

MANITOBA'S POLICY FRAMEWORK

FOR

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)

November 2001

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Policy in Manitoba

Background - the 1990's

- In Manitoba, Red River College was an early adopter of the recognition of prior learning, making it available in the 1980's to students in the fields of early childhood education and nursing. However, provincial funding for prior learning assessment services was not provided until 1995, at which time, the province funded the college to create a position for a PLA Facilitator.
- Concurrent to funding that position, the department of Education and Training encouraged other post-secondary institutions to consider offering prior learning assessment and recognition to their students. There was a deliberate strategy to develop grass roots institutional support as opposed to mandating the use of PLAR which had been unsuccessful in other jurisdictions.
- In 1997, the Council on Post-Secondary Education was formed. This new organization had the mandate to fund the province's post-secondary institutions, approve new programs and establish a post-secondary policy framework. As part of its program approval process, institutions were asked to consider how the recognition of prior learning would be part of every newly funded program. As well, the "System Restructuring Envelope" included prior learning assessment as one of the projects that could be funded, offering incentive funding to the establishment of the new service.
- A program within Education and Training, (Workforce 2000) funded practitioner Training workshops offered by the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network in the late 1990's.
- In 1997, Manitoba Education and Training, in partnership with Red River College and the Winnipeg Development Agreement (WDA) of Human Resources Development Canada initiated the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Centre (the PLA Centre). The PLA Centre was established as a time-limited, not-for profit agency, reporting to a board of directors. It was an arms length agency from both government and the college. The WDA provided salaries for the Executive Director, Project Manager, PLA Advisor and clerical support for 2.5 years. The province paid all operating costs, including rent. As well, the province funded all demonstration projects and the salaries for three PLA Advisors located outside of Winnipeg. Federal (WDA) funding for salaries ended in March 2000. Provincial funding continued until June 2001.
- The PLA Centre was established to provide advisory services to individuals who were unemployed or underemployed, and to provide consulting services to post-secondary education, business and industry to support the development of PLAR programs and services. As part of its work, demonstration projects were undertaken to validate the use of prior learning assessment in a variety of fields.

The new Policy Framework

- In 2000/01, the province acting upon its priorities reviewed the way in which adult learners were able to access high school upgrading and post-secondary education. With the goal of having mobile and portable credentials, the service delivery model for the provision of adult education was restructured.
- While the PLA Centre had been very effective in its demonstration projects and had provided advisory services and practitioner training that was valuable, the post-secondary institutions were still not increasing their capacity to offer PLAR services. Accordingly, a new strategy was developed that was designed to increase the capacity for the recognition of prior learning throughout the education/employment system. The remainder of this paper describes in detail the strategy and policy position of the province.
- One of the important ideals that was used to formulate the new policy was the value for recognition of learning acquired outside the formal educational system. In a time of skill shortages, it was important to support continuous learning and develop an integrated system. Another supporting initiative was the provision of dual credits for high school and post-secondary education where appropriate, as a way in which to support adult learners returning to school.
- In designing the new PLAR framework, the goal was to have the new framework be as decentralized as possible – making expertise and access available throughout the province. At the same time, PLAR had to be connected to other key initiatives of the department – the Manitoba Training Strategy, the College Expansion Initiative, and Advanced Education priorities. It was of great importance to expand the network of PLAR practitioners to make the recognition of prior learning accessible. And finally, there was a strong desire to move from demonstration projects that assisted a few people to widespread systemic change that would assist many.

The Goals for the New Strategy and Activities

1. To ensure a cost effective delivery and organizational structure for the continued work of PLAR.
2. To ensure PLAR is part of all major provincial activity to which it relates.
3. To build greater capacity within the public post secondary institutions in order to maximize the impact of PLAR within the educational system.
4. To build on the Essential Skills work occurring in business and industry by establishing PLAR within Workforce Manitoba.
5. To develop a sustainable mechanism for the continued delivery of PLAR advisory services.

- The new strategy has 3 cornerstones – funding to each of the post-secondary institutions to increase their capacity to offer prior learning assessment and recognition services; funding for a new staff position that would support the introduction and expansion of PLAR advisory services in the community and within the network of adult learning centres; and, funds to support workplace and industry PLAR projects.
- Responsibility for managing the new strategy is located in both the department of Education, Training and Youth, and the Council on Post-Secondary Education.
- Consistent with the introduction of the new strategy, the province's financial commitment to PLAR has increased. The provincial funds that had been allocated to projects at the PLA Centre (including salaries for staff located outside of Winnipeg) were reallocated to new positions both within and external to government. A new position was created to provide training and support to the network of adult learning centres so that they might begin to offer advisory services to the several thousand students enrolled in upgrading across the province. Another new position was created to support business and industry in their application of prior learning assessment. Next year, one additional position will be funded to provide support in Northern Manitoba.
- Funding for a period of 3 years, for a new position in each of the publicly funded post-secondary institutions was made available. This was to assist each institution to increase its capacity in offering PLAR services.
- The funds that had previously supported the operating costs at the PLA Centre were reallocated for the development of a comprehensive PLAR practitioner training program developed by Red River College to make training available not only in the classroom, but on-line as well. The three years of funding will include the development and implementation of two levels of PLAR training (ie, PLAR Foundation Training and an Advanced PLAR Practitioner training) for staff in post-secondary institutions and other organizations across Manitoba. PLAR Practitioners will also be able to access a professional development service in partnership with the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network and the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment.

Building Institutional Capacity

- In order to access the funds, each of the colleges and universities was asked to develop a specific initiative with goals identified for each of the 3 years of the project. Annual reporting is required to access the next year's funds. Further, institutions will contribute to an annual report on institutional-based PLAR activities. The annual report will be a public document, thereby raising the profile of PLAR, providing accountability for these additional funds, and providing the general public with information on institutional activities during the preceding year.

- The goals established by each institution are unique to their situations. The goals depend upon the current level of PLAR development within each college or university. Goals range from the development of PLAR policies and procedures, to the development of outcomes-based curriculum as a way to offer PLAR to the expansion of portfolio development workshops and PLAR advisory services.
- Institutional PLAR practitioners will form a PLAR Working Group to share information, collaborate on PLAR projects/activities and decide on provincial strategies to support wider use of PLAR within public post secondary institutions. It is also clear that institutional PLAR representatives will need to link periodically with the other sectors of PLAR activity, especially for information sharing, professional development and collaborative projects.

Providing Advisory Services

- The Government is actively supporting Adult Learning Centres (ALCs) located in communities throughout the Province. These centres can expect to be strengthened and defined more clearly during the coming year as part of the policy development currently occurring.
- Advisory Services tend to serve individuals who are not yet enrolled in post secondary institutions and therefore are unable to be well served by the institutions. Maximizing advisory service capabilities through the ALCs would serve the widest network of "walk-in" individuals seeking to examine their life/study experiences against either a future post secondary program or employment criteria.
- The Adult Learning Centres currently attempt to provide transition services to adults seeking appropriate credentials for either employment or college/university participation. Provincial PLAR advisory services would be housed with adult learning and community outreach programs. Services could take the form of training appropriate adult learning centre personnel in initial advising and assessment procedures. Regionally key adult learning centres could have more intensely trained practitioners who would be available for support to ALCs within the region or to individuals seeking a more in depth assessment. This should work well with regularized "course advising" meetings that need to be established between adult learning centres and colleges and universities.
- Staff in the employment services network have also participated in PLAR training provided by the PLA Centre. Individuals from the community seeking PLAR service or support within an employment setting could also be served through dedicated staff at designated employment centres. Making the advising and assessment process more accessible may necessitate a review of process and materials used for this purpose.
- The advisory services provided by the Adult Learning Centres will be directly linked to support services provided by Training and Continuing Education.

- Using 40 to 50 provincial ALCs and the designated employment centres located throughout the province for advisory services should provide increased opportunities for individuals to access this service. Providing local expertise, possibly redesigning formats or processes and looking for new ways to deliver advisory services should serve to imbed PLAR in those community services to which it is related -- employment and education.
- Increased advising throughout the province at the adult learning centres will in all likelihood lead to increased requests for the recognition of prior learning services within the colleges and universities. The activities currently underway at the institutions should enable them to respond to these requests when they arise.

Industry Related PLAR Development Projects

- Currently Workforce Manitoba manages sectoral training initiatives as well as province-wide training. It also houses the Labour Market Information Unit and the industry Essential Skills training initiative. Industry-related development projects would benefit from the positive interaction among the current activities occurring within the Branch.
- The industry-related PLAR staff person would be responsible for establishing and maintaining a PLAR Advisory Board made up of industry/business/labour representatives. The Board would function similarly to the Essential Skills Board who are currently able to attract outside funding for particular projects which are then managed through the Board. This means that PLAR would not need to forfeit outside funding opportunities to develop specific projects and may be in a better position to secure outside funding. Projects involving professional accrediting bodies could also be managed through this process. This model also provides the most cost effective management model for projects.
- Criteria for projects that will be funded under Workforce Manitoba for business and industry are currently under development. The initial criteria being considered are industry and labour driven projects; areas of high demand skills linked to labour market needs; projects that involve professional accrediting bodies; projects that have sustainable and post-secondary/regulatory body recognition. Finally, it is expected that industry and/or labour will contribute to the costs of the project.
- A steering committee for this activity has been developed, with representatives from business, labour and the department of Education, Training and Youth. Staff Branch activities will focus on promotion and awareness raising, workplace pilots and projects, research and information and facilitator training and development.

Links

- Links among the institutional working group, the industry related project staff and proponents of the advisory services network could be made at strategic points. For example, particular discussion forums or information sharing sessions that would benefit staff covering the range of PLAR activity could be initiated periodically. It is also possible that a provincial PLAR newsletter highlighting the various arenas of activity might also be produced. Coordinating this task will be an assignment of the PLAR Industry Projects areas. At all levels of activity, linkages will be made to the content or subject matter experts who are essential partners in developing appropriate processes for the recognition of prior learning.

This new working structure offers the following:

- A sustainable and cost effective funding mechanism for all areas of PLAR activity
- A province-wide system to deliver advisory services
- The program profile that is higher than a stand alone program
- Increased institutional capacity for PLAR across the post secondary system
- The ability to continue to attract outside funding sources where possible
- A comprehensive and sustainable system of basic and advanced practitioner training will be developed and available in a variety of formats.
- A DACUM chart outlining the competencies for PLAR practitioners has been developed, which will be used as the basis for the training and will provide a blueprint for practitioner activity.
- Ongoing liaison and consultation with the provincial practitioners network – the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network – MPLAN.

Benefits of the PLAR delivery model

1. An integrated system and structure is in place.
2. Practitioners throughout the education system, as well as business and industry will have access to the same training.
3. Graduates of the ALCs will “feed” the colleges and universities, which will be ready to provide services.
4. The expertise to offer advisory services will be spread throughout the province, rather than being localized to a few centres.
5. Accountability parameters are public.
6. Funding is sustainable in its current form for 3 years, enabling much program development and individual expertise.
7. New partnerships have been developed between government and the adult learning community, government and business/industry, government and post-secondary education. As well, there exists the capacity for each of those groups to form new partnerships amongst themselves.
8. Post-secondary education institutions are still expected to identify the role that the recognition of prior learning will have in every new program that is developed.