

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

A User's Guide for Evaluating Learning Against Whole Program Learning Outcomes



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Introduction and Overview

This practical user's guide is a product developed out of the collaborative presentations and discussions at the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) 2007 Fall Focus Pre-conference Workshop in Toronto, Ontario entitled: Evaluating Adult Learners Against Industry Standards or Entire Program Outcomes. It is designed to lead an organization step-by-step through a prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) process of an entire program and provide an understanding of some of the challenges that may be encountered.

In comparison to course-based PLAR, which directs prior learning toward satisfying the requirements of specific course for credit, program-based PLAR assessment directs the prior learning more broadly at the outcomes expected by an entire program. The obvious value of such an approach is that adults do not have to 'unpack' their learning in an effort to compare it to many small discreet courses or tasks. Rather it would be a look at the 'big picture' as required by exit competencies, work qualifications or program outcomes. This could reduce the potential of overlooking embedded knowledge and skills that may be more advanced or different from stated requirements.

Scope of the User's Guide

For the purposes of this report, prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is defined as a process through which individuals can be awarded academic credit, industry certification, or employment for non-formal and informal learning gained experientially. The theory on which PLAR is based recognizes that adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge, skills and abilities with them. PLAR is designed to assess and recognize the knowledge, skills and abilities relevant to the credential or job which is sought.

In this User's Guide, the emphasis is upon steps needed to formulate a professionally sound judgment concerning a PLAR candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities as they relate to an entire program.

For further information and resources about PLAR, visit the Recognition for Learning website at <http://recognitionforlearning.ca>

Working with the User's Guide

The main body of the User's Guide is divided into four sections.

The first three sections of the User's Guide present a plan of action that you can use to refine your own PLAR process. The basic idea behind these sections is that planning a PLAR process for whole program assessment is primarily a matter of making decisions about what you want to do and how you will do it. Although you may already be making individual PLAR processes available, this section will allow you to make decisions explicit and systematic for assessment against whole program outcomes.

Section 1 shows you how to identify appropriate scenarios or opportunities for using a PLAR process to evaluate learning against whole program learning outcomes. Section 2 outlines steps that need to be considered to help you develop whole program PLAR techniques. Section 3 extends your planning to include working with other colleagues, stakeholders and other supports. Section 4 provides an overview of a sample whole program learning outcomes assessment instrument and may be used as starting points for practitioners who wish to develop their own process.

Section 1 Taking Stock

It is important that you articulate why there is a need in your institution to evaluate learning against whole program learning outcomes and identify the target audience.

“I got an inquiry from a pilot last week, has his commercial license, 5000+hours of flight time, etc, so not really a “student” as pilots go. He has heard very good things about our program, and watched some of our diploma grads advance very quickly in the industry. He felt that a SIAST diploma in his portfolio might help in advancing his career. (Air Canada or whatever).”

- Inquiry from Commercial Pilot Program Head

At times, situations like the one illustrated above arise where an occupational field or its individual practitioners require updated credentials for promotion or further training. Individuals may have worked in a field for many years without formal recognition of their learning and a need to validate experience or previous on-the-job training is required.

It is typically these types of scenarios that necessitate the need to develop a system to examine competencies attained in the field, and to apply this knowledge to the relevant program in the educational institution or organization. The result is a good example of PLAR in practice, and demonstrates an excellent partnership with long term benefits to the industry, educational institution and individual.

PLAR can provide a valid method for evaluating learning against whole program learning outcomes that recognizes combinations of previous credentials, recent training courses, workplace and experiential learning, by conducting equivalency reviews along with PLAR methods.

Other opportunities for recognition of whole program outcomes include careers in transition, emerging occupations, and/or a change in standards required by certifying bodies or employers.

It is important to note that some educational institutions have residency requirements that may impact the ability to employ a whole program PLAR process. For example, to the PLAR candidate a 50% residency requirement would mean that half the credits for a credential could be earned as a result of PLAR, but the remaining 50% would need to be earned as a result of direct or distance instruction by faculty at the institution. Each institution sets its own residency requirement (and also sets its own policies pertaining to reducing or waiving the requirement in special circumstances).

Section 2 Developing a Whole Program PLAR Assessment

It is assumed that organizations that are developing a whole program outcome approach to PLAR already have a basic PLAR program in place. If your organization is just exploring PLAR as a process to recognize the prior learning of your employees or adult learners you may want to refer to the basic policies and procedures for PLAR implementation at www.recognitionforlearning.ca

Planning and Goal Setting

1. Gain expert advice and collaboration early on to develop insights and awareness building as to the unique benefits of a whole program approach. Scan the environment and pick strategic partners (leaders and innovators but also those in the best position for decision making); pull in external, relevant expertise to expedite the process.
2. Research to determine the need and resources required, for example:
 - Standards set by government (i.e. regulatory requirements for certification)
 - Market demand – it is important to have a sense of numbers to support the development of this special PLAR approach
 - Shortages of credentialed workers
 - Identification of key stakeholders
 - Budgetary implications
3. Identify project objectives, for example:
 - State specific results and deliverables to be achieved
 - Include candidate self-assessment of skills and competencies
 - Necessity of using a range of PLAR assessment method(s)
 - Assessor guidelines
 - A marketing/communications plan
4. Determine budget and source of revenue
5. Build a plan of action and set milestones
6. Plan up-front time for awareness building and professional development
7. Clearly articulate roles and expectations during the planning

Development

It may be beneficial to develop whole program PLAR as a pilot using the input and feedback of the first few candidates to guide the development process.

1. Develop competencies/outcomes at the program level, if not already in place.
 - Involvement with other programs or departments may be required. For example, are Communications and Math courses in the program delivered by an associated program? If so, their expertise and input may be required.
 - Explore options for prerequisite courses and their companion courses.
2. Determine what criteria would qualify someone for program level assessment and certification.
 - This should be done in consultation with the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) coordinator and a content expert and/or current industry input from the related field. The content expert has an intimate knowledge of the subject, programs, courses and the types of work experience that are appropriate for PLAR.
 - Establish conditions for eligibility of candidates together with criteria and an evaluation process.
 - Criteria should not be unique to this candidate but applicable to other potential candidates in the field. For example, are there any specific industry-standard training programs recognized in this field? Can the number of skill hours or performance in an occupation be validated?
3. Develop a pre-screening process of candidates based on eligibility criteria.
4. Undertake equivalency review - recognize training/program outcomes already covered off by the eligibility requirements
 - Are there other industry partners delivering similar training? Look for other areas where duplication among other service providers may exist so that recognition or transfer of credit may be granted in a block.
5. Specify types of evidence (documentation to support learning claims) that will be accepted to assess competency of the remaining learning outcomes.
6. Develop transparent, rigorous, reliable and valid assessment methods to assess the learning.
 - Be cognizant that there may be opportunities for demonstration of knowledge/course requirements at the work site.
 - Use authentic assessment to evaluate competencies/learning outcomes whenever possible.

- Generally a program level assessment will require a combination of methods to ensure competencies/outcomes are adequately assessed (i.e. challenge exam, interview, case study, demonstrations w/ employer validation, etc) to ensure both efficiency and quality control/confidence in the process.
 - Each assessment developed must have clearly defined criteria for the assessor. For example, interview guides with directed questions and accompanying rubric, or performance checklists with employer validations.
 - Consider accommodations for candidates (i.e. special needs, candidates at a distance.)
 - Build on existing PLAR materials whenever possible and adapt them to fit whole program/industry contexts to maximize initial investments.
 - The demonstrated learning must be consistent with the achievement levels required by the institution or industry standard.
7. Establish approaches to support self-assessment and advising.
- An advisor is needed initially to facilitate the flow of information and to conduct the initial guidance and screening process.
8. Plan a model for implementation and sustainability.
- What fee will adequately compensate for the assessor time required to assess the student?
 - Will you need to charge for consumables or other expenses that are over and above the instructor time to do the assessment?
 - Do industry/organizational leaders support the process
 - Are there administrative or record-keeping processes in place?
9. Establish a draft process.
10. Document policies and procedures.

Section 3 Working Together

Lack of input and awareness can result in resistance so it is important to identify the individuals who need to be involved and consult early and often to gain broad support and increase stakeholder buy-in.

Who are the individuals who need to be involved?

- Industry partners (employers and labour)
- Senior college management
- Academic departments
- Practitioners
- Assessors
- Registrar
- Advisory groups
- Student engagement
- Faculty/Staff
- Partners
- Stakeholders
- Marketing
- Certifying bodies/associations
- Government – funding
- Involving individuals to get Inter-ministerial buy-in
- Funding organizations
- National standard setting organizations
- Industry
- Employee associations
- Unions
- Counselors

Section 4 Sample Whole Program PLAR Assessment

The following example comes from the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) PLAR Candidate Guide Program Level Certification for Experienced Commercial Pilots.

The guide may be viewed in its entirety by visiting:

<http://www.siastr.sk.ca/pdf/plar/commercialpilotcandguide.pdf>

Background

Pilots may obtain a commercial license through a certified flight school. Ratings and endorsements can be added to the basic license.

The SIAST Commercial Pilot Diploma program requires the commercial license with additional ratings and ground school courses to support an entry level career as a commercial pilot on multi-engine aircraft.

There is a need to recognize the knowledge and skills that experienced commercial pilots have acquired through previous training, licensing, workplace and experiential learning in order to provide a means of obtaining educational credentials.

Following an equivalency review, the Commercial Pilot Diploma program has established conditions for eligibility, and developed a PLAR evaluation process and assessment methods to evaluate prior skill and knowledge in order to provide access to the diploma.

Are you eligible

You may be eligible for Program Level Certification if you meet all of the following eligibility criteria:

- ☐ Currently hold all of the following licenses and ratings:
 - ✓ CPL with valid medical certificate
 - ✓ INRAT
 - ✓ IATRA
 - ✓ ATPL
- ☐ Are currently, or have been employed as a commercial pilot during the previous three (3) years.
- ☐ Have a minimum of 1500 hrs flying experience.
- ☐ Have been recommended by a SIAST Commercial Pilot Diploma PLAR representative following an interview.
- ☐ Meet all admission requirements for the Commercial Pilot Diploma program. Refer to a current SIAST calendar, or to the official SIAST Commercial Pilot website program page for [admission requirements](#).
- ☐ Are registered in the program and have paid the applicable application fee.

Evidence File

In order to be granted PLAR credit for courses in the Commercial Pilot Diploma program, the candidate must submit proof that he/she has met the criteria for each class. This requires an **evidence file** of documentation indicating the necessary skills and knowledge have been met.

A consultation meeting is required with the PLAR designated contact **before** you begin to gather evidence. (Step 1 – PLAR Process).

Equivalency has been determined for the following courses based documentation supporting eligibility criteria. No further evidence for these courses is required.

- ✓ Theory of Flight (AVIA 180)
- ✓ Navigation (AVIA 181)
- ✓ Meteorology 1 (AVIA 182)
- ✓ Aircraft Engines (ENGN 180)
- ✓ Aircraft Instruments (INST 185)
- ✓ Meteorology 2 (AVIA 186)
- ✓ Flight Operations 2 (AVIA 188)
- ✓ Canadian Aviation Regulations (CARs) 2 (AVIA 280)
- ✓ Instrument Flying (INST 186)
- ✓ Human Factors/CRM (HUMR 187)

Additional evidence is required for the following remaining courses.

- ✓ Flight Operations 1 (AVIA 183)
- ✓ Canadian Aviation Regulations (CARs) 1 (AVIA 184)
- ✓ Communications 1 (COMM 393)
- ✓ Aircraft Pilot Electronics (ELTR 183)
- ✓ Mathematics (MATH 389)
- ✓ Physics (PHYS 185)
- ✓ Cultural Awareness (AVIA 189)
- ✓ Advanced Aircraft Systems (AVIA 187)
- ✓ Aviation Business (BUS 183)
- ✓ Introduction to Dangerous Goods by Air (TRAN 180)

For more details on the specific evidence required for each course, see Appendix A – PLAR Self-audits)

Required documentation to include in your evidence file:

- ☐ Copies all aviation licenses, ratings, endorsements, and a medical validation certificate. Must include CPL, INRAT, IATRA, and ATPL.
- ☐ A current resume.
Include details of other employment, community or volunteer work that may be relevant.
- ☐ Completion of required self-audits. (Appendix A – PLAR Self-audits). You must submit evidence that you have met the knowledge/skills requirements for each of the courses. Evidence is summarized for each course and may include any of the following:
 - ✓ Challenge assignments
 - ✓ Challenge exams
 - ✓ Interviews
 - ✓ Work samples
 - ✓ Demonstrations
- ☐ Completion of Employment Audit and Checklist. (Appendix B – Employment Audit).
Note: *You must include a completed Employment Audit from all applicable employers. Please make copies of form as needed.*
- ☐ Copies of relevant logbook pages.
- ☐ Evidence of completion of formal training (transcript required*), classes, workshops, seminars, company or recurrent aircraft type training, and other applicable courses. (Copies of course outlines, learning outcomes, and/or a certificate of attendance must be provided.)

Note: Following an assessor's review of the submitted evidence file, a follow up interview may be required to clarify evidence.