



**FANSHAWE**



**Best Practices in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition  
in Ontario Colleges & Universities**

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## Executive Summary

In this report, I explore the concept and process of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) at post-secondary institutions, with a particular focus on Ontario. PLAR is a process for assessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a candidate has acquired in informal and non-formal settings for the purposes of awarding academic credit, and is practiced across Canada and internationally.

In Ontario, PLAR is a required process at the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs), specified by the (2003a) *Framework for Programs of Instruction* of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. PLAR is not required at Ontario universities.

The goal of this study was to gather information about how colleges and universities in Ontario operationalize their PLAR policies and processes in order to develop a set of recommendations regarding how colleges and universities can enact the best practices in PLAR identified in the framework *6 Steps for Quality RPL* (CAPLA, 2015).

Phase I of this study involved completing a digital environmental-scan (e-scan) of the publically available information about PLAR found on the websites of all 24 Ontario CAATs, 20 public Ontario universities, and an out-of-province comparator for each of the college and university sectors. I selected the out-of-province comparators based on their reputation in the literature as leaders in the field. I systematized this review of websites through the use of a research tool I designed, guided by the *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework issued by the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). I calibrated the research tool by completing a review of a website concurrently with a colleague and comparing results, and then adjusting the checklist accordingly.

There were three broad findings of Phase I. First, the e-scan confirmed the findings in the literature that colleges tend to have more developed PLAR systems than universities do. Second, based on patterns in the findings for the CAATs, I was able to identify particular component parts in CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework that are apparently underdeveloped in Ontario's colleges. And, third, the e-scan offered me a preliminary way to "sort" the CAATs based on the apparent level of development of their PLAR processes.

In Phase II of the study, I created a questionnaire with four parts. Section one establishes context and administrative logistics. Section two asks questions regarding the apparently underdeveloped component parts of CAPLA's framework, revealed in Phase I. Section three presents a case study for participants' consideration, and section four inquires into best practices, lessons learned, and goal-setting. Individuals from 8 institutions agreed to participate in the study.

I coded the completed questionnaires from Phase II, considering them alongside the literature and the findings from Phase I. From the themes emergent in the data collected in Phase II, I identify and discuss the following recommendations:

1. Explore opportunities to resolve "financial disincentives to PLAR" for users
2. Address faculty concerns regarding workload and/or remuneration
3. Collect and use data
4. Centralize processes for consistency and quality
  - I. Integrate PLAR and credit transfer
  - II. Convene advisory committees

5. Develop PLAR champions
6. Integrate PLAR into continuous quality improvement initiatives
7. Provide appropriate resources for, and support to, faculty and staff
  - I. Develop resources/tools to assist faculty assessors
  - II. Provide workshops/training to faculty assessors on PLAR policy and process
  - III. Invest in human resources to support PLAR processes and practices
8. Make explicit the relationship between PLAR and course learning outcomes (or other relevant learning outcomes)
  - I. Ensure accessibility of course learning outcomes (or other relevant learning outcomes)
  - II. Facilitate opportunities for candidates to self-assess their knowledge, skills, and abilities in relation to the relevant learning outcomes before they formally commence the PLAR process
9. Enhance the user experience
  - I. Automate components of the process
  - II. Improve access to information

To conclude, I adapt Penner, Howieson, & DiTullio's (2017) model, the Culture of Mobility Spectrum, to propose a new tool called the Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum. This tool can help institutions reflect on their PLAR practices and identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to CAPLA's quality framework. Institutions can use the Spectrum to set goals for improvement in their PLAR process, regardless of their level of development.

My final overarching recommendation for this report is for a community of PLAR practitioners to:

10. Develop a dynamic digital repository for sharing resources and best practices across institutions

As with the foregoing recommendations, this final recommendation is supported by the data collected.

## Introduction and Literature Review

In this report, I begin by introducing the concept of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) at post-secondary institutions. PLAR is a process for assessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a candidate has acquired in informal and non-formal settings for the purposes of awarding academic credit. I draw on the literature to offer a brief history of PLAR in Ontario. I then introduce my research question: how do colleges and universities in Ontario operationalize their PLAR policies and processes?

Next, I describe the research methodology I used in this study. During Phase I, I completed a digital environmental-scan of the publically available information about PLAR on the websites of 44 Ontario post-secondary institutions, and 2 out-of-province comparators. I systematized this review of websites through the use of a research tool I designed, guided by the (2015) *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework issued by the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). During Phase II of the study, I designed a questionnaire based on the patterns and findings of Phase I. I invited participants from 8 institutions to complete the questionnaire. To conclude the methodology section, I discuss limitations of the study.

In the next section, Findings and Analysis, I discuss the themes that emerged from the Phase II data during coding, and present those themes, reflective of the participating institutions' best practices and lessons learned, as a set of recommendations for how post-secondary institutions can enact the best practices in PLAR identified in CAPLA's framework *6 Steps for Quality RPL*. Throughout, I make reference to relevant literature, drawing connections from the field to my current findings.

Following my discussion of the data, I include a section summarizing my key take-aways from the experiential learning opportunities that the occasion of this study provided.

Finally, I conclude with a culminating "meta-recommendation," that PLAR practitioners should formalize a community of practice through the development of a digital repository to facilitate sharing best practices and resources across institutions.

### What is PLAR?

In its (2015) comprehensive *Quality Assurance for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Canada: The Manual*, the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) defines RPL as:

a set of processes that allows individuals to identify, document, be assessed, and gain recognition for their prior learning. The focus is on the learning, rather than on where or how the learning occurred. Knowledge, skills, and abilities gained from life experiences may be formal, informal, or non-formal. RPL processes may serve several purposes, including: licensure, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, employment, career planning, recruitment or self-knowledge. (p. 1)

At Fanshawe College, the pertinent policy ([A124: Recognition of Prior Learning](#)) distinguishes between credit transfer and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). The college defines credit transfer as "Recognition of course credit for learning acquired through post-secondary education. Credit Transfer includes internal credit, external credit, and advanced standing" (2018, p. 1). It defines PLAR as "The process of evaluating the knowledge and skills gained through experiential and/or non-formal learning for the purpose of obtaining academic credit" (p. 1). While CAPLA's preferred terminology of RPL is holistic to include the recognition of learning gained in "formal, informal, or non-formal" settings,

I have limited my inquiry in this study to PLAR in post-secondary institutions: the granting of credit for demonstrable learning that has been acquired outside of public institutions of formal post-secondary education. Harris and Wihak (2014) define “formal, informal, [and] non-formal” learning:

Formal learning is structured and intentional, achieved through programmes/courses at accredited educational institutions (e.g. certificate, diploma or degree) and/or recognised by a regulatory body/professional organisation for certification. Non-formal learning is also intentional, gained through participation in organised workplace-based training, non-credit courses and workshops, but does not generate formal credit. Informal learning is incidental learning from life experience, workplace-based tasks, volunteer activities, and/or self-directed learning and study (p. 13).

The concept of issuing post-secondary credit in recognition of learning that occurs outside of a formal classroom is named by various terms internationally:

What is known as RPL in South Africa is known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the USA, Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) in Canada, Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (AP[E]L) in the UK, Validation of Prior Learning in the Netherlands and la validation des acquis or recognition of experiential learning in France (Conrad 2013). (Dreyer, 2015, pp. 111-112)

RPL is the term used in Australia, South Africa and Scotland; in the European Union the term Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) is used; the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) refers to practices as Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Outcomes (RNFILLO); Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is the preferred term in Canada; Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) is used in the UK, and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the United States. (Harris & Wihak, 2014, p. 13)

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) uses the term Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) to refer to the same concept that CAPLA calls RPL: according to UNESCO (2012), RVA “is a practice that makes visible and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that individuals have obtained in various contexts, and through various means in different phases of their lives” (p. 8).

### [A Brief History of PLAR in Ontario:](#)

Scholar Dianne Conrad (2014) argues that the concept of PLAR is rooted in ancient thought, such as in the teachings of Aristotle and Socrates who endorsed “the value of experience in learning” (p. 316). She also traces the concept to John Dewey’s work in educational theory in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Among practitioners, there is agreement that PLAR has been practiced for “several decades” in Canada and internationally (Harris & Wihak, 2014, p. 14), and that it has its practical origins in initiatives of the American Council on Education following World War II to assist adults returning from military service in obtaining academic standing in recognition of their learning from experience (see, e.g., CAPLA, 2011; Conrad, 2014).

In their (1999) report, *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Howell, Howorth, Lamarre, and Van Kleef specify that “PLAR initiatives began in Canada in 1977 with the implementation of pilot projects at Mohawk College in

Hamilton, Ontario” (p. 1). This was followed by a similar pilot at Red River College in Manitoba in 1980. The authors continue: “Although historically, colleges have used various strategies to recognize adults’ formal and informal learning, these were among the first institutions in Canada to focus on activities specifically designated as prior learning assessment” (p. 1). According to Aarts et al., the next formalized PLAR initiative in Ontario was “PLAR implementation at First Nations Technical Institute in Ontario in 1987” (p. 1).

CAPLA (2007) traces its origin to the leadership in PLAR provided by the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) located in Belleville, Ontario. CAPLA was formalized in 1994 through support from the FNTI. CAPLA became independent in 2002, but in its *Strategic Plan*, it notes the on-going ways that Indigenous ways of knowing

have influenced the organization...reflected in these sustaining beliefs:

- respect learners
- be inclusive
- value cultural diversity
- provide formal recognition for appropriate learning achievements
- reduce barriers to labour force participation
- advocate for improvements to formal educational and credentialing systems. (p. 3)

In 1993, one year before CAPLA was formalized,

the Ontario government commenced a three-year PLAR implementation subsidy program for community colleges, providing grants for designated staff and funding for assessments through the educational operating grant. By 1996, all 25 Ontario colleges were required to provide prior learning assessment services to their adult learners. (Aarts et al., 1999, p. 1)

During this three-year PLAR program beginning in 1993, “The Ministry of Education directed \$3.0 million to be used to create a full-time PLA Facilitator position at each institution...By 1996/97 targeted funding had ended and colleges were required to support PLA coordination, administration, training and development through their own operating budgets” (p. 3).

Currently, under the (2003a) *Framework for Programs of Instruction of the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive*, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) requires all 24 Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) to provide a PLAR process “for as many credit courses as possible in programs of instruction in which enrolment is eligible for funding” (p. 4). The MTCU (2003b) provides some best practice guidelines for how to do so, including a description of the two most common methods of PLAR assessment:

Challenge process: a method of assessment, other than portfolio assessment, developed and evaluated by subject-expert faculty to measure an individual’s learning achievement against course learning outcomes. The process measures demonstrated learning through a variety of written and non-written evaluation methods for the purpose of awarding credit without requiring enrolment in a course.

Portfolio assessment: a method of assessment that involves the evaluation of an organized collection of materials developed by a learner that records learning achievements and relates

them to personal, educational, or occupational goals, in this case, achievement of stated learning outcomes of college courses or programs. (p. 1)

Other guidelines that the MTCU provides relevant to this study are that:

- Course outlines should include course learning outcomes to assist candidates in their decision about whether to pursue PLAR
- PLAR candidates “should be advised that a reduction of course load as a result of earning credits through PLAR may affect their eligibility for financial assistance through the Ontario Student Assistance Plan” (p. 2)
- “Credits awarded through PLAR should be transcribed in the same way in which credits are normally transcribed in each course” (p. 2), and
- “Transcripts should not record unsuccessful PLAR attempts as ‘failures’” (p. 2).

While PLAR as a process is enshrined in the operations of Ontario’s colleges, it is not required at Ontario universities. As a result, in Ontario, as “In Canada, take-up at college level is more widespread than at university level (Van Kleef, 2009)” (Conrad, 2014, p. 318). For instance, in her (2007) study of the availability of information about PLAR on Canadian university websites, Wihak found that only 3 out of 60 websites reviewed indicated a “formal [policy] requiring institution-wide PLAR” (p. 105). Conrad (2014) further explains that “RPL for use in graduate programmes is...quite infrequent, at least in Canada” (p. 317). Confirming that PLAR uptake at universities remains a contemporary challenge, Browning (2018) points to the need for enhanced integration of, and support for, PLAR activity at all post-secondary institutions, but “particularly at Canadian universities” (p. iii).

### The Research Question:

The goal of this study was to gather information about how colleges and universities in Ontario operationalize their PLAR policies and processes in order to develop a set of recommendations regarding how colleges and universities can enact the best practices in PLAR identified in CAPLA’s framework *6 Steps for Quality RPL*.

The desire to further understand PLAR systems and operations in Ontario post-secondary institutions was rooted in some context specific to Fanshawe College. Enhancing PLAR operations at Fanshawe was a recommendation from reviewers during Fanshawe’s College Quality Assurance Audit Process (formerly known as the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit), administered through the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service. PLAR had also come to the forefront in curriculum discussions at Fanshawe because we had recently introduced the Course Outline Mapping and Management Systems (COMMS), which entailed some changes to the course outline template at the college. One such change was the new inclusion of a field requesting the professor to specify how a given course would be completed through PLAR. And, finally, Fanshawe was due to revise its PLAR policy and therefore had occasion to revisit PLAR best practice throughout the province.

## Methodology

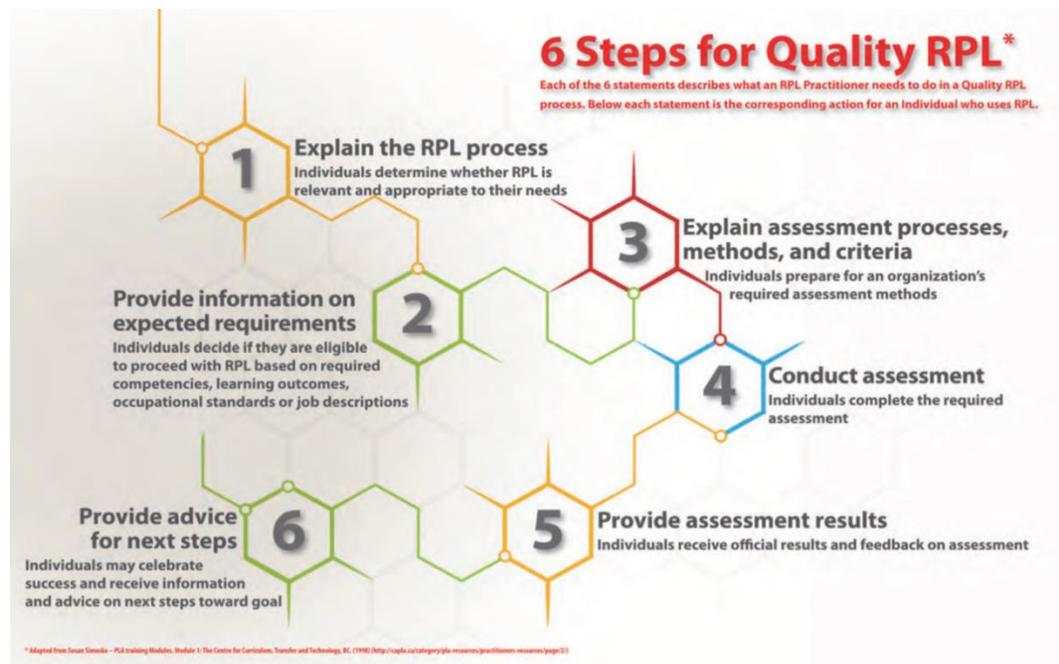
### Phase I

Phase I of this study involved completing a digital environmental-scan (e-scan) of the publically available information about PLAR found on the websites of all 24 Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology

(CAATs), 20 public Ontario universities<sup>1</sup>, and an out-of-province comparator for each of the college and university sectors. I selected the out-of-province comparators based on their reputation in the literature as leaders in the field.

To systematize the digital e-scan, I created a composite checklist based on the four Quality Assurance self-audit checklists provided by CAPLA (which in turn are based on its research into best practices in PLAR) (Appendix A). The composite checklist was organized by CAPLA's quality assurance framework, *6 Steps for Quality RPL* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



(CAPLA, 2015, p. 10)

In the *Minister's Framework for Programs of Instruction* (2003a), Ontario's CAATs are not only required to make PLAR processes available for as many courses as possible, but the Minister also stipulates that "Information on the PLAR process is to be made available to the public in the college central admissions publication and posted on the college's web site" (p. 5). Although I recognized that my findings in Phase I would be limited by what information an institution chose to provide publically, I had reasonable assurance, based on the *Framework for Programs of Instruction*, that the CAATs in particular would have some public-facing information about their PLAR processes which could help direct my inquiry moving forward in the project. Moreover, Wihak (2007) provided a precedent for reviewing the public information provided by universities about PLAR when she undertook to assess the ease with which a non-direct student could find information about using PLAR for admission and/or advanced standing in her study, "Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition in Canadian Universities: View from the Web."

<sup>1</sup> The 20 public Ontario universities were based on a list accessed through the Ontario University Application Centre website. College affiliates and universities that fall under the governance model of another university were not reviewed. The Royal Military College was also not reviewed because it falls under federal jurisdiction.

When building the checklist, I wrote it in two sections: The first half of the checklist (with alphanumeric indicators) consists of prompts for information that I reasoned would be more likely found among the institutions' public facing information. The second half of the checklist (with Roman numeral indicators) consists of prompts for information that I expected would be less likely or unlikely to be found on institutions' websites because these prompts pertain to the more "behind the scenes" work required to develop process and practice.

I worked with a colleague to test the composite checklist for clarity and completeness by using it to review the public information of the college outside of Ontario widely regarded as a leader in terms of its PLAR systems and processes. Independently, my colleague and I each used the checklist to assess the information found on the institution's website. When we compared our findings, we found that we had responded differently for only 4/74 items in that version of the checklist. In those four instances, one of us selected either "Yes" or "No" and the other selected "Partial," suggesting that the distinction in our responses was more to do with how we each interpreted the evidence we found, rather than with a weakness in the checklist. For instance, after discussing two of the four different responses, I recognized that I had made assumptions about the institution's practices based on the strength of the rest of its evidence, rather than treating the two items at face value. My "Partial" response gave the benefit of the doubt to the institution, whereas my colleague had responded "No" because there was no concrete evidence found to support the particular item. In most cases, we also collated the same forms of evidence for each item in the list.

Following this pilot testing of the checklist, we refined the research tool by:

- Numbering the items in the checklist for greater ease of reference.
- Re-aligning some items with CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL* by moving them from one section to another.
- Including additional notes to clarify some of the checklist items and/or to indicate what kind of evidence might validate certain checklist items.
- Consolidating certain items in the checklist to reduce repetition. The initial test particularly demonstrated repetition in items pertaining to roles & responsibilities; self-assessment; learning outcomes; and the advisory function.
- Moving three items from Step 4, Conduct Assessment, from the first to the second half of the document. We made this decision after testing the tool against an extraordinarily comprehensive website because we realized the unlikelihood of finding evidence to support these items in an institution's public-facing information. This decision means that Step 4 is not represented in the first half of the document, but Step 4 specifies actually conducting the assessment, which will typically be a very individualized process. Items from Step 4 remain in the second half of the document in case the public information does provide evidence to support those items.

After making these changes to the research tool, I ran a second test of the revised checklist with another colleague who was working with the checklist for the first time, and whom I had hired as a research assistant for Phase I of the study. This time we independently tested the checklist against the university leader in PLAR outside of Ontario. This test initially found more discrepancies between our results: the results differed on 18/65, or less than 28%, of the questions on this version. Of those differing results, 15/18 differed by a half step (either a "Yes" or "No" reply versus a "Partial"), while 3/18 differed by a full

step (“Yes” versus “No”). Unlike my colleague in the first test, the research assistant in the second test was less familiar with the checklist because she had not been involved in its development. This is one possible reason for the greater divide between our initial findings in the second test. A second possible reason may be that although the website we examined in the second test was very comprehensive and well-aligned with CAPLA’s best practices, the first website was even more thorough and almost perfectly aligned. Therefore, with a slight reduction in evident alignment between the checklist and the website, there was more room for interpretation in the second test. This second possibility is supported by the fact that the majority of the discrepancies (13/18) occurred in the second half of the checklist, where we have included the elements we expect are less likely to be found on the institutions’ websites. Because the website was less aligned to the items listed in the second half of the checklist (as predicted), there were more discrepancies between researchers’ interpretations of those items.

We compared and discussed our results, with a particular focus on why the discrepancies occurred. Through this discussion, we found that only 2/18 differing results were due to a conflicting point of view. The remaining 16/18 differing results could be explained either by an oversight of available evidence, or by different interpretations of either the question or the evidence required, which we resolved through discussion. In those cases, we also adjusted the questions and/or the notes about what constitutes evidence in the new version of the checklist to enhance clarity.

Following this second test of the checklist, we refined the research tool by:

- Re-aligning some items with CAPLA’s *6 Steps for Quality RPL* by moving them from one section to another.
- Including additional notes to clarify some of the checklist items and/or to indicate what kind of evidence might validate certain checklist items.
- Consolidating certain items in the checklist to reduce repetition. The second test particularly demonstrated repetition in items pertaining to following-up with, and reporting to, applicants; continuous improvement of PLAR and its elements; and data collection.
- Removing some items due to redundancy or to the unlikelihood of finding evidence to support these items in an institution’s public-facing information.

For best practice in PLAR, CAPLA recommends that assessors validate assessment tools to ensure inter-rater reliability. In other words, two or more assessors should grade an assignment independent of the other to determine how consistently they have scored the candidate. After applying this principle to the Phase I research tool through two tests, I concluded that its design is valid for determining alignment between an institution’s public-facing information and the quality mechanisms for PLAR identified by CAPLA, and for collating evidence.

To further enhance the consistency of the Phase I findings, my colleague, Lorraine Stock, research assistant for Phase I, reviewed all 24 Ontario CAAT websites, using the final, calibrated version of the research tool, while I reviewed all 20 Ontario university websites. The testing helped me to recognize the research tool as subject to interpretation and benefitting from dialogue and, therefore, I regard the data we collected in Phase I to be dynamic, rather than absolute. Moreover, the data ought also to be recognized as dynamic because, as Wihak (2007) points out, “websites change frequently...[so the] information we collected may be revised by the time these findings are published” (p. 104).

After completing the Phase I e-scan of 46 institutions, three clear patterns emerged from the data. First, the e-scan confirmed that Ontario's CAATs have significantly more developed PLAR processes than Ontario's public universities do, reflecting the finding from the literature that colleges tend to outpace universities in terms of PLAR process and uptake. Because the CAATs are required through the *Minister's Binding Policy Directive* to provide a PLAR process, at least some information for most of CAPLA's 6 steps could be found on each of the 24 Ontario college public websites. Finding information about PLAR on the public websites of Ontario's universities was significantly more challenging. I used the search function on each website, searching methodically for the terms: "Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition," "Recognition of Prior Learning," and "Challenge for Credit." I also sought information by clicking through admission and transfer sections of the websites, especially sections pertinent to transfer credit and/or mature or non-direct students. These strategies were informed by Wihak's (2007) study where each of her research assistants was tasked with reviewing university websites from the point of view of a potential applicant. They had 15 minutes per website and

were instructed to assume that they were mature students interested in returning to school for undergraduate studies and that they had heard something about 'getting credit for experience,' but were not familiar with the specific terms Prior Learning Assessment or PLAR; this scenario was based on research findings that indicated low awareness of the term PLAR amongst potential adult learners (Shmyr, 2003). (p. 102)

With Wihak's study informing my methodology, I noticed that I relied on my knowledge as a higher education practitioner to be able to find what little information about PLAR is publically available on the websites of Ontario's universities.

The checklist tool has 59 questions, and, based on the public information on the institution's website, we recorded a Yes, No, or Partial response to each question and linked to any evidence we found. For 8/20 – 40% – of universities, I recorded 0 Yes responses. 13/20 universities had 5 or fewer Yes responses, and 15/20 universities had 10 or fewer Yes responses. Of the remaining 5 universities, 2 each had 12 and 13 Yes responses, and one had 21 Yes responses.

Although most Ontario universities apparently do not have a PLAR system at the institutional level, I did find some interesting ways that specific programs and faculties within the universities use PLAR. For instance:

- Students at one university can use a PLAR process to challenge the field placement of the Bachelor of Social Work program.
- One university uses PLAR in its bridging program for Internationally Educated Nurses.
- One university has allowed students with significant experience to write challenge exams to obtain advanced standing in engineering programs.
- Some universities explicitly allow PLAR for the certificate programs in their Schools of Continuing Studies.
- One university uses PLAR in a bridging program designed for its Pharmacist graduates who have been working in the field since graduation and who now require a more advanced credential to continue practicing.

The second pattern I discerned based on the completed checklist for each CAAT, was a set of apparent weaknesses in college PLAR process in relation to CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework. I



- 6.A: Indicate that it will offer to meet with the individual after assessment to review outcomes of assessment (regardless of whether the individual was successful or unsuccessful), identify new goals, etc.?
- 1.II: Evaluate and continuously improve processes and practices?
- 1.III: Ask for the perspective of individuals who use PLAR when developing or reviewing policies and procedures?
- 1.IV: Describe how fees are distributed within the institution once collected and how that was determined?
- 1.V: Always or occasionally use advisory committees or teams when working with PLAR candidates?
- 2.I: Provide for appropriate advisor function training on an on-going basis?
- 2.II: Keep records of evidence that those performing PLAR functions have received appropriate PLAR training?
- 2.III: Encourage advisors' involvement in the professional organizations that are developing PLAR locally, provincially and nationally for continuous upgrading and insight?
- 3.I: Provide the applicant with the tools (scoring grids, charts, or rubrics) used to evaluate the assessment?
- 3.II: Provide knowledge and skill practice opportunities that simulate actual assessment situations?
- 4.I: Accommodate differences in learning and abilities and individual unique circumstances of the applicant?
- 4.II: Allow for use of translators for some assessments?
- 4.IV: Provide appropriate assessor function training for evaluators, subject matter experts, supervisors, elders on an on-going basis?
- 4.V: Account for the assessor's time for required training and assessment completion in formal workload documents?
- 4.VI: Keep records of evidence that those performing PLAR functions have received appropriate PLAR training?
- 4.VII: Encourage assessors' involvement in the professional organizations that are developing PLAR locally, provincially and nationally for continuous upgrading and insight?
- 4.VIII: Ensure that assessment tools and processes are valid, i.e., that they test the knowledge, skills, or abilities against the set criteria they are intended to test? (e.g. if the specific learning outcomes do not pertain to language and grammar skills, an applicant's success should not hinge on their language and grammar skills)
- 4.IX: Ensure that assessment tools and processes are reliable, i.e., that they have been tested and found to be consistent over a period of time?
- 4.XII: Validate assessment results to ensure inter-rater reliability?
- I also identified two other questions for further scrutiny that fell outside of the 13+ "N" criteria:
  - 1.R (12 "N" responses): Have a designated PLAR office or centre?
  - 2.B (17 "P" responses): Provide clear information on standards, competencies, tasks, or learning outcomes for the course or component of the program to be completed through PLAR?

The third outcome of the Phase I data analysis was a preliminary way for me to sort institutions based on their apparent level of development in relation to CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework. Along the y-axis, I tallied the number of "Y," "N," and "P" responses of each institution. This allowed me to group institutions based on the number of "Y" responses. The mean number of "Y" responses for the CAAT data set was 26/59. In the Conclusion section of this report, I discuss further how I used Phase I data to sort institutions according to their apparent level of development in relation to CAPLA's framework.

## Phase II

I used the three outcomes of Phase I to inform the development of the Phase II research tool. In Phase II, I sought more detailed information from a smaller number of respondents. I crafted a questionnaire for use in Phase II which consists of four sections (Appendix B). In the first section, I ask a series of questions which I have titled "Context," and which inquire into the administrative logistics of the institution's PLAR system. In the second section, "CAPLA's Quality Assurance Framework," I ask questions which align with the apparent weaknesses in process revealed during Phase I. In section three, "Case Study," I wrote a case study describing a PLAR candidate and asked participants a set of questions as a way to get a provisional picture of how an institution would direct a candidate through the PLAR process. And in section four, "Future Directions," I asked participants to reflect on lessons learned, best practices, and goal setting. I also included a text box for additional comments in case respondents wanted to include any additional information that did not easily fit into the rest of the questionnaire. None of the participants included new information in the additional comments section, suggesting that the questions posed in Phase II addressed the key points of the PLAR process.

I invited participants from eight institutions to complete the questionnaire. These eight institutions included the out-of-province comparators for each of the university and college sectors, five Ontario CAATs, and one Ontario university. To select the CAAT participants, I used the y-axis data from Phase I to help me determine the apparent leaders in PLAR process in each of the 4 regions identified by Colleges Ontario (Northern, Eastern, Central, Western). Fanshawe College was the fifth CAAT that I invited to participate, because Fanshawe had occasion to examine its PLAR process as outlined in the Introduction section, above. When I analysed the data from Phase I that I had collected for the Ontario universities, there was one clear leader (21/59) in terms of developed PLAR process in relation to CAPLA's framework, and I invited that institution to participate. I obtained all appropriate Research Ethics Board approvals before reaching out to potential participants. An individual from each of the eight institutions generously agreed to participate in the study.

I read each completed questionnaire as I received them, and asked the participants follow-up questions as needed. Once I had received all eight completed questionnaires, I reread them, this time coding each questionnaire for themes. I explore these themes in the Findings & Analysis section, below.

## Limitations

During Phase I of this study, my methodology was limited when exploring the publically available information about PLAR on the websites of the French language colleges in Ontario. We relied on translation software for reviewing the websites. It is possible that we overlooked or misunderstood some elements of the websites, accordingly.

I recognize that it is difficult to capture the dynamic nature of policies, processes, and practices. As Wihak (2007) notes above, websites change regularly, and policy documents get revised. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited by the fact that data collection necessarily occurred within defined periods of time.

The (2015) CAPLA framework I draw upon seeks to inform RPL systems in a variety of sectors, not only post-secondary, and across the country, not only in Ontario. I regret that logistics required me to limit this study to Ontario post-secondary institutions (with two exceptions). Moreover, it was beyond the scope of this study to explore uses of PLAR outside of the post-secondary sector, but I recognize that post-secondary can learn from how PLAR is used elsewhere.

Finally, the study would have benefitted from the input of additional participants from additional institutions. I know from the opportunities I have had to meet PLAR practitioners from across the province and the country that I have much to learn from colleagues at many more institutions than I was able to include in this study.

## Findings & Analysis

Themes emerged from the data collected in Phase II which were also informed by themes evident in the literature, and information and resources I explored during the Phase I e-scan. The data collected in Phase II therefore validates these themes as on-going, contemporary issues in PLAR for our consideration, even while they resonate with findings from past studies. In this section, I offer a set of recommendations that I root in my analysis of the data I collected in this study. In my Conclusion following this section, I include an overarching recommendation, which proposes a way for PLAR researchers and practitioners to continue building upon, and moving forward in finding solutions to, the best practices and challenges that persist in the field.

### Explore opportunities to resolve “financial disincentives to PLAR” for users:

In their (1999) study of PLAR across Canada, Aarts et al. note that “There are financial disincentives to PLAR at some institutions that require full-time students to pay PLAR assessment fees in addition to tuition for the courses in which they are being assessed” (p. 22). Moreover, the authors caution that a candidate’s use of PLAR could jeopardize their eligibility for provincial student assistance programs. Nearly twenty years later, this challenge and related concern remain salient. Recognizing the particular financial challenge for full-time students wishing to PLAR, respondents in this study wrote: “Most students do not save money through PLAR,” and “Students wanting to follow a PLAR process to earn credits actually spend more, not less.” All six respondents from the college sector specified that students could save money through PLAR if they are part-time or continuing education students to begin with, or if they can PLAR enough courses to entail a change in their status from full-time to part-time. In the latter case, however, many respondents highlighted the potential threat to the student’s access to the Ontario Student Assistance Plan (in the case of Ontario) that this change in status represents. Some respondents did note that an ideal condition under which a student might save money through PLAR is if they are able to use PLAR to obtain credit for one or more whole academic terms. However, the respondents made it clear that this option for Ontario college students is neither common, nor particularly well-developed at this time.

What makes the finding of the on-going financial disincentives for students to use PLAR particularly interesting, is that 5/8 of the participating institutions indicate somewhere in a publically-accessible document or on their website that one benefit of PLAR to the students is that it might save them money.

Because of differences in the structure of college and university programs, the university participants in this study did note that PLAR may assist students in saving money because it could be used to reduce the number of elective credits a student would need to complete to earn their degree.

#### Address faculty concerns regarding workload and/or remuneration:

Articulating another challenge for PLAR which remains relevant today, Aarts et al. (1999) write

The evidence indicates a wide range of remuneration practices across the institutions....The impact of lack of agreement and clarity around remuneration for conducting PLAR assessments at some institutions was manifested in a reluctance by faculty to participate in PLAR until appropriate compensation arrangements were made. (pp. 57 & 58)

Wihak (2007) includes “consideration of how PLAR will be reflected in faculty workload and reward agreements” among the administrative issues attendant with introducing PLAR across a post-secondary institution, pointing to such challenges as one reason for institutional resistance to the concept. Reflecting ten years after Wihak’s study, and nearly twenty years after Aarts et al.’s, respondents in this study identified faculty workload and remuneration issues as an on-going challenge today. I found there was no consensus regarding best practices for managing faculty workload and remuneration across institutions. In some cases, there were several strategies deployed *within* institutions. Some respondents noted that at their institution, PLAR is accounted for, either directly or indirectly, on the Standard Workload Formula (SWF), the term-by-term document that captures the workload agreement between faculty and management at Ontario colleges, as specified in the CAAT-A collective agreement. The difficulty here, as one respondent expressed, is that faculty and management usually cannot anticipate specific PLAR requests far enough in advance when they are developing the SWF. Some respondents specified that PLAR therefore gets incorporated into the Coordinator duties at their institution. Many respondents indicated that their institutions frequently contract PLAR assessors on a part-time basis as needed. One institution pays both part-time and full-time assessors directly. One respondent from the university sector explained that a faculty member’s PLAR assessment might be considered as part of their service to the university and accounted for during annual performance reviews.

One participant clearly recognized the need for development in response to this challenge, stating “Moving forward, we are investigating what the best practices are with regard to PLAR and SWFs.” Another respondent commented that the timing of PLAR assessments can pose a challenge since ideally, a candidate will complete a PLAR assessment prior to the beginning of the term when they seek to begin their program of study. Practically, this means that PLAR assessments are likely to occur in the summer term prior to a fall start, when faculty tend to be out-of-office. As a result and, as another respondent put it, “Challenges in procuring assessments are generally the biggest hurdle we face.” As discussed below, some institutions are working toward the proactive development of methods of assessment for PLAR candidates, which may help to address this challenge to some extent.

Many of the CAATs state in publically accessible information that a candidate may undertake a PLAR challenge prior to formally enrolling at the institution. However, in the context of faculty workload, this practice came into question, with a respondent putting it this way:

While a PLAR applicant is, in principle, eligible to pursue an application to PLAR a course without being a student in a full-time program, in practice, Administrators and Faculty are unwilling to invest scarce resources in supporting a non-registered applicant through a PLAR process to earn a credit when the possibility exists that the applicant may not actually meet admission requirements to the program. This is perceived to be both a risk to the academic integrity of the admissions process, as well as an unwise use of limited resources.

While thinking through faculty workload and remuneration issues for supporting PLAR is already a challenge, it is an even more complex one in the case of candidates not yet enrolled at the institution.

### Collect and use data:

In the Lessons Learned section of the (2017) Technological Education Pathway Development ONCAT pathways project, Gedies, Harrison, Kongkham-Fernandez, Kelsey, Wilson, Speers, Ostermaier, Lamontagne, Baker, and DiPetta recommend that practitioners “Research, collect and manage data for better decision making...where data drives decisions” (p. 14). This best practice for thinking about pathways and mobility in an institution also emerged as a theme for institutional processes pertaining to PLAR.

Echoing this realization of the strength of data-driven decision-making, several respondents shared that they have recently, or soon plan to, expand the amount and type of data they collect about PLAR at their institutions in order to inform their policies, processes, and practices moving forward. For instance, another consideration identified in the Aarts et al. (1999) study still relevant today is whether attracting more mature students to institutions will increase PLAR levels and/or whether enhancing PLAR practices may increase the number of mature students who seek out the institution. In response to my question about the benefits of PLAR to the institution, one respondent wrote that “PLAR may...help to attract mature students.” By way of a follow-up question, I asked: “are you planning to track or monitor whether PLAR helps to attract mature students in some way?” and the respondent confirmed: “We are currently looking into ways to market PLAR better to potential mature students. Once we have those processes in place, we will likely start collecting data on whether PLAR helped attract them to the college/program”. One respondent explicitly noted that, broadly, “The data we collect informs our practices for registration, outreach, assessor retention, and challenge method.”

Of the eight participating institutions, five respondents were able to share reliable data regarding the number of PLAR attempts they had had in the 2016/2017 academic year, and how many of those attempts resulted in the applicant successfully receiving credit:

1. 820/848, or 97%, of PLAR assessment attempts resulted in the applicant receiving credit
2. 517/568, or 91%, of PLAR assessment attempts resulted in the applicant receiving credit
3. 385/410, or 94%, of PLAR assessment attempts resulted in the applicant receiving credit
4. 369/374, or >98%, of PLAR assessment attempts resulted in the applicant receiving credit
5. 280/302, or 93%, of PLAR assessment attempts resulted in the applicant receiving credit

Respondents from three of these five institutions reported that one of the ways their institution defines its success in PLAR is by the percentage of PLAR assessments that result in the applicant receiving credit. By this metric, all five of the reporting institutions were highly successful in PLAR for the 2016/17 academic year.

One respondent also noted that another way her institution defines its success in PLAR is through an increase in number of PLAR applications, and most participating institutions are also successful in their PLAR activity according to this metric. Through the literature review, I was able to find some comparator data for the number of PLAR assessments conducted by these same institutions ten years ago and twenty years ago:

Number of Assessments by Institution and Academic Year				
Institution	1996/97 (Aarts et al., 1999, p. 13)	2006/07 (Van Kleef, 2009, pp. 6-8) (percentage change from 1996/97)	2016/17 (Harrison, 2018) (percentage change from 2006/07)	% change between 1996/97 and 2016/17
1.	321	740 (+130%)	848 (+15%)	+164%
2.	Data not collected for this institution	263	568 (+116%)	Data not available
3.	604	567 (-6%)	410 (-28%)	-32%
4.	Data not collected for this institution	106	374 (+252%)	Data not available
5.	198	269 (+36%)	302 (+12%)	+52%

While it is heartening to see a general increase in PLAR assessments, the real number of assessments remains low relative to the populations of these institutions. Continuing to collect, use, and promote data and information about PLAR may help to bring awareness to the concept, and to find ways for institutions to most effectively leverage PLAR in ways that benefit both students and institutions.

### Centralize processes for consistency and quality:

Describing the features of institutions who use PLAR most successfully, Diane Conrad (2014) argues that the institution should support “A centralized RPL office...headed up by a senior academic who serves as an RPL advocate” (p. 324). The study participants reinforced the alignment of centralization with consistency and quality through their responses. One respondent whose institution includes two modes of PLAR, one centralized and one not, remarked that “[Centralized] PLAR is highly consistent... [Decentralized] PLAR is highly inconsistent.” Because colleges in Ontario are mandated to offer PLAR processes, PLAR is at least partially centralized at the CAATs, while I found in Phase I that it is generally decentralized at Ontario universities, with some exceptions. One Ontario college respondent who classified PLAR at her institution as centralized, stated that “Anecdotally, I believe this leads to greater consistency in PLAR practices.” Several respondents noted that PLAR *practices* may be necessarily decentralized because of different assessment requirements across academic divisions, but that the *process* ought to be centralized for consistency and transparency, two of CAPLA’s (2015) Guiding Principles.

Two subthemes in this code emerged from the data:

### Integrate PLAR and credit transfer

Insofar as PLAR is one component of a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL), which includes PLAR and credit transfer, the data collected during Phase II suggests that, ideally, PLAR and credit transfer should work together toward providing students with the most recognition of their prior learning possible. This will enhance student mobility systems by not requiring students to duplicate their learning. Two respondents specifically noted that PLAR and credit transfer are addressed by the same policy at their institution “to better reflect a cohesive and comprehensive approach to these...processes.” A third respondent explained that “PLAR [at her institution] is working with the Credit Transfer department to ensure that students are aware of the other pathways to credential.”

The importance of integrating PLAR and credit transfer as a matter of fairness to candidates who bring learning from formal, informal, and non-formal settings to our institutions stood out in participants’ responses to the case study that I included in the Phase II questionnaire. In the case study, I described a fictional candidate, Susan, with a 15-year old Bachelor of Arts degree in History who has been working for the past eight years in a series of roles where she has learned bookkeeping and accounts payable skills on the job while also engaging in self-study for professional development. Susan now would like to return to school to pursue an accounting credential (for the full case study, please see section 3, Appendix B). Respondents agreed that ideally, Susan would receive transfer credit for her completed formal education (in the case of Ontario college curriculum, likely a general education credit or credits, and a communications credit), and PLAR credits for the knowledge and skills she has acquired in the workplace and through self-study. The PLAR credit would be contingent on Susan appropriately demonstrating how her knowledge and skills align with relevant courses at the institution. In other words, *ideally*, PLAR and credit transfer would be well integrated so as to offer Susan the maximum amount of recognition for her prior learning as appropriate.

Indicating that there is further work to be done in terms of integrating the concepts and processes of PLAR and credit transfer, however, respondents also noted challenges with how PLAR and credit transfer typically work – or do not work – together. Two respondents addressed the potential problem that Susan’s formal education ended fifteen years ago, “outside of [the] usual...’window’ for exemption.” One respondent’s window is five years, and another’s, seven. One respondent said that, as a result, Susan is likely not eligible for credit transfer because her formal education took place too long ago. The other respondent elaborated:

Under this policy [of credit transfer], individual academic areas have discretion over whether they will accept transfers of credit where the basis course is more than 5 years old. Some academic areas are very strict, while others are more lenient. When an ‘outdated’ credit transfer is denied, there is little recourse for the student, as their academic experience is ineligible for PLAR (which is only work/life experience). Susan may be one of these students whose academic experience is not eligible for either credit transfer or PLAR.

Within recognition of prior learning systems, ideally institutions will develop processes and methods for ensuring PLAR and credit transfer can work together in the candidate's best interest. If an individual's formal education is outdated according to an institution's policy, might there be the opportunity for that candidate to demonstrate via PLAR that they have maintained the currency of their knowledge through self-study, application of skills on-the-job (e.g. communication skills), etc.? As long as an individual can demonstrate their skills and knowledge in relation to an established, current set of learning outcomes, the logistics of RPL policies should not prevent them from obtaining credit where it is due.

At another respondent's institution, policy specifically prevents the integration of PLAR and credit transfer: "Our policy does not provide PLAR in combination with receipt of any other transfer credit/advanced standing credits," so "Susan would not qualify for PLAR because she would receive credit recognition from having completed a first degree." In this case, the age of Susan's first credential is not at issue, but it prevents the learning she achieved in the workplace from being recognized through PLAR.

Each set of challenges points to an opportunity for institutions to continue strategizing around how best to integrate PLAR and credit transfer in order to best serve students who have developed their knowledge and skills in formal, informal, and non-formal settings.

#### Convene advisory committees

In CAPLA's (2015) self-audit checklist for Quality RPL Systems, it inquires whether the institution "[considers] use of advisory committees or teams" (p. 36). An RPL advisory committee reflects CAPLA's attestation that "Ideally, all potential stakeholders need to be working together in a collaborative RPL process partnership" (p. 18). Three respondents referred to committees at their institution who advise on RPL policy matters, including PLAR. One of these respondents spoke to the composition of this advisory committee, which includes "representation from faculty, staff and administrators from the academic areas, [Centre for Academic Excellence], [Office of the Registrar], marketing and apprenticeship teams." The use of committees to advise on PLAR policy, process, and practice stood out to me because of the finding stated above, that at Ontario colleges in particular, process tends to be centralized and practice decentralized. By bringing stakeholders from across the institution together on the matter, advisory committees can enhance transparency and consistency of PLAR process and practice by ensuring that the stakeholders managing process centrally receive input from those enacting practice, and vice versa. One respondent summarized the role of the centralized PLAR Office at her institution this way: "Academic areas approach PLAR in different ways, and a centralized PLAR Office helps to ensure that all areas are interpreting and following policy in the same way." Especially for those institutions – in Ontario, the majority – without a dedicated PLAR Office, an advisory committee can serve that function of assuring a common understanding of PLAR policy and process across the institution.

#### Develop PLAR champions:

Another feature of successful PLAR systems according to Conrad (2014) is the development and support of PLAR champions who have access to resources both internal and external to the institution. The development of PLAR champions was a clear theme within the data, and respondents connected the development of PLAR champions to the success of the process at the institutional level. For instance,

responding to a question about what kind of advice they would offer to other institutions looking to develop or enhance their PLAR processes, one respondent wrote, “Show people the value of PLAR...[and identify and/or develop] PLAR ambassadors at the different academic areas who can advocate for and promote PLAR among their peers.” Reinforcing CAPLA’s (2015) contention that quality PLAR systems require explicit support from management, another respondent offered institutions looking to develop their system this advice: “There needs to be support for RPL in the upper levels of the institution.”

One respondent linked the collection and use of data to developing PLAR champions by recognizing that champions are made by rooting PLAR policies, processes, and practices in evidence-based research – precisely, that “data drives decisions” (Gedies et al., 2017, p. 14). This respondent articulated a common challenge with regard to PLAR, the problem of faculty and administrator buy-in, what she called “a hesitancy to endorse PLAR.” But, the respondent goes on, “Once academics understand the assessment strategies used to evaluate PLAR, the conformation to [the American Council on Education] and [the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning] principles, how PLAR can increase student numbers...their endorsement comes naturally.”

### [Integrate PLAR into continuous quality improvement initiatives:](#)

#### [Quality assurance at the curriculum level:](#)

Many respondents pointed to increasing integration of PLAR considerations into quality assurance and continuous quality improvement processes at their institutions, particularly aligned with quality assurance processes in place to support curriculum review and development. For instance, several respondents stated that PLAR is considered to at least some extent during both program development and program review processes. Some respondents pointed to relatively recent initiatives to bring some decision-making and/or oversight around PLAR under the purview of the academic quality unit at the institution, with one respondent explaining that “The expectation is that these areas will work closely together.” It follows that this working relationship will allow for enhanced integration of PLAR methods of assessment with other curriculum documents and activities.

Two respondents discussed the methodical review of PLAR methods of assessment outside of scheduled program review activities. At their respective institutions, PLAR assessments are considered current for two and five years, respectively. Once the PLAR assessment has aged beyond that, the centralized unit responsible for PLAR reaches out to the relevant academic area to request a review of the PLAR assessment. This is a clear example of the importance of centralizing process for consistency and quality.

Some respondents pointed to curriculum documents that their institutions have developed or adapted to ensure quality alignment of PLAR methods of assessments and the traditional curriculum. For instance, one institution has recently developed a PLAR Learner Guide for housing the PLAR method of assessment for a given course, and has devised a way through the Course Outline Mapping and Management System (COMMS) to store the PLAR Learner Guide alongside other curriculum documents for a given course (e.g. the course outline). This institution suggested that the development of the PLAR Learner Guide might become a standard curriculum deliverable during detailed curriculum development for new program development. Another respondent specified that her institution “uses marking rubrics with assessment criteria to help ensure inter rater reliability” of PLAR methods of assessment, while one respondent noted this as a goal at her institution: “We are trying to further improve the validity and reliability of our assessments through the use of rubrics and clear assessment guidelines. Assessments

are reviewed by the PLAR Coordinator before they are distributed to the student to ensure that an assessment tool is provided.” In addition to the development of these kinds of curriculum resources to help ensure quality in assessment practices, one respondent described a *process* applied to a certain method of PLAR assessment at her institution:

There is a built-in inter-rater assessment in every Competency-based PLAR we do. This includes two assessors reviewing a student’s portfolio and evaluating information before meeting with each other to discuss. This process is intentionally designed to have reduced subjectivity in the assessment process. In addition, the PLAR Director reviews every portfolio before and after it is assessed.

One participant’s response to my question about what mechanisms are in place at their institution to encourage the continuous quality improvement of PLAR policies, processes, and practices came closest to explicitly naming a return on investment problem vis-à-vis PLAR, echoes of which I have heard anecdotally at conferences and during other discussions of PLAR. This respondent reported that there are “Very low numbers [of PLAR applications] at our institution [so] therefore [it is] not [a] priority for improvement at this time.” This respondent noted in response to an earlier question that retrieving the data on numbers of PLAR applications and numbers of successful PLAR attempts was a manual process at her institution. This highlights a chicken and egg problem regarding data use and collection in order to enhance and leverage PLAR. Wihak identified a similar problem in her (2007) study of how easily potential new students can access information about PLAR on university websites. Wihak cites an earlier study which found that 24/29 universities regard their websites as “the primary method that was used to inform prospective students about PLAR policy and procedures” (p. 100). But, Wihak goes on, the same study found that the respondents had conducted fewer than 50 PLAR assessments per year. This suggests

that the PLAR information available on the web may not be adequately informing prospective students about the process. The low demand for PLAR is, however, a concern because universities can use it as a reason to refrain from committing time and resources needed to develop an effective approach to PLAR policies and procedures. (p. 100)

The question remains: to what extent will institutions see a return on their investment if they elect to continuously enhance and improve the quality of their PLAR systems? And, for institutions who do not currently have significant uptake around PLAR, what factors can or should drive such continuous quality improvements?

#### Quality assurance at the institutional level:

Five of the eight respondents also referred to the integration of PLAR *as a system* into continuous quality improvement initiatives at the *institutional* level. For instance, one respondent referred to the College Quality Assurance Audit Process (CQAAP), a quality assurance process initiated at the institutional level by the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) and required on a five-to-seven year cycle of all CAATs in Ontario. This respondent noted that the CQAAP had affected her institution’s goal setting around enhancing PLAR as a system: “Since the previous quality assurance audit, the college has an ongoing commitment to improve the availability of information regarding PLAR.”

Two respondents noted internally-driven institutional initiatives to conduct quality reviews of their PLAR systems. One conducts this quality review in-house: “the unit who processes PLAR...[has] put together a quality improvement plan to address gaps in policies, processes and practices. This plan is then monitored by the Academic Quality area to ensure they are making progress on their milestones.” Another respondent identified this kind of in-house review as a future-direction in order to further develop PLAR processes at her institution, and to update policies and processes. But she also mentioned the quality measure of recruiting “external PLAR experts...to do an informal program review” of the institution’s PLAR processes.

The respondent from the Ontario university included in the study explained that the PLAR policy at his institution was initially approved through the university’s Senate Committee on Academic Regulations and Petitions, so any changes to the policy must have Senate approval, as one internal quality measure.

A unique best practice in this code from Red River College (RRC) is the development of a specific RPL Strategic and Operational Plan. The participant from RRC explains:

During the next year, RRC’s 5 year RPL Strategic and Operational Plan will be revised and rewritten. Input gathered through research and consultations will be included in the re-development of the RPL Strategic Plan. Quality assurance is critical to the development, implementation and renewal of RRC’s RPL policies and procedures, advising and assessment practices and our resources and systems development. A specific goal on Quality in RPL is included in RRC’s RPL Strategic Plan.

Continuous quality improvement at both the micro and macro levels of PLAR systems is integral to a well functioning – and growing – PLAR system. Moreover, continuous quality improvement of PLAR assures the alignment of the PLAR system with CAPLA’s (2015) *Guiding Principles for Quality RPL Practice in Canada*, and particularly the principles of consistency, validity, and rigour, each of which is key to developing PLAR champions among institutional stakeholders.

#### [Provide appropriate resources for, and support to, faculty and staff:](#)

The importance of appropriate and adequate support and resources for personnel involved in implementing PLAR processes emerged as a trend in the data, with a particular focus on supporting faculty in the PLAR process. This reflects the alignment of the faculty role with that of the PLAR assessor, and perhaps reflects the fact that PLAR advisors tend to already be PLAR champions through their functional role of advisor while some faculty, as the respondents and the literature note, need to be won over by the concept. The need for more support and resources for faculty also relates back to the theme above of faculty workload and remuneration.

Three sub-recommendations emerged within this theme:

#### [Develop resources/tools to assist faculty assessors](#)

Several respondents referred to tools and templates that had been developed, or are under development, at their institutions to assist faculty in navigating PLAR process and practice. These include:

- Resource documents for faculty to help them determine a student’s eligibility to PLAR a given course

- Resource documents for faculty to help them develop PLAR assessments following guidelines for best practice
- Assessor Manuals and/or instructions for using assessment resources to ensure the PLAR assessment is aligned with the curriculum and will serve the PLAR candidate

One participant clearly expressed the importance of developing tools and resources to assist faculty assessors in navigating PLAR processes and practices, naming the development of these resources one of her institution's best practices in PLAR because it "reduces confusion around PLAR processes and assessment development."

While some institutions, such as Red River College and Algonquin College, post resources created specifically for faculty on their publically accessible websites, others post them on their intranet sites, as noted by participants. As discussed in the methodology section of this report, this is an example of practice that aligns with CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework which would not have been evident during Phase I of this study. It also provides support for my final recommendation in this report, the idea of developing a digital repository for resource sharing across institutions.

#### Provide workshops/training to faculty assessors on PLAR policy and process

In addition to developing tools and resources, respondents emphasized the importance of providing workshops and/or training on PLAR policies, processes, and practices. Many institutions appear to have workshops/professional development opportunities in place, but respondents also made it clear that much training in relation to PLAR occurs on an ad hoc basis, especially following a change in policy, process, or practice. One respondent pointed out that training for PLAR assessors is required by policy at her institution. Respondents referenced the (2015) CAPLA *Quality Assurance for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Canada: The Manual*, in-house tools, and institutional policy as useful resources in the provision of workshops and/or training to faculty assessors.

In addition to these ad hoc training initiatives, two respondents noted more methodical approaches to providing training in PLAR assessment to faculty. One referenced a pilot project at her institution which includes training faculty on "basic PLAR information, processes and best practices," and provided them with an opportunity to attend a workshop run by the RPL Facilitator at Red River College, a notable leader in PLAR in Canada. Another respondent described the typical training program for new PLAR assessors at her institution. New assessors must first shadow two assessments. They then participate in an assessment and are observed by the PLAR Director, who offers feedback which the PLAR assessor can apply to their work going forward. At this institution, the PLAR Director also randomly observes all PLAR assessors, and also provides feedback to assessors upon request.

#### Invest in human resources to support PLAR processes and practices

In addition to the development of tools and the provision of workshops and training, human resources recurred in participants' responses as important for supporting faculty assessors. Those with a PLAR Office or Centre referred to the personnel there as valuable resources to faculty, and those without a designated office referenced faculty and staff working in other roles

who also have expertise in PLAR and are available to provide resources, training, and general advice to faculty assessors when necessary. In response to my question about how the institution distributes PLAR fees collected from candidates, respondents with a PLAR Office or Centre stated that part of the PLAR fees go to offsetting funding for a part-time staff position, demonstrating the importance of human resources for supporting a PLAR system.

Two respondents specifically referenced the Student Success Advisor (SSA) role at their institution as a potential resource for supporting PLAR, particularly for supporting students through the process. For one respondent, SSAs currently provide support on PLAR to students as needed. The second respondent named reaching out to SSAs as a goal for further PLAR development at her institution to ensure SSAs understand the benefits of PLAR and are best prepared to assist students.

Two different respondents highlighted the unique practice of assigning a PLAR-related position *within* academic areas with a high volume of PLAR. At one institution, a staff person coordinates all recognition of prior learning activity – credit transfer and PLAR for one academic school. At another institution, individual programs with high numbers of PLAR assessments have PLAR advisors specifically assigned to them.

### Make explicit the relationship between PLAR and course learning outcomes (or other relevant learning outcomes):

Course learning outcomes emerged as a clear theme in the responses, reflecting the hallmark of valid and reliable PLAR for the purpose of obtaining post-secondary credit: aligning a candidate's knowledge, skills, and abilities with well-articulated learning outcomes. One respondent specified that at her institution, the "PLAR policy aligns PLAR to learning outcomes." The significance of learning outcomes for quality PLAR is reinforced in the literature: Conrad (2014), argues that "Learning outcomes comprise a foundational piece of RPL in many rigorous academic systems, providing clear and accessible targets against which learners can focus their quest for recognition of their prior learning" (p. 321). The Australian Qualifications Framework Council (2012) emphasizes the importance of aligning assessment methods with learning outcomes: "RPL assessment methods should address the specific evidence required to demonstrate prior achievement of the learning outcomes and assessment requirements of the particular qualification components for which credit is sought" (p. 2).

Explicitly aligning PLAR assessment methods with course learning outcomes is not only best practice in PLAR, but it also provides a check and balance for ensuring alignment between assessment methods and course learning outcomes for *all* students accessing a particular curriculum, whether through PLAR or in-class. For instance, in response to a question inquiring into the benefits of PLAR *to the institution*, one respondent notes that PLAR "increases expertise in documenting and assessing learning." Reflecting on one's curriculum in order to construct an appropriate PLAR assessment might afford a faculty member the opportunity to notice a discrepancy between course learning outcomes, course content, and methods of evaluation currently in place in a course. In this way, respondents' descriptions of PLAR assessments resonate with the principles of effective curriculum design in general: "We encourage faculty to design their PLAR assessment based on learning outcomes."

Two interesting challenges came forward within the theme of course learning outcomes which should be highlighted for further consideration. First, in response to my question about how a course is

determined ineligible for PLAR, one participant wrote: “The main test used to determine eligibility is whether the learning outcomes are/can be achievable through work or life experiences or other types of informal or non-formal learning.” This is a unique perspective on what make a course eligible or ineligible for PLAR, and it reinforces the importance of well-articulated learning outcomes. If the course learning outcomes are the basis for PLAR ineligibility, it is important that they properly articulate what a student will know and be able to do at the conclusion of the course, and that they are well aligned with the methods of evaluation. For the college system, in particular, this also raises questions for vocationally-focused programming about what kind of learning outcomes may *not* be achieved through experiential learning.

The second interesting challenge that emerged regarding course learning outcomes was highlighted by a participant reflecting on the complexities of the case study in section three of the questionnaire:

Because of the way courses are structured, Susan may also find that a course includes, for example, 4 course learning outcomes she feels she has mastered, and 2 that she hasn’t. In this case, it would be recommended that Susan takes the course – neither PLAR nor our fees structure currently allow for students to PLAR segments of courses. Students can either PLAR the whole course, or they take the whole course.

Our informal and non-formal learning will not always align precisely with the way curriculum content is distributed across courses yet, as this respondent points out, there is not currently a common mechanism for PLARing *components* of courses at Ontario colleges<sup>3</sup>. Linking this theme to the theme of financial disincentives for PLAR users, this respondent indicates that the fee structure for PLAR is one factor for why students do not usually have recourse to PLAR for only a part of a course. How might we avoid restricting PLAR opportunities for knowledgeable and experienced candidates because of restrictions imposed by fee structures? And, might exploring ways to resolve this problem – for instance, through increased modularization of curriculum – also lead to increased innovative and flexible curriculum development and delivery which would serve all learners and therefore represent an opportunity for universal design for learning?

Within the broader recommendation to make explicit the relationship between PLAR and course learning outcomes, two sub-recommendations emerged:

#### Ensure accessibility of course learning outcomes (or other relevant learning outcomes)

Strengthening the relationship between best practices in PLAR and best practices in curriculum, several respondents indicated that their colleges have recently moved to making all course outlines – which include course learning outcomes – publically available through their websites. For those institutions where not all course outlines are publically available, respondents explained that the potential PLAR candidate would need to reach out to either an advisor or the course instructor, program coordinator, program manager, or school Chair to obtain the course outlines, since, for every college respondent, reviewing the course learning outcomes is the candidate’s first step in determining whether to proceed with PLAR. Particularly for candidates

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<sup>3</sup> Outside of this study, I have spoken to a colleague who is an experienced PLAR assessor who told me anecdotally that some assessors will work with PLAR candidates to develop an individualized learning plan in cases where their knowledge and skills aligns with a part – but not all – of a course.

without knowledge of post-secondary organizational structures, ensuring the accessibility of the relevant learning outcomes is key.

Facilitate opportunities for candidates to self-assess their knowledge, skills, and abilities in relation to the relevant learning outcomes before they formally commence the PLAR process

CAPLA (2015) identifies opportunities for candidates to self-assess the strength of their PLAR candidacy as a best practice, and respondents' descriptions of self-assessment ties this activity clearly to course learning outcomes: "[Students complete a] personal PLAR Self-Assessment (i.e. why they believe they should be eligible to pursue their credit through a PLAR process, including how they rate their knowledge/skills/abilities against the learning outcomes of the course". At some participating institutions, this self-assessment is a formalized part of the PLAR process, and leads to the subject matter expert's determination of the candidate's eligibility to attempt the PLAR process.

At other participating institutions, the self-assessment step is not strictly required, but is strongly recommended; at these institutions, the candidates self-select with regard to the strength of their PLAR candidacy; they do not need to be deemed eligible by a subject matter expert in order to begin the PLAR process. Whether a required component of the process or not, however, the learner self-assessment tools of the participating institutions offer the candidate the opportunity to reflect on their level of knowledge and skill in relation to the course learning outcomes, and to begin document evidence of their learning in relation to the outcomes.

While the norm at all six participating colleges is for PLAR assessments to measure a candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities in relation to course learning outcomes, the two participating universities offered other ways to think about PLAR assessment, perhaps because learning outcomes are conceived of differently in the college and university sectors in Canada (Conrad, 2014). At both universities, PLAR candidates may submit a portfolio to a committee which assesses it for evidence of degree-level competency. Successful candidates are granted non-equivalent credits toward the elective components of their degree, shortening the time it will take them to complete their credential. In this case, course learning outcomes are no longer the relevant factor, because students are not receiving credit for PLARing a specific course. These candidates would require access to the competencies against which their PLAR assessment will be measured. One of the participating universities also provides the opportunity for candidates to challenge specific courses required for their degree through PLAR, while the other does not; at the latter institution, PLAR is only applied to unspecified elective credits.

During Phase I of this study, I learned that within the Ontario college system, Algonquin College is unique in offering students a similar opportunity to PLAR for non-equivalent credit as at the two participating universities. Algonquin has developed a PLAR assessment method which provides the opportunity for students to acquire credit toward the General Education component of their coursework by demonstrating their prior learning in relation to the five General Education themes in Ontario. Among the Ontario colleges, it is best practice to transcribe PLAR credits in the same way that a grade would be transcribed if the student took the course (although failing PLAR grades are not recorded on the transcript). This is the practice at Algonquin for PLAR completed on a course-match basis, but it transcribes non-equivalent General Education credits achieved through PLAR as "CR" on the transcript (Algonquin College, 2018, online).

### Enhance the User Experience:

Under this code, respondents noted recent initiatives and new goals for improving their PLAR processes and practices with the *user*, specifically, in mind. This aligns with the finding in the literature that PLAR is a learner-centred practice (see, e.g., CAPLA, 2011; 2015; Conrad, 2014; UNESCO, 2012).

I have identified two subthemes within this code:

#### Automate components of the process

Because PLAR is a learner-centred concept which depends on an individual's learning and on their ability to articulate it, PLAR practitioners tend to resist the notion that the process of using PLAR for obtaining academic credit can be automated. However, the participants in this study pointed to ways that *components* of the process can be automated and/or digitized to enhance the user experience in ways that may also address faculty workload concerns.

Participants whose institution requires that a candidate's eligibility be formally reviewed by a subject matter expert have used digital solutions to streamline that process, and at one institution, applicants can apply directly through the public website. Participants also indicated the development of self-assessment templates to streamline the beginning of the process for candidates.

Participants' development of PLAR Learner Guides to house methods of assessment for PLAR candidates, and the public availability of course learning outcomes to candidates (each of which is discussed elsewhere in this report in greater detail) also represent ways that components of the PLAR process may be automated to serve the user. However, all of these initiatives also offer partial solutions to assessor – and advisor – workload issues, since they empower the candidate to assess their own knowledge, skills, and abilities, and they ensure that a method of assessment for a PLAR candidate is prepared in advance of a request.

Although it is the case that PLAR for the purpose of academic credit tends to be a very individualized process out of recognition that everyone's life experiences and opportunities for learning are different, there are some precedents of automating the PLAR process based on a defined program of training at an organization other than a publically funded college or university. In these and other examples that I learned about during the course of this study, assessment is built in to the original training program itself, so, similar to an articulation agreement for credit transfer, PLAR practitioners, including subject matter experts, have determined a set amount of credits a candidate may be awarded based on their completion of the training program, and assuming the candidate meets certain criteria. Examples of these kinds of articulated PLAR agreements include:

- The McDonald's Agreement
  - "McDonald's employees, who have completed specific McDonald's training, will be eligible to be granted the equivalent of first-year credit for a business or business administration program at one of 24 public colleges in Ontario" (Fanshawe College, 2016, online).
- TRU Credit Bank

- “The Credit Bank allows you to receive credit for pre-assessed training from selected employers, private training organizations and Continuing Studies programs” (TRU, no date, online).
- The Canadian Armed Forces National Equivalency Database
  - The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is working with post-secondary institutions across Canada to map CAF training programs, CAF occupations, and related programs at public Canadian colleges and universities to facilitate a smooth recognition of prior learning process for those looking to enter, change roles or occupations within, and exit, the CAF (Gray, 2018, p. 8).
- Algoma University and the National Aboriginal Land Managers Association
  - The respondent from Algoma University explained that the institution had recently leveraged the PLAR policy “to enhance an agreement with the National Aboriginal Land Managers Association [NALMA] for their students who complete the NALMA Professional Lands Management Certification program.”

### Improve access to information

Participants in this study indicated several ways that their institutions are working to provide clearer, more accessible information to PLAR candidates. This is a heartening theme given Wihak’s (2007) finding that “the PLAR information available on the web may not be adequately informing prospective students about the process” (p. 100), and that 5/6 of CAPLA’s (2015) *6 Steps for Quality RPL* involve explaining or providing information.

Some of the innovative ways that institutions are improving access to information about PLAR for candidates includes:

- All PLAR candidates at one participating institution are enrolled in a section of the learning management system which houses all resources for PLAR and allows for communication between candidates and the PLAR Office.
- One respondent highlighted a recent initiative to offer specified drop-in hours at the PLAR Office so that candidates know when they will be able to meet with an advisor to discuss the process, and so that the PLAR personnel can best manage their time.
- Another institution offers regular orientation sessions for new PLAR candidates to ensure consistency and transparency of information about the process.
- One respondent explained that her institution provides PLAR information at Open House.
- At Thompson Rivers University where PLAR is particularly promoted to its Open Learning (OL) students, the institution sends PLAR info directly to all OL students upon admission.

One respondent’s comments in relation to this subtheme were also referenced above, under the theme of collecting and using data to improve PLAR systems. She reported: “We are currently looking into ways to market PLAR better to potential mature students. Once we have those processes in place, we will likely start collecting data on whether PLAR helped attract them to the college/program.” These remarks raise the question of how improving access to information for potential PLAR candidates may correlate with an increase in PLAR rates and

success, as well as student recruitment and retention. In light of Wihak's (2007) findings that candidates may not find sufficient information about PLAR on institutional websites, such a study of how the provision of increased information improves PLAR systems would be timely.

## Experiential Learning

This project has afforded me the invaluable opportunity to meet and network with colleagues throughout the province and across the country doing interesting and innovative work in PLAR with commitment and passion. PLAR practitioners are an exceptionally generous and collegial group, and I have learned so much from each of them along my own path to becoming a PLAR champion. In this section, I offer some of the key take-aways from the experiential learning I undertook while exploring the concept of PLAR. As in any PLAR assessment, it is the learning from the experience, not the experience itself, which is so valuable.

### The 27<sup>th</sup> Annual PLAR Conference, Loyalist College – June, 2016

- This conference was my first immersive introduction to the concept of PLAR.
- The Loyalist conference emphasizes PLAR as a *holistic* process, and highlights how PLAR is useful not only for obtaining employment, academic credit, or professional recognition but also for nurturing an individual's goal setting, reflective practice, and self-esteem,
- The Loyalist conference emphasizes portfolio as a method of PLAR assessment, and I learned about the recommended component parts of a portfolio, and best practices for assessing a portfolio.
- PLAR at Loyalist College emerged from a partnership with the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in the 1990s. PLAR practitioners from FNTI spoke to PLAR as reflective of Indigenous ways of knowing, pointing to ways that PLAR may be a useful tool in on-going efforts toward the decolonization of education in Canada.

### The Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admission and Transfer (PCCAT) Conference – June, 2018

- At the PCCAT conference, I attended a session titled Learner Mobility: A Framework for Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) for Our Veterans (Blackwell & Nicholas, 2018). In this session, a representative from a Military Family Resource Centre (MFRC), and a representative from an Ontario college discussed opportunities for partnerships between the CAATs and the MFRCs in order to support personnel releasing from the military in obtaining advanced standing in college programs through PLAR. I subsequently joined a community of practice for those interested in exploring how we can leverage PLAR at the CAATs to support personnel releasing from the military that arose from that session.
- I presented my preliminary findings from Phase I of this study, including an early conception of the Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum. I received interesting feedback from colleagues across Canada, reiterating the need to consult across provinces on best practice in PLAR.

### Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment Workshop, Red River College – October, 2018

- Fanshawe College had the opportunity to host the RPL Facilitator from Red River College who delivered a workshop on PLAR to approximately 45 staff, faculty, and administrators across the college. This was an invaluable opportunity to learn about best practice in PLAR assessment

from a leading Canadian institution, to further develop PLAR champions at Fanshawe, and to bring a diverse group of individuals together to address common questions and share points of view on PLAR process and practice at the college.

- This workshop reminded participants to start with existing methods of evaluation for a given course when developing a PLAR assessment; if existing methods of evaluation are constructively aligned with the curriculum, chances are that one method, or a combination of methods, can be used or adapted for a PLAR assessment.
- The workshop also reinforce how attending carefully to creating a strong PLAR assessment method that is well aligned with curriculum can offer faculty an opportunity to refine the curriculum. For example, by focusing on a culminating method of assessment for a PLAR candidate, faculty might have occasion to rearticulate poorly worded course learning outcomes, or adjust existing methods of evaluation. In this way, the thoughtful development PLAR assessment serves as a quality assurance measure for the course as a whole.

### The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment Annual Conference November, 2018

#### *Pre-Conference: RPL in the Military*

- During the pre-conference, I learned about the CAF's development of a National Equivalency Database, discussed above.
- Discussion at the pre-conference underscored the importance of establishing a central point person at post-secondary institutions who can address PLAR questions and concerns, particularly for those candidates without significant prior knowledge of post-secondary norms and structures.

#### *Conference*

- The CAPLA Conference highlights the need for PLAR systems in a variety of sectors, not only post-secondary. For instance, there is an urgency to recognize the knowledge, skills, and abilities of immigrants and refugees to Canada. This not only treats such individuals with fairness and respect, but also helps to address the skills gap in Canada and contributes to strategic economic development. This urgency is not new. As CAPLA wrote in 2015:

Internationally educated people are coming to Canada in response to our need to improve Canada's economic future. However, once here, many internationally educated people experience a disconnect between their knowledge, skills, and abilities and the assessment and recognition of that learning. From this, it is easy to identify the nature of some of Canada's most serious labour force issues. (p. 3)

- Both the pre-conference and conference helped me to reflect on the idea that PLAR entails a willingness to take a calculated risk, because it departs from traditional structures of education and assessment. But, the return on investment of such a calculated risk may be very lucrative, both to individuals who obtain recognition for their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and to the institutions who recruit such knowledgeable and skilled individuals.
- I presented findings from this study at a plenary session of the conference, and enjoyed many interesting follow-up discussions with colleagues throughout the remainder of the conference.

- Reflecting the rich opportunities I have had to become a PLAR champion, I was elected to the CAPLA Board of Directors for a three-year term.

#### Education and Skills Symposium, Conference Board of Canada – November, 2018

- I had the opportunity to present findings from this study on a panel about PLAR at the Education and Skills Symposium of the Conference Board. Feedback from attendees reflected the themes of the Symposium overall:
  - Presenters and participants noted the growing importance of the transferable skills. How can we teach and evaluate transferable skills, and how can we address transferable skills via PLAR?
  - There is an urgency to decolonize education to support Indigenous students across the country. What role and PLAR play in this work of decolonization?
  - Post-secondary institutions need to collect and use data to inform decision-making.
  - Presenters and participants emphasized the significance of work-integrated learning (WIL). Given the current focus on WIL in post-secondary education (particularly for universities seeking new ways to enhance WIL) why does resistance to PLAR – a method for recognizing the rich learning that comes from WIL - persist?

## Conclusion

Throughout this report, I have made recommendations for improving the operationalization of PLAR processes at post-secondary institutions based on the themes that emerged from the data. While immersed among the champions in the PLAR community, I was continually struck by the generosity of my colleagues and their willingness to share their expertise and their resources in order to support others in enhancing the PLAR process at their institutions. So what can we do with the best practices that emerged in this study on a grander scale, one that exceeds individual efforts made discreetly across each institution? Harris and Wihak (2014) articulate a theme in the literature when they emphasize that PLAR researchers and practitioners need to build on one another's work, rather than duplicate it. Conrad (2014) asks a similar question for researchers and practitioners to consider: "How can the trend toward deepened and expanded research-based RPL *knowledge* translate into *practice* in higher education?" (p. 331, my emphasis). One response to Conrad's challenge comes from Travers and Harris (2014), who examine the professional development needs of PLAR practitioners, and advocate for them to participate in "communities of practice in order to learn more about different and complex perspectives and how to incorporate best practices into advice and assessment" (p. 233). Writing in 2011, CAPLA – itself a community of practice for RPL/PLAR practitioners on a national-scale – made the point that PLAR practitioners must build on one another's work while implementing research-based practice in their organizations. This entails resource and information sharing across institutions, not simply within them:

We should...be able to draw on all the PLAR work across the country to develop a strategic approach towards its integration....One way to do this is to identify and support champions of PLAR and identify the components of the most workable programs. (CAPLA, 2011, p. 14)

On a global scale, the UNESCO (2012) agrees: “Given the complexities in establishing an effective Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) system, there is a need to strengthen international cooperation and capacity-building in the field” (p. 7).

In 2017, researchers Penner, Howieson, and DiTullio undertook a project titled *Creating a Culture of Mobility: Needs of Small Institutions*. The authors proposed a model they call The Culture of Mobility Spectrum for helping institutions identify goals for the development and continuous quality improvement of their pathways activity (Figure 3).

Figure 3

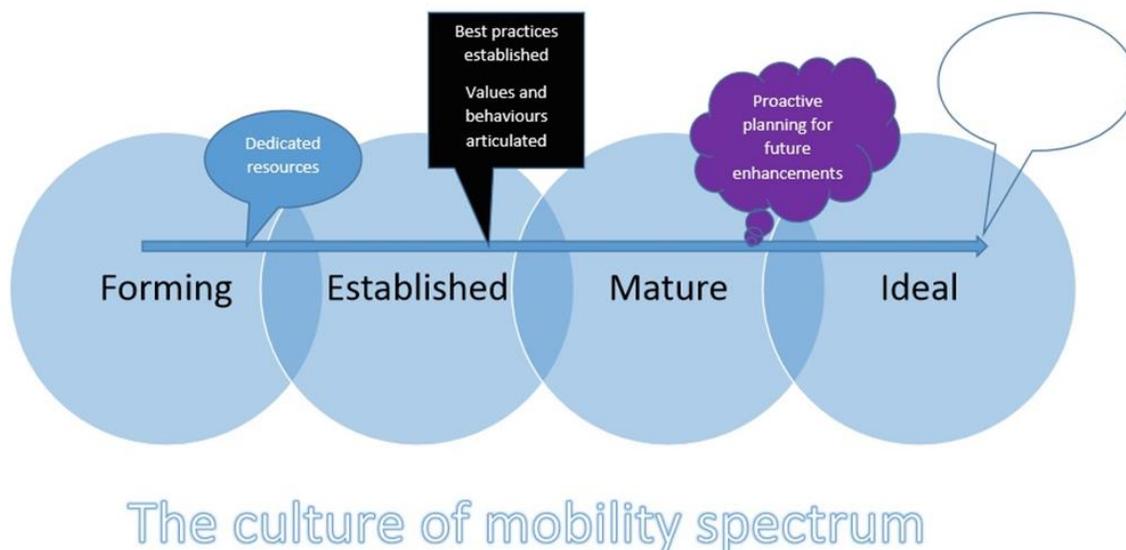


Figure 12 The Culture of Mobility Spectrum

(Penner, Howieson & DiTullio, 2017, p. 33)

Penner et al. propose that “a culture of mobility exists on a spectrum. This spectrum has stages the researchers have identified as forming, established, mature and ideal” (p. 32). They continue:

Each stage of this cultural development has indicators and best practices. For example, in a Forming culture, pathways duties are dispersed, and the lexicon is being learned. In an established culture, a dedicated resource is established for pathways, and activities are centralized. In a Mature culture, the actions are now proactive, looking ahead to what can be done, and in an Ideal culture, values, mission, vision, and behaviours/practices are in perfect alignment....[Institutions] could map themselves to this spectrum, identify where they are, and also define where they want to be. From this mapping, institutions could select a best practice from another stage of the spectrum, try the best practice and attempt to move to a new phase of cultural development. (p. 32)

At Fanshawe College, The Culture of Mobility Spectrum did just that: it helped members of the college reflect on its trajectory of pathway development and identify areas for further work and continuous improvement.

Penner et al.'s model inspires me to consider how a similar model – one I call The Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum – could inform a tool for sharing resources and best practices across a community of PLAR practitioners. How might such a model assist practitioners in moving toward research-based practice by building on one another's work and easily "[identifying] the components of the most workable [PLAR] programs" (Conrad, 2014; Travers & Harris, 2014; CAPLA, 2011, p. 14)?

Following data collection from Phase I, I drafted a preliminary version of The Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum. I divided the colleges based on their apparent level of development into three categories: Forming, Established, and Mature. Because my metric for determining the colleges' levels of PLAR development was their apparent alignment with CAPLA's (2015) *6 Steps for Quality RPL* framework, I assigned to the "Forming" category the college in each of the Eastern, Western, and Northern regions of Ontario with the fewest "Y" responses to the Phase I checklist. I omitted the Central region college with the fewest "Y" responses from this category because its score was much closer to that of the colleges assigned to the "Established" category. To assign colleges to the "Established" category, I selected the colleges in each of the four regions of Ontario closest to the mean "Y" responses (26) on the Phase I checklist. I assigned to the "Mature" category the college in each of the four regions of Ontario with the most "Y" responses to the Phase I checklist. In keeping with Penner et al.'s intention with their original Culture of Mobility Spectrum, I did not assign any colleges to the "Ideal" category, since "Ideal" indicates perfect alignment with the quality framework informing the spectrum – in this case, CAPLA's *6 Steps for Quality RPL*.

Next, I created a table by listing the Forming, Established, and Mature categories along the x-axis, and the 6 steps of CAPLA's framework along the y-axis. I produced a preliminary Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum by collating patterns and/or sample practices of the colleges in each of these categories of development for each step in the framework (Appendix C). This table helped me to think about the data I had collected in Phase I in new ways, but more valuably, I recognized it as a tool for helping institutions reflect on their PLAR practices and identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to the quality framework used in the field. Institutions could use the table to set goals for improvement, regardless of their level of development; since no institution is at the "Ideal" category of perfect alignment with CAPLA's framework, each can learn from the others as it strives to incrementally improve its own processes and practices.

The data I collected throughout this project has been very helpful as an inventory of best practices that we at Fanshawe College could draw upon when improving our PLAR system. For instance, the working group struck to revise the PLAR policy at Fanshawe determined to include guidelines about timelines and PLAR in an appendix to the policy. Because of the work done in Phase I of this project, I was able to pull from sample timelines language across several of the CAATs to inform the decisions of the policy working group.

The Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum can act as an index of practice that colleagues across the system can consult as needed. Ideally, it would be a dynamic digital repository not only of sample practices, but also of sample resources which members would be free to use and adapt as needed. Such

a tool would speak directly to Travers and Harris's directive to *build* on one another's work, not duplicate it.

The final "meta-recommendation" arising from this study is:

[Develop a dynamic digital repository for sharing resources and best practices across institutions](#)

As a meta-recommendation, The Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum houses specific recommendations for improving one's PLAR system.

The data I collected in Phase II of this study validates this meta-recommendation. Sample comments I received that support the need for and usefulness of an accessible repository for sharing tools and practices include:

- "We are more inexperienced and we do reach out to other institutions for their best practices."
- "We are excited to see and share in other institutions' best practices."
- One respondent cited "The continued efforts to align with Ministry recommendations and national best practices in PLAR" and offered this advice: "Tie policies and processes to research and national best practices...Look at what others have done in the field; do not reinvent the wheel."
- One respondent noted that in building the PLAR process at his institution, he and his colleagues "are on listservs so are privy to information sharing from other institutions."
- One respondent referred throughout her questionnaire to the importance of rooting an institution's PLAR system in evidence-based research.

To echo these participants' emphasis on collaboration, I look forward to continuing to learn with and from other PLAR practitioners provincially, nationally, and internationally, as a member of a community of practice seeking innovative ways to enhance PLAR systems and practices to best serve students and candidates accessing post-secondary education.

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## Appendix A

<b>NAME OF INSTITUTION:</b>
<b>DATE:</b>
<b>TOTAL TIME:</b>

*This questionnaire is adapted from CAPLA's (2015) Quality Assurance Checklists. It is organized by CAPLA's "6 Steps for Quality RPL" framework.*

<b>Step 1:</b> Explain the PLAR process	<b>Step 4:</b> Conduct assessment
<b>Step 2:</b> Provide information on expected requirements	<b>Step 5:</b> Provide assessment results
<b>Step 3:</b> Explain assessment processes,	<b>Step 6:</b> Provide advice for next steps

<b>IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Partial (explain)</b>	<b>Evidence/Description</b>
<b>Step 1: Explain the PLAR Process</b>				
A. Provide clear and freely available information, written in plain language, in both print and digital media?				(Is there a "landing page" for PLAR? In addition to website materials, are there reference materials that could be printed off?)
B. Actively promote access to PLAR?				(Provide explanation of what constitutes "active" – e.g. some leaders send out PLAR materials with their application/admission packages)
C. Develop and ensure awareness of required forms?				(Link to forms if available)
D. Explain applicant/candidate/client/learner rights and responsibilities?				
E. Identify and explain PLAR related roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process (e.g. those providing awareness, advising, registration, support, assessment and feedback)?				
F. Identify the value and/or benefits of PLAR?				(List any benefits noted, and to whom they apply – e.g. benefits for the students, for the institution, etc.)
G. Clearly describe each step of the PLAR process (e.g. costs, timelines, and responsibilities)?				(Link to any related tools, e.g. flow-charts, guides, etc.)

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
H. Outline registration/application requirements?				
I. Explain refunds?				
J. Provide information about/explanation of the fees associated with PLAR?				(Record all fees listed; please also note any information regarding payment plans/financial assistance available pertaining to PLAR fees)
K. Charge different fees depending on the type of PLAR challenge to be assessed?				
L. Pro-rate registration fees?				(Are registration fees lowered if a candidate successfully PLARs [a] course[s]? Does this differ for part-time and full-time students?)
M. Limit the proportion of a course or program which can be completed through PLAR? (e.g. residency requirement)				
N. Limit the kinds of courses that can be completed through PLAR (e.g. a regulated trade)?				
O. Impose time limits regarding PLAR applications?				(Does the fee expire? If there are any stipulations around timing, please note them. May also pertain to timing of submission and assessment vis-à-vis course timetables, etc.)
P. Indicate that there is no guarantee of the recognition the applicant hopes for, i.e., licensure, certification, or advance credit?				
Q. Provide contact information for who to contact with questions and/or to begin a PLAR challenge?				(List the types of contacts included – e.g. a PLAR advisor, a PLAR coordinator, a SME, etc.)
R. Have a designated PLAR office or centre?				
S. Have one or more people working in a dedicated and centralized PLAR position?				(If so, in which area of the institution do they work [e.g. Registrar's Office, Centre for Academic Excellence,

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
				Centre for Teaching and Learning, etc.]?)
T. Situate PLAR as a function or process within the larger institutional context of credit transfer and pathways?				
U. Mention any formalized articulation and/or advanced standing agreements which are based on PLAR? (e.g. the McDonald's agreement)				
V. Situate PLAR within the strategic mandate and/or a larger systemic mandate? (e.g. mention the Ministerial directive)				
W. Collect, analyze, and/or report on data pertaining to PLAR?				(Does the website offer any data about PLAR outcomes at the institution? [e.g. how many students use PLAR, which Schools are most likely to see PLAR requests, rate of PLAR success, etc?])
<b>Step 2: Provide Information on Expected Requirements</b>				
A. Provide advisory services to assist individuals in identifying their goals and in how to identify and articulate their learning compared to competencies, standards, or course or program learning outcomes?				
B. Provide clear information on standards, competencies, tasks, or learning outcomes for the course or component of the program to be completed through PLAR?				(We might get to this information indirectly – e.g. through a sample assessment tool, or through a description of assessment methods. Alternately, if <i>course</i> learning outcomes are public facing, then that is also an indirect “yes” to this question)
C. Provide tools or resources to assist the individual in assessing their suitability as a PLAR candidate and to facilitate self-reflection and self-assessment of their learning and experiences in relation to licensure standards, or course and program outcomes?				(is there an online self-assessment tool, e.g. Socrates?; the website might indicate that it will provide applicants with a self-assessment tool

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
				relative to specific assessments/learning outcomes [e.g. in a learner guide/resource guide])
<b>Step 3: Explain Assessment Processes, Methods, and Criteria</b>				
A. Have a clear process, including roles and responsibilities, for creating an assessment tool?				(Is there a description of how an assessment tool is determined/created at the institution?)
B. Fully inform applicants of how the assessment process works?				(The website isn't directed at applicants, per se, but it may still include a description of how the assessment process works in general)
C. Provide information to assist in identification of sources and strength of evidence of learning/ how to prove learning to the required competencies, standards or outcomes?				(Publically available information about this, as opposed to simply gesturing to the advisor function. This info might be embedded in pamphlets or videos describing the process. E.g. a guide of how to prepare a strong portfolio)
D. Provide specific information on documentation, evidence collection, skill demonstration, interview, examinations, case studies, product samples expected? (i.e. Describe or list different types of assessment methods and Describe or list component parts of a portfolio?)				(Please list the assessment types the site mentions, and info it provides. Does it give examples of what the applicant might be asked for [e.g. sample portfolios]? If it includes component parts of a portfolio, please list)
<b>Step 5: Provide Assessment Results</b>				
A. Notify the individual of official assessment results?				(We can't know about the details of the notification, but the site

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
				might state that it does notify individuals as a matter of process)
B. Provide a report to the individual that includes detailed constructive feedback on strengths and areas where improvements are needed in the case of a successful assessment, and a clear explanation of reasons why credit has not been awarded in the case of an unsuccessful assessment?				(We can't know about the detail of the report, but the site might state that it provides a report as a matter of process. Does the <b>successful</b> candidate receive feedback? Is it made clear to the <b>unsuccessful</b> candidate why her application was unsuccessful [e.g. an explanation of incomplete evidence, learning differences or gaps that are still needed to meet criteria])
C. Provide successful results in the form of academic credit, license, certification, etc., as applicable?				(Does the website state that it provides academic credit for successful challenges?)
D. Provide information about how successful results are recorded in the applicant's transcript or other official records, or how they are otherwise documented?				(Is there any information about the transcript or other official modes of documentation?)
<b>Step 6: Provide Advice for Next Steps</b>				
A. Indicate that it will offer to meet with the individual after assessment to review outcomes of assessment (regardless of whether the individual was successful or unsuccessful), identify new goals, etc.?				(Is there any indication on the website/process flow info re: how the institution follows-up with the applicant? If the applicant isn't already enrolled, is there any info about how the institution attempts to retain them?)
B. Clearly state that the PLAR candidate has the right to appeal the assessor's decision?				

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION UNLIKELY TO BE FOUND ON PUBLIC WEBSITES:				
IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:				
<b>Step 1: Explain the RPL Process</b>				
I. Conduct regular reviews of PLAR policies and procedures?				(a review date on an official policy document is sufficient for a “yes,” but please also note any other QA measures mentioned)
II. Evaluate and continuously improve processes and practices?				(Please record any specific info you find about continuous quality processes. This might be broad regarding PLAR alignment with best practices, and/or more specific – e.g. routinely updating assessment tools alongside curriculum changes to ensure currency of the assessment tool)
III. Ask for the perspective of individuals who use PLAR when developing or reviewing policies and procedures?				
IV. Describe how fees are distributed within the institution once collected and how that was determined?				
V. Always or occasionally use advisory committees or teams when working with PLAR candidates?				
<b>Step 2: Provide Information on Expected Requirements</b>				
I. Provide for appropriate advisor function training on an on-going basis?				(e.g. sample related workshops; training mentioned as a requirement in policy)
II. Keep records of evidence that those performing PLAR functions have received appropriate PLAR training?				

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:	Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
III. Encourage advisors' involvement in the professional organizations that are developing PLAR locally, provincially and nationally for continuous upgrading and insight?				(could be indirect – e.g. a link to CAPLA)
<b>Step 3: Explain Assessment Processes, Methods, and Criteria</b>				
I. Provide the applicant with the tools (scoring grids, charts, or rubrics) used to evaluate the assessment?				(Publicly accessible course outlines address this indirectly and in part)
II. Provide knowledge and skill practice opportunities that simulate actual assessment situations?				(This is partially captured by questions about self-assessment tools above. Is there any mention of practice time in a lab, etc., which goes over and above a practice quiz used for self-assessment?)
III. Provide to the applicant networking contact opportunities with a subject matter expert as appropriate?				(This one could now be captured by the contact information question above – in that field, note whose contact information, and/or whom the applicant is directed to reach out to)
<b>Step 4: Conduct Assessment</b>				
I. Accommodate differences in learning and abilities and individual unique circumstances of the applicant?				
II. Allow for use of translators for some assessments?				
III. Offer exams required for assessment more than once per year?				
IV. Provide appropriate assessor function training for evaluators, subject matter experts, supervisors, elders on an on-going basis?				
V. Account for the assessor's time for required training and assessment completion in formal workload documents?				

IN OR ACCORDING TO ITS PUBLIC INFORMATION, DOES THE INSTITUTION:		Yes	No	Partial (explain)	Evidence/Description
VI.	Keep records of evidence that those performing PLAR functions have received appropriate PLAR training?				
VII.	Encourage assessors' involvement in the professional organizations that are developing PLAR locally, provincially and nationally for continuous upgrading and insight?				(could be indirect – e.g. a link to CAPLA)
VIII.	Ensure that assessment tools and processes are valid, i.e., that they test the knowledge, skills, or abilities against the set criteria they are intended to test? (e.g. if the specific learning outcomes do not pertain to language and grammar skills, an applicant's success should not hinge on their language and grammar skills)				
IX.	Ensure that assessment tools and processes are reliable, i.e., that they have been tested and found to be consistent over a period of time?				
X.	Ensure that assessment tools and methods are at an equivalent level to that of non-PLAR individuals?				
XI.	Validate authenticity of evidence submitted for assessment?				(Does the institution mention practices to ensure academic integrity throughout all PLAR assessments? E.g. ensuring the work is actually that of the candidate; ensuring the candidate actually completed the learning/experiences s/he reports in the portfolio, etc.)
XII.	Validate assessment results to ensure inter-rater reliability?				

Does the institution frame PLAR as specific to particular students or delivery types, e.g. mature learners, Indigenous students, internationally educated professionals, part-time studies?

Is there any other notable information about PLAR provided on the website not captured in this questionnaire?

**This questionnaire has been adapted from the following documents:**

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). (2015a). 6 steps for quality RPL self-audit checklist. In *Quality assurance for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canada* (Appendix C).

Retrieved from <http://capla.ca/rpl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/QA-manual-free-appendices.pdf>

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). (2015b). *Quality assurance for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canada*. Ottawa: Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). (2015c). Quality RPL systems self-audit checklist. In *Quality assurance for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canada* (Appendix C).

Retrieved from <http://capla.ca/rpl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/QA-manual-free-appendices.pdf>

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). (2015d). RPL QA guiding principles self-audit checklist. In *Quality assurance for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canada* (Appendix C).

Retrieved from <http://capla.ca/rpl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/QA-manual-free-appendices.pdf>

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA). (2015e). RPL quality procedures checklist. In *Quality assurance for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Canada* (Appendix C). Retrieved from

<http://capla.ca/rpl/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/QA-manual-free-appendices.pdf>

## Appendix B

### **Best Practices in PLAR in Ontario Colleges & Universities - Questionnaire**

#### **Notes & Instructions:**

- The goals of this study are to better understand how Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is operationalized in post-secondary institutions and to develop a set of recommendations for how to enact the best practices in, and guidelines for, PLAR identified by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA).
- Please complete each question to the best of your ability. If you are unable or unwilling to complete a specific question, please leave the text box empty and move to the next question.
- Completion of the questionnaire will likely take no more than one or two workdays at the most, but you may choose to complete the questionnaire over a longer period of time.
- You are welcome to provide any links, documents, references, etc. that you deem appropriate to your responses, but you are not required to do so.
- Please consult with colleagues or other areas in your institution if/as necessary. Answers should be recorded by the person(s) who signed and returned the Letter of Informed Consent.
- Any answers you provide may be included in the research report to be prepared for publication on ONCAT's website, and/or in any other published materials that may arise from this study. Your name will never appear in published materials, though your institution may be commended for particularly innovative or well-developed practices.
- Please return the completed questionnaire to Mary Harrison, Principal Investigator, by **<DATE>**. You may also contact me with any questions or concerns about this questionnaire or the study by email: [mjharrison@fanshawec.ca](mailto:mjharrison@fanshawec.ca) or phone: 519-452-4430 ext. 3921.

#### **Section One: Context**

1. How many PLAR applications did your institution process in the 2016/2017 academic year?

2. Of those applications, how many PLAR attempts resulted in the applicant successfully receiving credit?

3. What kinds of data do you collect on PLAR activity at your institution, and how does that data inform your PLAR policies, processes, and practices?

4. How is assessor workload managed in relation to PLAR at your institution? For instance, does your institution typically account for PLAR assessment functions in the Standard Workload Formula (SWF) or other workload documents for full-time faculty, or is the institution more likely to hire part-time faculty on a contractual basis to complete PLAR assessment functions as needed?

5. At your institution, which academic areas or departments receive the most PLAR requests?

6. At your institution, how is it determined that a course is ineligible for PLAR? What criteria is that decision based on?

7. A PLAR assessment plan is a defined method of evaluation for assessing an applicant's knowledge and skills relative to the learning outcomes of a specific course. Could you estimate how many and/or what proportion of courses at your institution have developed a PLAR assessment plan? At your institution, are PLAR assessment plans typically developed proactively, or on a case-by-case basis as requests are made?

## **Section Two: CAPLA's Quality Assurance Framework**

8. If you charge different fees for different methods of PLAR assessment, how were those fees determined?

9. If you charge a "flat rate" fee to candidates seeking to PLAR multiple courses at once, what is that fee and how was it determined?

10. How are PLAR fees distributed in your institution?

11. Please describe the conditions through which a student might save money by successfully using PLAR; e.g., are tuition fees pro-rated based on a student's PLAR activity at your institution?

12. Are PLAR processes at your institution centralized or decentralized? Can you comment on the correlation of the centralized or decentralized processes on the consistency of PLAR practice across your institution?

13. What are the job titles in your institution of those responsible for managing and/or overseeing PLAR processes? In what departments are those jobs located?

14. What mechanisms are in place at your institution to encourage the continuous quality improvement of PLAR policies, processes, and practices? For instance, is PLAR considered during program review and program development?

15. What stakeholders (e.g. administrators, faculty assessors, advisors, applicants/students, advisory committees, etc.) provide input to your institution's PLAR policies, processes, and practices?

16. How does your institution ensure that PLAR resources (e.g. assessment tools; resource guides, etc.) remain current, valid, and reliable relative to other curriculum resources?

17. Does your institution occasionally or often take steps to determine inter-rater reliability of PLAR assessment results, for instance by comparing two or more assessors' conclusions regarding an applicant's portfolio grade?

18. When and how are the course learning outcomes (or the program learning outcomes, depending on the nature of the PLAR application) made available to potential applicants?

19. Please describe the resources/services your institution provides to an applicant/student to help them prepare for a PLAR assessment (e.g. applicant guides, self-assessment tools, rubrics, sample assessments, simulated practice opportunities, etc.). When and how can applicants/students access these resources/services?

20. How are those performing PLAR functions at your institution (e.g. advisors and assessors) trained in your institution's policies, processes, and practices, and professionally supported to remain current in PLAR best practices? Is PLAR training monitored in any way?

21. How does your institution accommodate for differences in learning abilities, culture, language and/or unique circumstances of PLAR applicants?

22. Regardless of whether an applicant was successful or unsuccessful in their PLAR attempt, would one or more people at your institution typically follow-up with the applicant to provide constructive feedback, identify new goals, discuss next steps, etc.? If so, please describe.

### **Section Three: Case Study**

*Please read the case study and answer the questions that follow.*

Susan completed a 4-year Bachelor of Arts degree in History in 2003. She worked in retail services for several years after completing her studies. In 2010, Susan got a job as a receptionist at a company manufacturing car parts. After a year of working reception, she had some bookkeeping tasks added to her portfolio. She performed this combination of reception and bookkeeping duties for 5 years. In 2016, Susan accepted a new job at an engineering company in an Accounts Payable role. Her current company requires all employees to take 20 hours of training per

year in their functional area through Lynda.com, so Susan has accrued approximately 40 hours of online training in accounting principles since she began working there. Susan has become interested in returning to school to pursue an accounting credential and a professional designation in order to advance her career. Since completing her Bachelor of Arts, she has been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and she worries about being properly accommodated academically, particularly when writing tests. She would prefer to return to school full-time, and she would rely on the provincial Student Assistance/Aid Program in order to do so. Susan is not familiar with the concept of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, but she wants to know whether there are any options available to help her shorten the duration and reduce the cost of study.

23. What would your institution's PLAR processes look like when applied to this specific case?

24. What elements of this case study stand out to you as the most relevant for considering whether Susan is a suitable PLAR candidate?

25. According to your institutional policies and processes regarding PLAR, what would be the *ideal* outcome of this case study?

26. In *actual practice*, what are some challenges, issues, and considerations that might arise as Susan seeks to pursue PLAR? What are some features of your process that would help and benefit Susan?

#### **Section Four: Future Directions**

27. How does your institution define and measure its success in PLAR processes?

28. Is PLAR included in any of your institution's current strategic goals? If yes, please describe.

29. What would you identify as the benefits of PLAR *to the institution*?

30. In your view, what are your institution's best practices in PLAR policies, processes, and practices?

31. What are the "lessons learned" regarding PLAR and your institutional policies, processes, and practices, and what advice would you offer to another institution seeking to develop its processes further?

32. What are your institution's plans and/or goals regarding the development or continuous quality improvement of its PLAR policies, processes, and practices over the next three to five years?

**Additional Comments:**

## Appendix C

<b>PHASE I: Indicators of Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum by Stage</b>				
	<b>Forming</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Western, and Northern regions with the fewest “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>  <i>Note: The college in the Central region with the fewest “Y” responses had a score much closer to the mean score than to the next highest scoring college in this category. Accordingly, it has not been used to determine the indicators of this stage on the spectrum.</i>  <i>2/3 of the colleges in this category are medium colleges, 1/3 is a small college.</i>  <i>1/3 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i>	<b>Established</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions closest to the mean (26) “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>  <i>1/4 of the colleges in this category is a large college, 2/4 are medium colleges, 1/4 is a small college</i>  <i>None of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i>	<b>Mature</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions with the most “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>  <i>3/4 of the colleges in this category are large colleges, and 1/4 is a small college</i>  <i>3/4 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i>	<b>Ideal</b> <i>Perfect alignment between CAPLA’s 6 Steps for Quality RPL &amp; institution’s actual practices</i>
<b>Step 1:</b> Explain the PLAR Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>benefits of PLAR either not clearly identified or identified only for students (1.F)</li> <li>reference to PLAR as a “province-wide initiative” (1.V)</li> <li>no date of last review of PLAR policy publically available (1.I)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>links to PLAR information found in a variety of locations within the college’s website (1.B)</li> <li>forms required for PLAR processes are developed and available online through a central page (1.C)</li> <li>identify the benefits of PLAR to <i>students</i> (1.F)</li> <li>Organizes its PLAR process into 5 overarching steps for the candidate to complete, aligned to the first 5 steps of CAPLA’s <i>6 Steps for Quality</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>identify the benefits of PLAR <i>to the institution</i> (1.F)</li> <li>designated office (1.R) &amp; designated position (1.S)</li> <li>existence of more than one formalized articulation and/or advanced standing agreement based on PLAR (1.U)</li> </ul>	

PHASE I: Indicators of Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum by Stage				
	<p><b>Forming</b> Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Western, and Northern regions with the fewest “Y” responses to the questionnaire</p> <p><i>Note: The college in the Central region with the fewest “Y” responses had a score much closer to the mean score than to the next highest scoring college in this category. Accordingly, it has not been used to determine the indicators of this stage on the spectrum.</i></p> <p><i>2/3 of the colleges in this category are medium colleges, 1/3 is a small college.</i></p> <p><i>1/3 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	<p><b>Established</b> Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions closest to the mean (26) “Y” responses to the questionnaire</p> <p><i>1/4 of the colleges in this category is a large college, 2/4 are medium colleges, 1/4 is a small college</i></p> <p><i>None of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	<p><b>Mature</b> Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions with the most “Y” responses to the questionnaire</p> <p><i>3/4 of the colleges in this category are large colleges, and 1/4 is a small college</i></p> <p><i>3/4 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	<p><b>Ideal</b> Perfect alignment between CAPLA’s 6 Steps for Quality RPL &amp; institution’s actual practices</p>
		<p>RPL: Research; Consult; Apply; Challenge; Get Your Results (1.G)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLAR is clearly assigned as a function within a related administrative office (1.R), and as a component of a staff person’s role (e.g. Pathways Advisor) (1.S)</li> <li>• website mentions PLAR as a component of the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive (1.V)</li> <li>• states a date of last review of PLAR policy (1.I)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLAR is integrated in college’s strategic mandate (1.V)</li> <li>• has mechanisms in place to routinely collect, analyze, and/or report on data pertaining to PLAR (1.W)</li> <li>• states a date of last review of PLAR policy within the last 10 years (1.I)</li> </ul>	

<b>PHASE I: Indicators of Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum by Stage</b>				
	<b>Forming</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Western, and Northern regions with the fewest “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>	<b>Established</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions closest to the mean (26) “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>	<b>Mature</b> <i>Sample processes of the college in each of the Eastern, Central, Western and Northern regions with the most “Y” responses to the questionnaire</i>	<b>Ideal</b> <i>Perfect alignment between CAPLA’s 6 Steps for Quality RPL &amp; institution’s actual practices</i>
	<p><i>Note: The college in the Central region with the fewest “Y” responses had a score much closer to the mean score than to the next highest scoring college in this category. Accordingly, it has not been used to determine the indicators of this stage on the spectrum.</i></p> <p><i>2/3 of the colleges in this category are medium colleges, 1/3 is a small college.</i></p> <p><i>1/3 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	<p><i>1/4 of the colleges in this category is a large college, 2/4 are medium colleges, 1/4 is a small college</i></p> <p><i>None of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	<p><i>3/4 of the colleges in this category are large colleges, and 1/4 is a small college</i></p> <p><i>3/4 of the colleges in this category use COMMS</i></p>	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developed resources specific to promoting and explaining PLAR and its processes to students and candidates (e.g. Student Guides; regularly provided orientation/information workshops/sessions for students) (1, broadly)</li> </ul>	
<b>Step 2:</b> Provide Information on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>usually refer to the course or program learning outcomes when referencing PLAR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>clear statement that candidates will be evaluated based on their achievement of course learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>course learning outcomes available by request (2.B)</li> </ul>	

<b>PHASE I: Indicators of Quality of PLAR Processes Spectrum by Stage</b>				
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Expected Requirements	processes, though course learning outcomes not publically available, or only by request for a small fee (2.B)	outcomes, which will be provided during the process (and are not publically available) (2.B)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developed resources specific to assisting candidates in self-assessing their suitability to use PLAR (e.g. self-assessment templates) (2.C)</li> </ul>	
<b>Step 3:</b> Explain Assessment Processes, Methods, and Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>few concrete details on the assessment process, but a statement that the learning outcomes are the basis for the assessment process (3.A)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PLAR policy states that assessment will be conducted by a subject-matter expert, and it can be inferred that a SME also created the assessment tool (3.A)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>developed resources specific to assisting candidates in preparing (for) a PLAR assessment, knowing what to expect, and demonstrating breadth</li> </ul>	

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			<p>and depth of learning appropriately (e.g. Portfolio Guidelines) (3.D &amp; 3.C)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision of different formats for completing PLAR, depending on candidate’s needs and goals – e.g. processes to support and promote course-based <i>and</i> program-based PLAR; General</li> </ul>	

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			Education PLAR, etc. (3.D) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provision to the candidate of tools, such as rubrics, used to evaluate the assessment (3.I)</li> </ul>	
<b>Step 4: Conduct Assessment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• statement that the learner is responsible for providing evidence that validates their learning (4.XI)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLAR policy states that assessors will be provided with an orientation/some form of training in PLAR processes (4.IV)</li> <li>• PLAR candidates’ learning will be evaluated against specific course learning outcomes (4.X)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• explicitly accommodates candidates with disabilities who use PLAR processes (4.I)</li> <li>• developed resources specific to supporting</li> </ul>	

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			and/or training those completing the assessor function in PLAR assessment and processes (e.g. Faculty Guides; provision of mandatory training) (4.IV)	
<b>Step 5:</b> Provide Assessment Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>either no reference to the transcript or other official student record, or indication that the PLAR is <i>not</i> recorded on the transcript in the same way as a regular course grade;</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PLAR policy statement that in the case of portfolio assessment, the assessor is responsible for providing the candidate with feedback, and providing the applicant one</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>at the Assessor’s discretion, they may, instead of failing the PLAR candidate for insufficient evidence, request that they</li> </ul>	

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	one reference to recording <i>unsuccessful</i> PLAR attempts on the transcript	opportunity to resubmit in response to feedback (5.B) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>compliance with Minister’s Binding Policy Directive regarding transcribing grades earned through PLAR (5.D)</li></ul>	provide (an) additional demonstration(s) of their acquisition of the learning outcomes (5.B) <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>compliance with Minister’s Binding Policy Directive regarding transcribing grades earned through PLAR (5.D)</li></ul>	
<b>Step 6:</b> Provide Advice for Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>incomplete information regarding a PLAR candidate’s right to an appeal OR a clear statement that a PLAR</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>information about appeals inconsistent across colleges in this category; a unique example is that for one college, portfolio</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>indicate to the student/candidate whom they may contact with any</li></ul>	

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	<p>candidate does <i>not</i> have the right to an appeal (6.B)</p>	<p>assessments may be appealed, but challenge exams may not be appealed (6.B)</p>	<p>questions following their assessment (6.A)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students/candidates have the right to appeal the outcome of the PLAR, and are informed as much (6.B)</li> </ul>	