

*Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer
(ACAT) Presents the Final Report on*



Alberta Recognizes Learning

*A Forum on
Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
(PLAR)*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In June 2006, Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) held a two day Forum: Alberta Recognizes Learning. The Forum on PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition), brought together various stakeholders from across Alberta, including all ACAT member institutions, their Vice Presidents Academic, Registrars, Assistant or Associate Registrars, Advisors, PLAR Coordinators, ACAT contact persons and ACAT council members. Representatives from Apprenticeship and Industry Training, Human Resources and Employment, Professional Associations/Organizations, Licensing Bodies and industry were also invited to participate.

The purpose of Alberta Recognizes Learning was to engage in discussion with stakeholders to identify key issues surrounding the implementation of PLAR, possible solutions to overcome those barriers and next steps for all stakeholders in working toward those solutions. Over the course of the two days, participants heard from key speakers in the field of PLAR from Alberta and across Canada. In addition, four Alberta post-secondary institutions and Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training had the opportunity to showcase their best practices in PLAR. All in attendance participated in facilitated group discussions; these group discussions produced recommendations that are outlined later in this document and which will also be used to inform a provincial PLAR policy framework on PLAR.

Alberta Recognizes Learning covered topics such as the integral role PLAR has in A Learning Alberta, the role of PLAR in Alberta and how Alberta's adult learners could benefit from PLAR.

The key objectives and expected outcomes of the Forum included:

- Raising awareness of PLAR in Alberta
- Identifying and showcasing best practices in Alberta and Canada
- Discussing challenges facing PLAR practitioners
- Identifying opportunities for overcoming these challenges; and
- Providing recommendations to ACAT and the system to use in better practicing PLAR

ACAT received positive evaluative responses, one of which was an overwhelming request for regular annual workshops.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS EMERGING FROM THE FORUM

Participants of Alberta Recognizes Learning were divided into focus groups each led by a facilitator. Focus groups had an opportunity to discuss issues and obstacles and propose resolution through innovative solutions. As stakeholders interested in advancing PLAR in Alberta, participants were asked what actions could be taken to achieve the strategic directions identified, including who should be involved and in what capacity. The following, outlined in greater detail in the report, summarizes participants' feedback:

1. Broaden the definition of “learning”;
2. Develop an Alberta policy framework on PLAR;
3. Develop a central and focused leadership to promote PLAR;
4. Establish a funding model responsive to PLAR practices;
5. Develop universal assessment standards;
6. Develop PLAR training for mentors and assessors for consistent system wide implementation;
7. Create and make visible best practices, innovative ideas and research;
8. Develop partnerships between key stakeholders such as industry, institutions, communities and special interest groups;
9. Establish a provincial PLAR centre; and
10. Develop a comprehensive information and communication plan to advance PLAR.

In an effort to continue with the momentum built at the Forum and to focus on the importance of PLAR as a key strategy for Alberta’s post-secondary system, ACAT outlines a number of short and long-term recommendations. These recommendations will shape the direction of ACAT’s collaborative involvement in the implementation of PLAR at post-secondary institutions in Alberta.

ACAT is excited about PLAR and the ensuing opportunities for Albertans and Alberta. ACAT’s vision states: “Alberta’s post secondary institutions work cooperatively to provide a transfer system that is responsive to the needs of learners in the matters of admissions, transfer credit, and the recognition of prior learning.” In line with this vision, ACAT strongly recommends that Alberta Advanced Education and Technology develop a policy framework on PLAR. Alberta is a learning society and the recognition of all applicable prior learning is a means to this end.

CONTEXT/BACKGROUND:

In May 2005, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) funded a research project conducted by Barrington Research Group Inc. on the state of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) at Alberta post-secondary institutions. A final report was produced entitled “Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Final Report”. The report defined PLAR as “an assessment process that considers learning gained through experiences other than taking formal credit courses including: work, self-directed study, community work, non-credit courses, on-the-job training, corporate training programs or life experience”. The instrumental core of PLAR is a learner’s experiential learning. Also of note is that “work experience” or “hours” are not a part of PLAR; rather, it is the learning or skills acquired through life experience that is critical.

A significant finding of this report indicated that only 62% of Alberta post-secondary institutions (18 of 29) had PLAR policies in place, and 37% (11 of 29) had none. Further, even though slightly less than two-thirds of our post-secondary institutions have a PLAR policy, research indicates that only one to two percent of post-secondary students report receiving credit through PLAR at Alberta post-secondary institutions. For these reasons, it was deemed timely to actively promote PLAR in Alberta.

PLAR activity at the majority of Alberta’s post-secondary institutions is limited. Today, with advanced education identified as a high priority for government and the need to align with the goal of creating a learner-centred society and lifelong learning opportunities for all Albertans, PLAR is drawn back to the spotlight. With the need to search for more creative effective solutions to address such things as labour market shortages, early high school leavers and the need to create more flexible learning opportunities, PLAR becomes a key strategy to address these issues. Recognition of prior learning has been highlighted in Advanced Education and Technology’s new policy framework, *A Learning Alberta*, and has been identified as a key mechanism to enhance access in the Access to the Future Act.

As well, PLAR can be found as a strategy in a number of cross-ministry initiatives including “Building and Educating Tomorrow’s Workforce” with Human Resources and Employment. PLAR is also considered an action for Advanced Education and Technology within the strategy for “Connecting Learning and Work: A Career Development Strategy for Alberta” (formerly, “Learner Pathways”).

ALBERTA RECOGNIZES LEARNING: ACAT’s Forum on PLAR

In support of one of the key strategies in ACAT’s Business Plan, and as a result of recommendations from the research report on PLAR, ACAT recommended that it was timely to hold a Forum on PLAR. The Forum was intended as a first step in generating interest province wide.

The Forum on PLAR: Alberta Recognizes Learning brought together various stakeholders from across Alberta, including all ACAT member institutions, their Vice Presidents Academic, Registrars, Assistant or Associate Registrars, Advisors, PLAR Coordinators, ACAT contact

persons, and ACAT council members. Representatives from Apprenticeship and Industry Training, Human Resources and Employment, Professional Associations/Organizations, Licensing Bodies and industry were also invited to participate.

The purpose of Alberta Recognizes Learning was to engage in discussion with stakeholders to identify key issues surrounding the implementation of PLAR, possible solutions to overcome those barriers, and next steps for all stakeholders in working toward those solutions. Over the course of the two days, participants heard from key speakers in the field of PLAR from Alberta and across Canada. In addition, three Alberta post-secondary institutions, Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training and the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) had the opportunity to showcase their best practices in PLAR. All in attendance participated in facilitated group discussions.

Alberta Recognizes Learning covered topics such as the integral role PLAR has in *Learning Alberta*, the role of PLAR in Alberta and how Alberta's adult learners could benefit from PLAR.

The key objectives and expected outcomes of the Forum included:

- Raising awareness of PLAR in Alberta
- Identifying and showcasing best practices in Alberta and Canada
- Discussing challenges facing PLAR practitioners
- Identifying opportunities for overcoming these challenges; and
- Providing recommendations to ACAT and the post-secondary system to use in better practicing PLAR

ACAT received very positive evaluative responses from the Forum participants: 89% of respondents rated their overall satisfaction as high, 98% rated the content of the concurrent sessions positively, and 92% highly rated the process for the Forum. 98% rated the effectiveness of the facilitated sessions highly and overwhelmingly, participants expressed a great deal of interest in holding similar events in the future.

THEMES EMERGING FROM THE FORUM

Participants of ***Alberta Recognizes Learning*** were divided into focus groups each led by a facilitator. From these groups a number of themes and suggested actions emerged. Over the two days, the focus groups were asked the following questions:

- 1) What are some of the issues, obstacles or challenges to consider as we work to bring PLAR to full potential in Alberta?
- 2) For the issue areas, what are some innovative and practical things we can do to address these obstacles?
- 3) As stakeholders interested in advancing PLAR in Alberta, what actions can be taken to achieve the strategic directions we identified? Who needs to be involved and in what role(s)?

The following themes summarize participants' feedback, including their suggested actions :

1. Definition of “learning”: In order to raise consciousness about PLAR, broaden the definition of learning beyond what is more traditionally accepted by post-secondary education providers and focus more on the successful evidence-based mastery of course- or program-based outcomes exhibited by learners.

- Rethink traditional approaches to course delivery and registration
- Value all learning, regardless of delivery
- Develop learning outcomes for various disciplines
- Develop key evidence-based process/practice
- See the voluntary sector as a learning environment

Suggested Actions:

Under the leadership of ACAT and its member institutions :

- ✓ Develop a definition of learning that is more “adult learning friendly” and outcomes-based.
- ✓ Involve business, industry, the voluntary sector, and other learning communities, as equitable partners in this new culture
- ✓ Organize disciplinary discussions about learning outcomes
- ✓ Develop program/course outcomes and competencies against which to assess prior learning

2. Need for an Alberta Policy Framework on PLAR: Identify and set priorities and policy to support and facilitate the development and implementation of PLAR practice in Alberta .

- Request that the Government of Alberta and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology to develop and adopt a policy framework on PLAR to increase the capacity for the recognition of prior learning throughout the education/employment system

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ ACAT to be an advocate for PLAR within the educational system and public arena including industry
- ✓ ACAT to make a formal request to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology for the development of a PLAR Policy Framework, including consideration for a cross-ministry policy framework to support the practice of PLAR in both education and employment
- ✓ Encourage the Government of Alberta to include support for the implementation of PLAR practices in its next Business Plan

3. A requirement for central and focused leadership to promote PLAR: Create a governing body of key stakeholders to lead development and implementation of PLAR.

- Province needs to take the lead
- Government to set/define standards
- Establish a provincial coordination body to develop common framework for PLAR in Alberta
- Establish a provincial steering committee to facilitate research and development
- Set targets on PLAR; provincially and within institutions
- Set up single point of contact for PLAR – one centre for PLAR
- Key players to set ground rules
- Identify scope of PLAR
- Ensure parallel policy between government and accrediting groups/organizations

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Form a PLAR Charter Committee to define goals/expectations. Membership: Government and institutions at a senior level
- ✓ ACAT to spearhead formation of Alberta PLAR Governing Council comprised of government, Advanced Education and Technology, Human Resources and Employment, post-secondary institutions and learners
- ✓ Governing Council to solicit participation from each sector

4. A funding model responsive to PLAR Practices: Establish a diverse, sustainable and coordinated government-funded model to engage post-secondary institutions, employers, community development agencies and Labour Market Information Centres in ensuring PLAR awareness, implementation, accountability and sustainability.

- Change or adjust funding formula to reflect learning outcomes
- Provide sufficient resources and influence to assist institutions in adopting and implementing PLAR
- Advanced Education and Technology to supply start-up and ongoing PLAR resources for staff support
- Develop a long-term, sustainable model that is not dependent on “transitory” government funding
- Introduce recognition incentives for participants
- Provincial funding for PLAR coordinators in all institutions
- Targeted funding for PLAR initiatives
- Targeted research and development in labour shortage areas

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Establish a provincial policy direction for PLAR, including targeted funding
- ✓ Review funding mechanisms to identify opportunities to enhance the practice of PLAR
- ✓ Set priorities in educational and employment areas most in need of PLAR
- ✓ ACAT to advocate to government the role and benefits of PLAR in meeting the needs of students and the economy
- ✓ Advanced Education and Technology to establish incentives for institutions/regulatory bodies to adopt PLAR
- ✓ Identify key institutions that are best equipped to provide PLAR and empower them
- ✓ Provide provincial (i.e., Students Finance) funding for PLAR participants

5. Development of universal standards: Develop universal PLAR standards and an assessment framework with input from all stakeholders to ensure consistency and transparency.

- Centralize through ACAT – standards, best practices, consortia of institutions, forums, training and action
- Introduce legislation and regulations with regards to PLAR and standards of practice
- Utilize and apply national standards tailored to Alberta
- Institutions adopt a PLAR standards policy to ensure consistency when implementing PLAR
- Bridge with industry to develop occupational skills competency and provide staff support

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ ACAT to coordinate partnership of stakeholders
- ✓ ACAT to pull together all stakeholders to do an analysis to inform the process of providing mechanisms and structures to support the implementation of PLAR
- ✓ Review Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) standards and customize to Alberta needs
- ✓ Bring content specialists, practitioners and industry together to develop core learning outcomes

6. Develop PLAR training for mentors and assessors: Developing PLAR training to ensure consistent system wide implementation.

- Create a provincial PLAR training centre to provide support and training for PLAR initiatives
- Train people to understand and assess PLAR
- Create a team of PLAR expert trainers to make presentations at institutions and other places
- Provide comprehensive training for mentors and assessors
- Create a PLAR tool kit for institutions to implement

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Identify national PLAR training competencies for practitioners
- ✓ Bring stakeholders together to develop staff development strategies
- ✓ ACAT to design and deliver training programs for PLAR
- ✓ Train PLAR practitioners leading to certification as PLAR assessors
- ✓ Develop online training for PLAR practitioners
- ✓ Create a collection of tools for practitioners and individuals available in a variety of formats

7. Research and best practices: Create and make visible, through formal and informal mechanisms, best practices, innovative ideas and research. Develop models, templates and tools to create PLAR process with many possible applications.

- Create a PLAR journal to showcase research and develop research grants for work in PLAR
- Create a common web based PLAR assessment database
- Establish a province-wide clearinghouse for best practices (and experts) – profession to profession and to workplace
- Develop a process for communicating and sharing developed practices

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Create a dedicated PLAR website for all stakeholder needs including relevant links to resources
- ✓ Establish an Alberta online source of PLAR best practice information such as assessment templates and competency profiles
- ✓ Assign a dedicated PLAR representative at each institution
- ✓ Post core learning outcomes on website
- ✓ Develop a PLAR toolkit for PLAR practitioners

8. Partnerships: Developing strategic and innovative partnerships between key stakeholders (e.g. industry, institutions, communities and special interest groups) to meet the needs of the learners.

- Facilitate the development of partnerships for those seeking common ground, collective voice and strategizing for action
- Develop peer mentoring programs and processes
- Engage professional associations to build PLAR capacity and credibility
- Partner on projects; cross-sectional teams working together
- Collaborate to provide direction and a united focus

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Create an advisory committee made up of key stakeholders
- ✓ Put formal and sustainable mentoring or apprenticeship processes in place for PLAR practitioners/assessors

- ✓ Identify and mobilize key players to develop a strategic plan
- ✓ Keep stakeholders up to date

9. Provincial PLAR Centre: Establish a provincial PLAR centre such as a council to oversee and provide direction. Develop a variety of committees/networks to ensure inclusion and commitment from key stakeholders.

- Form Alberta Prior Learning Assessment Network (APLAN)
- PLAR Council with Secretariat to develop definitions, processes, recognition and encourage research
- Include PLAR in ACAT agreements
- Create articulation committees
- Involve licensing bodies, apprenticeship, post-secondary providers, professional associations, etc.
- Create a centre to mentor students to develop portfolios
- Fund a centre of excellence for PLAR development and student assistance
- Ensure provincial access to PLAR centre

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Network with industry, professional associations, students and community for research on PLAR models leading to implementation
- ✓ Government mandate articulation committees for academic areas and disciplines to be implemented
- ✓ Establish working groups

10. Informing and Communicating about PLAR: Develop and implement a comprehensive information and communication plan to advance PLAR, market PLAR and make it a household term. Educate and share PLAR definitions and best practices in order to develop a common understanding.

- Develop a common definition of PLAR among all stakeholders
- Educate the educators about PLAR
- Sell program, seek buy-in
- PLAR consciousness-raising
- Increase public and stakeholder awareness of PLAR
- Distribute information, research and models
- Provide training for institutional staff and other stakeholders

Suggested Actions:

- ✓ Launch a provincial marketing campaign to increase public awareness of PLAR
- ✓ Create promotional materials
- ✓ Build awareness/promote PLAR via onsite/online info sessions
- ✓ Pilot innovative PLAR projects and share results
- ✓ Engage in faculty orientation, professional development, student orientation and faculty/advisor orientation

- ✓ Hold annual PLAR symposium to showcase initiatives
- ✓ Articulate what post-secondary institutions/organizations are already doing
- ✓ Take inventory of those institutions prepared to start using PLAR and partner them with those institutions successfully utilizing PLAR (mentor)

ACAT'S RECOMMENDATIONS

As a key strategy to enhance seamless learning opportunities, there is a need to focus on PLAR for Alberta's post-secondary system. Based on a review of the suggested actions and in an effort to continue with the momentum built at the Forum, ACAT puts forward the following short and long-term recommendations :

Short-term Actions:

- ACAT will recommend to the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology that the province develop a comprehensive provincial PLAR policy framework;
- Within the context of the framework, ACAT will facilitate the creation of a steering committee or an advisory committee to act on the strategic directions emerging from the PLAR Forum;
- ACAT will encourage research initiatives and results will be made available to those requiring such information;
- ACAT will include on its website, in the database and Transfer Guide, all the institutions that are currently engaging in PLAR activities so that this information is available to all students. ACAT's website will also include portals and links to PLAR research, resources, and helpful sites;
- ACAT will encourage the creation of mentorships between PLAR-proficient post-secondary institutions/organizations and those wanting to begin or expand their PLAR capacity;
- In connection with stakeholders, ACAT will facilitate workshops and future forums for institutional staff and PLAR assessors, professional organizations and others interested in sharing best practices and develop common terminology in an effort to facilitate widespread implementation and acceptance of PLAR policies and standards; and
- ACAT will recommend that pilot projects be funded and implemented in areas with existing demand for PLAR, as well as areas more conducive to PLAR, i.e., areas with existing PLAR practices, together with areas with clearly stated outcomes and competencies. Examples of high priority areas may include: nursing, the trades and newcomers to Canada or others areas of priority expressed by the system. These examples are especially conducive to PLAR assessments by way of portfolio development and/or competency and skill assessments. These pilot projects will address immediate needs in certain areas and also provide other institutions and organizations with starting points, processes and procedures.

Long-term Actions:

- Existing literature and research on PLAR to be compiled and available through the Steering or Advisory Committee and be available to all stakeholders via websites, newsletters and other communication materials;

- Guided by the provincial policy framework:
 - o Create a provincial PLAR body to set the strategic direction for PLAR in Alberta and to keep track of materials, research and resources. This body will also put the provincial framework into action and facilitate the development of common standards for assessments. PLAR assessments may or may not be routed through this body to ensure consistency. This body should be initiated by ACAT in collaboration with stakeholders and will 'house' the experts; and
 - o ACAT will encourage Advanced Education and Technology to re-evaluate the funding models for post-secondary institutions and students receiving PLAR credit. Funding is required not only to the institutions, but also should be available to learners seeking PLAR opportunities, i.e. student funding opportunities, including grants, scholarships, bursaries and the availability of student finance for PLAR purposes.

CONCLUSION

PLAR is a creative solution to enable Albertans to pursue their passions through a series of seamless transitions. It is a way for Alberta to foster the learning and development of under-represented groups by recognizing their informal and experiential learning. According to research conducted by David Livingstone and Doug Myers, "more than half of all Canadians and even greater numbers of the employed would be more likely to enrol in adult education if their previous informal learning were recognized". PLAR enables efficient and effective career laddering and encourages learners to produce and maintain individual portfolios of skills and learning experiences.

The current economic climate in Alberta demands solutions to address labour shortages – PLAR offers a solution to this dilemma, and creates new opportunities for entry and re-entry to formal learning experiences. Beyond the current demands of the labour shortage, PLAR provides much needed longer term benefits. Within a few years, post-secondary institutions will experience an influx of young Albertans seeking advanced education of some sort. The current economic boom has created an environment wherein young Albertans forgo post-secondary education for a position in a high paying workforce. When the labour market begins to level off there will be a great demand for the recognition of experiential learning. If post-secondary institutions have existing PLAR policies and procedures when this influx occurs, they will be in a position to handle the increased demand.

ACAT is excited about PLAR and the ensuing opportunities for Albertans and Alberta. ACAT's vision states: "Alberta's post secondary institutions work cooperatively to provide a transfer system that is responsive to the needs of learners in the matters of admissions, transfer credit, and the recognition of prior learning." In line with this vision, ACAT is recommending that Alberta Advanced Education and Technology as a first step develop a policy framework on PLAR. Alberta is a learning society and the recognition of prior learning is a means to this end.