

# **FAST-TRACKING LEARNERS**

## **Viability Study to Develop a Centralized Platform for PLAR**



**PUBLIC VERSION  
MAY 2026**

Original version for  
stakeholder feedback  
October 2025

# Fast-Tracking Learners: Viability Study to Develop a Centralized Platform for PLAR

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## Executive Summary

Many elements of Ontario’s postsecondary system are still grounded in a traditional model that expects most students to enter directly from high school. In reality, underemployed adults seeking to develop new skills, mid-career professionals working to upgrade their credentials, and newcomers wanting to acquire a Canadian-based education make up a significant — and growing — segment of the province’s postsecondary population. Although many of these learners have gained valuable knowledge and skills through workplace, non-formal, and informal learning experiences, they often face barriers trying to access postsecondary programs, earn postsecondary credentials, and advance their careers. Current mechanisms for recognizing prior learning are fragmented, costly, and inconsistent, creating unnecessary delays and financial burdens. At the same time, Ontario’s economy urgently requires job-ready workers in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology, making the need for efficient, learner-centered solutions more pressing than ever.

As defined by the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is a “process that uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate, and demonstrate past learning. Prior learning can be acquired through study, work, and other life experiences that are not recognized through formal transfer of credit mechanisms” (Government of Ontario 2025). MCURES also notes that “PLAR offers learners the opportunity to earn credit for college courses based on formal demonstration of prior learning usually acquired through study, work, and other life experiences that is not recognized through formal credit transfer mechanisms.”<sup>1</sup> PLAR processes can significantly reduce the time and cost required to earn postsecondary credentials and pursue meaningful careers, especially for underemployed adults, military-connected learners, newcomers, and people with previous work experience. Research also shows that adult learners who receive PLAR credit are more than twice as likely to graduate compared to those who do not. Despite these benefits, PLAR remains underutilized in Ontario due to inconsistent processes, limited awareness, and administrative complexity.

**To unlock the full potential of PLAR as a tool to fast-track Ontario’s postsecondary learners, this viability study proposes a two-year pilot project to develop a centralized platform for PLAR assessment and administration.**

ONCAT will oversee governance, financial management, and reporting, as well as disburse funds to OntarioLearn and participating colleges based on agreed deliverables. OntarioLearn will provide the technical backbone for the pilot, ensuring seamless integration and operational leadership.

This viability study uses “OntarioPLAR™” as a preliminary name for the centralized platform. During the pilot project, stakeholder feedback will inspire a name for the platform that resonates with the core audience of Ontario’s postsecondary learners.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: other jurisdictions and organizations use various terms and acronyms (e.g., PLA, PLR, RPL, VPL). In alignment with the term used by the Government of Ontario, this viability study uses “PLAR.”

OntarioPLAR™, powered by OntarioLearn, is envisioned as a centralized platform designed to support learners at publicly assisted colleges in Ontario by providing a unified digital system for PLAR assessment and administration. The platform will streamline processes, centralize resources, and provide clear information — reducing confusion and barriers that often prevent learners from receiving credit for prior learning. By simplifying administrative procedures and consolidating information, OntarioPLAR™ aims to accelerate educational progress, support lifelong learning, and improve mobility across institutions.

ONCAT is uniquely positioned to lead this initiative as the governance and funding hub. With its active learner-facing platform (ONTransfer.ca), ONCAT already attracts significant traffic from visitors — more than 200,000 each year — seeking pathways and credit transfer options. The organization has experience managing system-wide projects and coordinating collaboration within Ontario’s postsecondary system, which provides the background necessary for effective project delivery.

This integrated approach benefits learners first and foremost by providing faster, fairer recognition of prior learning, reducing costs, and improving mobility. Institutions gain from uniform standards, reduced redundancy, and enhanced operational efficiency, while the province benefits from a more responsive, cost-effective postsecondary system aligned with workforce priorities. Backed by evidence-based reports endorsing centralized PLAR frameworks (Morrissey et al., 2008; Harrison, 2018), OntarioPLAR™ represents a modern, scalable solution that advances efficiency, equity, and economic growth.

## The pilot would deliver a coordinated, province-wide system with the following key features:

- 1. One-Stop Learner Portal:** OntarioPLAR™ will provide a single, province-endorsed entry point (via OntarioLearn) where potential learners be informed about PLAR, complete a guided self-assessment, and receive instant, personalized credit estimates based on a provincial equivalency database and prior outcomes.
- 2. Provincial Credit Bank and Common Assessment Assets:** At the core of OntarioPLAR™ sits a provincial credit bank: a curated, continuously updated catalogue of pre-assessed non-formal learning (e.g., employer training, industry certifications, continuing education), complementary to ONCAT’s formal credit transfer focus.
- 3. Program-Embedded, Workforce-Aligned Pathways:** PLAR pathways will be built into program maps, beginning with programs with high student demand (e.g., trades, early childhood education, personal support worker, information technology) and aligned to employer-validated competencies.
- 4. Shared Pool of Trained Assessors (with a Provincial Assessor Academy):** A province-wide roster of trained assessors, faculty, and subject matter experts will be coordinated centrally and assigned to requests based on discipline and specialization.
- 5. Advising and Preparation Services (Human-Led, AI-Enabled):** OntarioPLAR™ consolidates self-service resources (guides, exemplars, study materials, portfolio builders) and offers personalized advising through a central team, with dedicated supports for Indigenous learners, internationally trained individuals, veterans, and other priority groups.
- 6. Streamlined Processes, Turnaround, and (Safe) Automation:** The platform enables online challenge exams (with secure proctoring), auto-recognition for mapped credentials (e.g., Red Seal, Cisco), and API-based verification with credentialing bodies.

7. **Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement:** System-wide standards, rubrics, and moderation are used to maintain consistency of decisions across colleges. Periodic sampling and second-marker reviews help establish reliability, comparable to standardized testing moderation and quality assurance processes aligned with the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA).
8. **Common Recognition and Inter-Agency Coordination:** As usage grows, OntarioPLAR™ identifies high-frequency patterns, professional credentials and trainings repeatedly yielding the same outcomes, and proposes automation rules for cross-college committee approval.
9. **Technology Backbone and Enterprise Integrations:** OntarioLearn’s cloud infrastructure, technical helpdesk, and virtual proctoring provide the delivery backbone.

## Benefits of this approach include:

### Benefits for Learners

- Faster admissions, more flexible options
- Reduced costs and time to completion
- Greater transparency and support

### Benefits for Institutions

- Efficiency scalability, and innovation
- Faculty workload and quality assurance
- Enrollment growth and retention

### Benefits for the Province

- Economic impact and workforce readiness
- Equity and Reconciliation
- Transparency and provincial leadership

## Next steps include:

- Launch a pilot project led by ONCAT: develop a two-year pilot project, managed by ONCAT as the funding and governance hub, to build and test a centralized PLAR service model.
- Establish clear goals and metrics: define measurable outcomes to evaluate success.
- Build a collaborative governance model: form a steering committee with broad representation to oversee policy harmonization, quality assurance, and continuous improvement.
- Engage stakeholders and promote awareness: develop a communications strategy to inform learners about PLAR opportunities and highlight the benefits of PLAR for postsecondary institutions, employers, and community partners.

Ontario’s postsecondary system stands at a crossroads. The province’s adult learners require faster, more affordable, and more transparent options to access postsecondary opportunities and earn postsecondary credentials. Without these opportunities, too many learners face unnecessary delays, higher costs, and lost opportunities for advancement. A centralized PLAR platform is essential to ensure that learners can leverage their existing skills and experience to achieve their educational and career goals.

The tools, the talent, and the infrastructure already exist. What is needed now is the will to act.

## Introduction

Ontario's postsecondary landscape is rapidly changing, driven by the evolving needs and experiences of adult learners. Increasingly, Ontario's publicly assisted colleges are serving underemployed adults, mid-career professionals, military-connected learners, newcomers, and people with previous work experience. For these learners, the journey to attain postsecondary credentials is often marked by significant barriers: lengthy programs, high costs, inflexible schedules, and limited recognition of the skills and knowledge they have already acquired through work, community engagement, or prior education.

Despite bringing valuable experience and competencies, adult learners frequently encounter inefficient, costly, and fragmented mechanisms for having their prior learning recognized. Many adult learners are balancing work, family, and other commitments, making traditional processes to access postsecondary opportunities and acquire postsecondary credentials difficult to navigate. The lack of clear, accessible options for crediting prior learning can delay career advancement, increase financial strain, and discourage participation in further education, all at a time when Ontario's economy urgently needs job-ready workers in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology.

At the same time, Ontario's publicly assisted colleges are navigating an unprecedented period of fiscal and operational strain. Recent federal policy changes affecting international student recruitment have resulted in substantial revenue shortfalls (Colleges Ontario, 2025). In response, many institutions have suspended programs and reduced staffing to offset projected deficits, even as they strive to meet the labour market needs of their communities. Ongoing workforce challenges in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology, together with the economic effects of the U.S. trade environment on manufacturing and transportation, underscore the pressing need for reskilling and upskilling (Office of the Premier, 2025).

Amid these challenges lies a strategic opportunity. Demographic and economic trends indicate that adult learners, including underemployed adults, mid-career professionals, and newcomers will constitute a growing share of Ontario's postsecondary population (OCAS, 2021). To remain competitive and relevant, colleges must adopt mechanisms that accelerate reskilling and upskilling while preserving quality and fiscal sustainability.

This viability study argues that Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is one of the most underutilized yet high-impact strategies available to Ontario's colleges. PLAR enables institutions to recognize non-formal and informal learning, allowing individuals to leverage their prior experiences towards accelerated credential attainment by exempting them from redundant coursework. When implemented effectively, PLAR reduces time-to-credential, lowers costs for learners, and strengthens system capacity to respond to labour market needs. Importantly, this approach can be scaled with modest incremental investment, leveraging existing infrastructure, such as OntarioLearn, to deliver province-wide benefits.

Ironically, while Ontario colleges proudly market experiential learning as an integral and unique aspect of their programming, they often dismiss comparable learning acquired outside their own programs. This disconnect undervalues the competencies of experienced learners and constrains the sector's ability to meet urgent workforce needs in a cost-effective and timely manner. Against this backdrop of economic and demographic shifts, PLAR emerges as a strategic solution with untapped potential. This vision is fully aligned with ONCAT's strategic priorities to make pathways more transparent and improve learner mobility across Ontario's postsecondary system (ONCAT, 2023).

# The Case for PLAR: Evidence and Rationale

PLAR is a rigorous academic process that evaluates work experience, independent study, community engagement, and other forms of non-traditional learning against course or program outcomes (MCURES, 2023a). When equivalency is demonstrated, learners may receive academic credit, which reduces required courses and accelerates program progression. As the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES) defines it, PLAR is “a process that uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate, and demonstrate past learning” (MCURES, 2023a).

Providing PLAR options is not optional for Ontario publicly assisted colleges. Since 2003, a binding Ministry policy directive has required colleges of applied arts and technology to offer PLAR “for as many credit courses as possible in programs of instruction in which enrolment is eligible for funding through the general purpose operating grant” (MCURES, 2023b). This directive built on earlier investments that funded PLAR roles to develop policies, processes, and implementation at each college.

PLAR is uniquely positioned to address Ontario’s most pressing postsecondary and workforce challenges. As the province faces rapid economic change, technological disruption, and persistent labour shortages, the need for rapid upskilling and reskilling has never been greater. Demographic shifts, such as an aging workforce and declining numbers of traditional-age students, mean that adult learners, career changers, and skilled newcomers form an increasing share of the college population. Many bring significant formal, non-formal, and informal learning accumulated across diverse professional and community contexts.

Indigenous learners remain underrepresented in Ontario’s postsecondary system, partly due to rigid credentialing structures that undervalue Indigenous and community-based knowledge. Indigenous-designed PLAR processes offer an option to address these inequities by recognizing learning that occurs through cultural, land-based, and community practices (Ray, Vaillancourt, Wick, & Beaulieu, 2024).

## Benefits for Learners

For adult learners, PLAR offers a clear value proposition. Many pursue postsecondary credentials as levers for advancement: to gain a promotion, retain employment, or transition into emerging fields. Yet the prospect of lengthy programs can be a substantial barrier for those balancing work, family, and other commitments. PLAR addresses this gap by assessing prior learning and translating it into academic credit. The result is a significant reduction in time-to-credential, lowering both financial and opportunity costs, and making postsecondary opportunities more accessible (Aarts et al., 1999, 2003).

## Benefits for Institutions

For the institutional perspective, PLAR is a strategic lever for enrollment, retention, graduation, and accountability outcomes. Recognizing the skills and experience of adult learners expands the applicant pool, improves persistence, and shortens time-to-credential (Aarts et al., 1999; CAEL, 2020). PLAR also enables faster credentialing in high-demand fields, strengthening responsiveness to employers and communities (Morrissey, et al., 2008). By reducing course duplication and streamlining requirements for completion, PLAR optimises resource use and reinforces the colleges’ commitment to access, innovation, and workforce development.

## Benefits for the Province

From the provincial lens, PLAR supports Ontario’s broader economic development agenda by accelerating the deployment of skilled talent in priority sectors. By reducing duplication of training, PLAR promotes lifelong learning, bridges the gap between academic institutions and employers, and creates more efficient transfer

pathways to credentials (Morrissey, et al., 2008) (Harris & Wihak, 2023). Moreover, by expanding access to postsecondary opportunities, PLAR supports equity and inclusion, enabling newcomers, underemployed adults, and those marginalized by traditional education systems to participate more fully in Ontario’s economy (Ray, Vaillancourt, Wick, & Beaulieu, 2024).

## Empirical Evidence

Empirical evidence from both Canadian and international research consistently demonstrates the transformative impact of PLAR on student outcomes, institutional effectiveness, and system-level efficiency. A longitudinal study by the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL) followed the academic outcomes of more than 64,000 adult students (aged 25 and older) at 48 postsecondary institutions, including Athabasca University and the University of the Fraser Valley, over seven years. The study reported that 56% of students who received PLAR credit completed a postsecondary credential (certificate, diploma, or degree), compared to 21% of students who did not earn PLAR credit (CAEL, 2010). This “PLAR boost” effect has been further validated in a more recent CAEL study, which analyzed data from over 230,000 adult learners at 72 institutions. Once again, the results showed that earning prior learning credits is strongly associated with higher graduation rates, as well as significant cost and time savings for students (CAEL, 2020). In both studies, the graduation rate for PLAR recipients was more than double that of non-PLAR students, a pattern that held across diverse institutional types and learner demographics.

The underlying dynamics of this effect are well documented in the literature. Students who engage in PLAR invest considerable time and effort in preparing portfolios or challenge assessments, which not only validates their prior learning but also increases their commitment to program completion. As Devey (2009) and others have observed, by earning credit at the outset, these learners are already closer to the “finish line,” making them less likely to drop out because they have “more to lose” than those who have not yet accumulated momentum in their academic journey. This motivational dimension is particularly salient for adult learners, who often juggle work, family, and other responsibilities alongside their studies.

Canadian research echoes these findings and highlights their relevance for Ontario’s colleges. Aarts et al. (2003) found that not only did PLAR recipients achieve higher rates of passing courses than traditional students, but they also persisted in their programs at higher rates and were more likely to graduate. These learners reported that PLAR reduced both the time and cost required to complete their credentials, enabling them to remain in the workforce and manage other life commitments. Importantly, the benefits of PLAR were not limited to individual learners as institutions that implemented robust PLAR practices saw improvements in student retention and completion, as well as enhanced alignment between academic programming and workforce needs (Morrissey, et al., 2008; Harrison, 2018).

The Ontario context further underscores the urgency and opportunity for scaling PLAR. Demographic and enrollment trends reveal a steady decline in traditional domestic applicants aged 19–23, and a corresponding rise in learners aged 24 and older, many of whom return to college for retraining or upskilling (OCAS, 2021). This shift is mirrored in the growth of OntarioLearn, the province-wide consortium of all 24 publicly assisted colleges, which has seen sustained increases in part-time online course enrollments among working adults over the past three decades (OntarioLearn, 2025). These mature students, along with skilled newcomers and Indigenous learners, represent historically undersupported groups whose prior learning is often undervalued or overlooked by conventional academic policies (Ray, Vaillancourt, Wick, & Beaulieu, 2024).

Moreover, the evidence points to PLAR as a powerful lever for equity and inclusion. By recognizing the competencies of newcomers, underemployed adults, and those marginalized by traditional education systems, PLAR creates more accessible and efficient pathways to credential attainment and labour market participation (Moss, 2014). This is especially critical in fields facing acute skills shortages, such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology, where the rapid deployment of qualified professionals is essential for Ontario's economic resilience.

PLAR not only leads to higher graduation rates and quicker credential completion for learners, but it also provides cost savings, boosts student motivation, and increases system responsiveness. These benefits are important as Ontario's colleges respond to shifting demographics and workforce needs. Making PLAR a core strategy can help the province maximize adult learner success, enhance institutional outcomes, and support economic and social objectives. While Ontario's colleges are poised to capitalize on PLAR's advantages, achieving its full impact requires a coordinated and strategic approach to ensure the academic integrity of Ontario's well-respected postsecondary credentials, while also promoting long-term sustainability through shared resources and improved services

## Current State of PLAR in Ontario Colleges

While PLAR offers several advantages and could be beneficial to more learners, its application in Ontario colleges remains limited, inconsistent, and fragmented (Aarts S. , et al., 1999; Conrad, 2008). Some colleges have invested in PLAR services, but these are isolated pockets of practice rather than a coherent system. This situation raises questions about the factors that restrict broader use and contribute to uneven adoption throughout the province. Examining these issues is essential to designing practical, evidence-based solutions.

### Lack of Awareness

A primary barrier to PLAR uptake is insufficient awareness among prospective and current students. ONCAT's review of all 24 Ontario college websites found that, while most institutions provide some basic PLAR information, the quality and accessibility of this information vary widely. Roughly one-quarter of colleges lack a dedicated webpage outlining the PLAR process, and where details do exist, they are often buried within policy documents or scattered across multiple pages, making them difficult to find (Missaghian, 2022). As a result, many eligible learners remain unaware of PLAR or are unclear about how to initiate an application (Harrison, 2018; Harris & Wihak, 2023). This problem is compounded by the absence of PLAR information at key decision points. For example, OCAS does not include a dedicated section on PLAR, and ONCAT's own resources focus on credit transfer rather than recognition of experiential or non-formal learning. The lack of transparent, easily accessible information, especially at the application stage, restricts PLAR utilization among those who could benefit most. Providing targeted PLAR information when prospective adult learners are exploring program options as part of their return-to-school or upskilling decisions may help increase application rates (Aarts S. , et al., 2003).

### Inconsistent Information and Processes

The decentralized management of PLAR across Ontario colleges has resulted in a patchwork of policies, procedures, and supports. Application steps, assessment fees, available advising, and the way PLAR credits are recorded all differ from one institution to another (Harrison, 2018; Missaghian, 2022). Critically, none of the colleges clearly indicate whether PLAR credits earned at one institution are transferable to another, unlike the established processes for formal credit transfer managed by ONCAT. This lack of portability means that students who earn PLAR credit at one college may have to repeat the assessment, or even retake the course, if they transfer to another institution, undermining the efficiency and value proposition of PLAR (Missaghian, 2022). As Harrison (2018) notes, consistent and transparent information, ideally delivered through a centralized resource, remains a key challenge in Ontario.

### Duplication of Effort

The absence of provincial coordination means that each college is independently developing PLAR assessments, training faculty, and managing administrative processes, even for common courses that share province-wide standards. For example, challenge exams for foundational courses like “Introduction to Business Mathematics” or “Human Anatomy and Physiology” are likely being developed in parallel at multiple institutions with little to no cross-sharing of materials or standards. This siloed approach leads to redundant work, inconsistent academic rigour, and inefficient use of faculty time and institutional resources (Aarts S. , et al., 1999; Harrison, 2018). This example not only highlights the inefficiency but also reinforces the case for shared assessment repositories and mutual recognition agreements (Morrissett, et al., 2008; Harrison, 2018).

### **Lengthy Process**

The process of securing credit through PLAR can be lengthy under current institutional frameworks. Applicants typically must attend information sessions, verify eligibility, prepare portfolios or complete challenge exams, and then wait for faculty assessment and academic approval. Many institutions report that PLAR decisions can take six to eight weeks or longer, especially when faculty are unavailable or when PLAR is just one of many competing responsibilities for staff (Harrison, 2018; Missaghian, 2022). These delays can disrupt student academic planning, particularly if they are enrolled in courses for which they are seeking credit, or if a negative PLAR decision arrives too late for them to adjust their schedules (Aarts et al., 2003). The lack of dedicated PLAR staff and the infrequent volume of requests further exacerbate these delays, making the process unpredictable and discouraging for both learners and faculty.

### **Financial Barriers for Students**

Ironically, PLAR's promise of cost savings is often undermined by existing institutional and policy structures. Ontario colleges typically charge a PLAR assessment fee averaging \$130 per course, which can quickly add up for students seeking multiple credits (Missaghian, 2022). If a PLAR challenge is unsuccessful, the fee yields no credit, making it a financial risk. Moreover, the optimal scenario, where a student can use PLAR to bypass an entire term or year of study, is exceedingly rare (Harrison, 2018). For students relying on financial aid, PLAR can also jeopardize their eligibility for OSAP if successful challenges reduce their course load below full-time status (MCURES, 2023a). As a result, some students opt to take and pay for courses they do not need simply to maintain their full-time student status, a perverse financial disincentive to PLAR that has been identified as a key issue by both researchers and practitioners (Aarts et al., 1999; Harrison, 2018).

### **Institutional Costs**

From the institutional perspective, PLAR is often viewed as a resource-intensive, low-volume activity with unclear financial returns. Because most faculty and staff encounter PLAR requests only sporadically, there is little opportunity to develop routine expertise or efficient workflows. In addition, the current fee structure seldom reflects the actual costs associated with faculty and staff time, particularly when assessments are conducted on an ad hoc basis or require specialized subject matter expertise (Harrison, 2018). The lack of standardized procedures for tracking, compensating, and training PLAR assessors further reduces institutional incentives to prioritize or scale PLAR (Aarts et al., 1999; Harrison, 2018). As a result, PLAR remains on the margins of institutional practice, with minimal investment in staff development or process improvement.

### **Marginalization of Adult Learning**

PLAR's limited institutional prioritisation is directly related to its connection with adult and part-time learners, who have traditionally received less support from funding frameworks and, as a result, the college system (Gallant, Brumwell, Chatoor, & Colyar, 2025). As Conrad (2008) observes, "Prior learning assessment, as a child of adult education, continues to suffer predicaments similar to those long endured by its parent field." Because adult learners often seek flexible programs and recognition of prior experience, but represent a small share of overall enrollments, PLAR is frequently relegated to the margins (e.g., continuing education). Funding models and administrative processes that favour full-time students inadvertently create additional challenges for PLAR. This structural disincentive discourages colleges from investing in PLAR, leaving its potential largely untapped within the broader system (Aarts et al., 1999; Harrison, 2018).

# Best Practices in PLAR: Evidence and Implications

PLAR is mandated across Ontario colleges and is in widespread use. Its adoption and impact, however, are constrained by the operational and policy challenges outlined earlier. To mitigate these issues, it may be advantageous to evaluate established models that successfully facilitate the recognition of prior learning. Illustrative examples from individual institutions and overarching frameworks present characteristics and outcomes that can inform the development of a more viable solution for the Ontario college sector.

## 1. Athabasca University (AB): Centralized PLAR at Scale

**Model.** Canada’s “Open University” operates a centralized PLAR unit serving all academic programs and offers a portfolio development course that supports students in preparing submissions. Athabasca attracts a large proportion of out-of-province learners, notably from Ontario.

**Implications.** Comprehensive student supports (e.g., portfolio courses), trained faculty assessors, and PLAR embedded in academic practice enable scale and fiscal viability within a single institution. The steady enrollment of Ontario students taking courses at Athabasca University — 10,097 of them in 2023–2024 — signals unmet demand within the Ontario system.

## 2. Nova Scotia Community College (NS): Program-Integrated, Workforce-Aligned Acceleration

**Model.** NSCC integrates PLAR into program design, with government-supported initiatives such as the Africentric Accelerated ECE Diploma. Experienced staff can bypass 50–75% of the course requirements, completing credentials faster while remaining employed. The college is piloting AI-enabled tools to provide real-time guidance for learners and resources for staff who support PLAR candidates.

**Implications.** When PLAR is tightly aligned to workforce needs and supported by targeted funding, uptake rises and time-to-credential falls. Technology streamlines navigation, triage, and feedback loops, improving learner experience and staff efficiency.

## 3. Thompson Rivers University (BC): Credit Bank and Competency-Based Portfolios

**Model.** TRU’s open learning division deploys dedicated PLAR advisors (including Indigenous PLAR roles), a library of rubrics and challenge exams, and two notable innovations: (1) competency-based portfolios tied to institutional learning outcomes, and (2) a credit bank cataloguing pre-assessed training from employers, private training providers, and continuing education across the country.

**Implications.** Awareness and clear options drive utilization. Beyond course-by-course assessment, a competency-based portfolio and a credit bank for non-formal learning (complementing ONCAT’s formal transfer focus) expands recognition opportunities and reduces re-assessment workload.

## 4. Québec’s RAC (QC): Province-Wide Framework with Regional Hubs

**Model.** Québec’s Ministry-led “Reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences (RAC)” coordinates regional Centres of Expertise (CERACs) across school boards, CEGEPs, universities, and employment services. Candidates assemble evidence with supported guidance and can meet credential requirements through multiple channels (no restrictive residency requirement).

**Implications.** Government leadership, clear standards, and regional pooling of expertise enable scale, consistency, and learner mobility. Continuous simplification of processes and interfaces correlates with higher participation and completion.

## 5. American Council on Education (US): Centralized Credit Recommendations

**Model.** ACE has, for decades, evaluated workplace and military training and publishes credit recommendations widely accepted by hundreds of U.S. institutions.

**Implications.** A trusted, centralized evaluation authority creates consistency and quality, eliminates duplicative institutional effort, and expands recognition of learning beyond traditional classrooms, functionally serving as a national PLAR layer that Ontario could emulate at the college system level.

## 6. France's VAE (FR): National RPL Framework

**Model.** National legislation enables individuals to earn formal qualifications via assessment of work experience, supported by regional centres and standardized procedures overseen centrally. Over 400,000 credentials have been awarded across two decades and reforms continue to refine access and usability.

**Implications.** Central governance with local delivery can reach large populations while maintaining quality. Continuous improvement and user-centred design are essential to sustain impact at scale.

## 7. OntarioLearn (ON): Proven Consortium Infrastructure in Ontario

**Model.** OntarioLearn unites the 24 publicly assisted colleges on a common technology platform for online learning, centralizing key functions (e.g., course delivery systems, 24/7 help desk). Learners may register with a single institution and gain streamlined access to courses offered by other colleges. This approach has facilitated over 1.5 million online course enrolments across thirty years, reduced redundancy, and promoted seamless mobility within the educational system.

**Implications.** Ontario has a proven centralized service layer that combines technology, expertise, and operations across its colleges. The platform's scalability enables it to adapt to changes in demand, including higher enrolments from adult and part-time learners, as shown during the COVID-19 pandemic.

# Guiding Principles for a Centralized PLAR System

Building on the lessons drawn from leading institutional and jurisdictional models, it is evident that the evolution of PLAR systems has been driven by two critical forces: the efficiency and consistency afforded by centralized frameworks, and the flexibility enabled through collaborative networks, learner-focused processes, and technological innovation. These case studies reveal that successful PLAR systems do more than recognize prior learning, they integrate equity, transparency, and scalability into their design. From national credit recommendation services to province-wide frameworks and institutional exemplars, common patterns emerge that can guide Ontario in creating a more cohesive, efficient, and accessible approach. The following themes synthesize these insights and outline the foundational principles for a centralized PLAR system that meets the needs of learners, colleges, and the provincial economy.

## 1. Proactive Advising and Learner Support

Institutions that invest in advising and structured learner support see higher PLAR uptake and success rates (Harrison, 2018). Athabasca’s portfolio development course and TRU’s dedicated PLAR advisors, including roles focused on Indigenous learners, illustrate the importance of guided navigation. Furthermore, it is recommended that such guidance be delivered by seasoned PLAR practitioners possessing substantial expertise in adult and experiential learning (Harris & Wihak, 2023). CAEL’s research (2020) confirms that adult learners who receive PLAR credit graduate at higher rates, save time and money, and persist to earn additional credentials, a phenomenon they labeled as a “PLA Boost.” Ontario should centralize self-service tools and invest in dedicated PLAR advisors and community-based supports, ensuring that learners receive timely, personalized assistance throughout the process.

## 2. Visibility and Accessibility from the Start

Evidence consistently shows that early and clear communication about PLAR opportunities drives participation. Athabasca University and TRU both integrate PLAR information into admissions processes, while NSCC’s targeted outreach to childcare workers significantly boosted engagement. Empirical evidence confirms that learners are seldom aware of the availability of PLAR, and that visibility and proactive communication can transform PLAR from a “hidden option” into a strategic enrollment driver, even contributing to a “brain gain” by retaining talent in-province (Bloom & Grant, 2001; Harris & Wihak, 2023). Ontario colleges should make PLAR highly visible at the point of application and admission, supported by personalized eligibility tools and clear guidance on how prior experience maps to program requirements.

## 3. Central Governance and Shared Standards

Centralized governance is a defining feature of the most successful PLAR systems worldwide. Models such as the American Council on Education’s (ACE) credit recommendation service, Québec’s RAC framework, and France’s VAE demonstrate that when assessments are conducted once by qualified experts and recognized across institutions, duplication is minimised, and consistency is promoted. These systems have proven to be scalable, cost-effective, and trusted by both learners and institutions. Research by Conrad (2008) reinforces the value of a centralized PLAR unit, emphasizing its distinct role from credit transfer and its ability to enhance institutional credibility. OntarioLearn provides a local precedent for this approach, illustrating how Ontario colleges can collaborate effectively through shared governance and infrastructure. For Ontario, adopting a centralized PLAR hub with common standards and quality assurance protocols would ensure fairness, reduce redundancy, and build confidence among colleges and learners alike.

#### **4. Common Assessment Assets and a Provincial Credit Bank**

The development of shared assessment resources is critical to efficiency and transparency. TRU’s credit bank, which catalogs pre-assessed employer and training-provider programs, and ACE’s national credit recommendations both demonstrate how centralized repositories reduce repetitive evaluations and accelerate learner progress. The development of a digital repository for sharing resources and best practices related to PLAR was the “meta-recommendation” made by Harrison (2018) in her research. These tools also expand recognition beyond formal education, capturing workplace, non-formal, and informal learning that is increasingly relevant in today’s labour market. Ontario can replicate this success by creating a provincial credit bank and shared library of challenge exams and rubrics, ensuring that once a learning experience is assessed, it can be recognized across the system without duplication.

#### **5. Program-Embedded and Workforce-Aligned Pathways**

PLAR is most impactful when integrated into program design and aligned with labour market needs. Nova Scotia Community College’s Africentric Accelerated ECE program exemplifies this principle, enabling experienced childcare workers to bypass up to 75% of program requirements while continuing employment. Similarly, TRU’s competency-based portfolios align with institutional learning outcomes, providing an additional pathway to credit recognition for adult learners. These approaches not only shorten time-to-credential but also address workforce shortages in critical sectors. Ontario should embed and promote PLAR options into program maps for priority sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology, ensuring that recognition of prior learning directly supports provincial workforce strategies.

#### **6. Faculty and Assessor Engagement**

The quality and credibility of PLAR depends on the expertise of those who deliver it. Athabasca and TRU have institutionalized PLAR through dedicated offices and trained assessors, while CAPLA’s Quality Framework underscores the need for standardized training, moderation, and calibration (CAPLA, 2025). Harrison (2018) highlights the necessity of developing resources and tools for faculty assessors, offering ongoing workshops and training, and investing in human resources to support effective PLAR processes and practices. Faculty champions not only ensure fairness and rigour but also foster innovation in assessment practices. Ontario’s model should include a provincial “assessor academy”, shared rubrics, and a robust community of practice.

#### **7. Technology and Innovation as Enablers**

Digital platforms and AI-driven tools are transforming PLAR by streamlining processes and improving user experience. NSCC’s exploration of AI for real-time learner support and ACE’s centralized catalogues demonstrate how technology can simplify navigation, automate routine tasks, and enhance decision-making. OntarioLearn already provides a robust shared-service infrastructure for online learning, proving that Ontario colleges can collaborate effectively on technology-enabled solutions. Leveraging OntarioLearn as the backbone for a centralized PLAR portal would deliver a seamless, scalable, and equitable system for learners and institutions alike.

#### **8. Equity, Inclusion, and User-Centered Design**

Equity-focused design is essential to ensure that PLAR serves all learners, particularly those from underrepresented groups. NSCC’s Africentric pathway and TRU’s Indigenous PLAR supports highlight the importance of culturally responsive methods (Ray, Vaillancourt, Wick, & Beaulieu, 2024). Québec’s RAC further demonstrates how removing barriers, such as residency requirements, increases flexibility and

participation (Moss, 2011). Ontario should embed equity principles into policy and practice, offering multilingual resources, community-based advising, and simplified processes. Co-designing Indigenous PLAR frameworks with Indigenous communities would ensure assessments reflect Indigenous values, supporting Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and ONCAT's goals for equity, diversity, and inclusion (TRC, 2015; ONCAT, 2023).

## 9. Data-Driven Improvement and Accountability

Sustained success relies on ongoing monitoring and adjustment. France's VAE and Québec's RAC have improved through reforms guided by data such as participation rates, processing times, and learner outcomes. Transparent reporting drives both system improvements and public trust. Centralizing activities on one platform would enable more consistent data collection for continuous improvement, which current methods cannot achieve efficiently (Van Kleef, 2009; Harrison, 2018). Ontario should adopt a provincial dashboard to track key metrics like decision time, credits awarded, and completion rates, using this data to refine policies, funding, and quality over time.

These principles, grounded in evidence from leading jurisdictions and institutions, converge on a clear conclusion: Ontario needs a centralized, technology-enabled PLAR system built on shared standards, proactive learner supports, and equity-driven design. The next section outlines how this vision can be operationalized through OntarioLearn's proven collaborative infrastructure, delivering measurable benefits for learners, institutions, and the province. OntarioPLAR™ presents a practical and scalable solution for unifying and improving PLAR processes throughout Ontario.

## Introducing OntarioPLAR™

To unlock the full potential of PLAR as a tool to fast-track Ontario’s postsecondary learners, this viability study proposes a two-year pilot project to develop a centralized platform for PLAR assessment and administration.

ONCAT will oversee governance, financial management, and reporting, as well as disburse funds to OntarioLearn and participating colleges based on agreed deliverables. OntarioLearn will provide the technical backbone for the pilot, ensuring seamless integration and operational leadership.

OntarioPLAR™, powered by OntarioLearn, is envisioned as a centralized platform designed to support learners at publicly assisted colleges in Ontario by providing a unified digital system for PLAR assessment and administration. The platform will streamline processes, centralize resources, and provide clear information — reducing confusion and barriers that often prevent learners from receiving credit for prior learning. By simplifying administrative procedures and consolidating information, OntarioPLAR™ aims to accelerate educational progress, support lifelong learning, and improve mobility across institutions.

ONCAT is uniquely positioned to lead this initiative as the governance and funding hub. With its active learner-facing platform (ONTransfer.ca), ONCAT already attracts significant traffic from visitors — more than 200,000 each year — seeking pathways and credit transfer options. The organization has experience managing system-wide projects and coordinating collaboration within Ontario’s postsecondary system, which provides the background necessary for effective project delivery.

This integrated approach benefits learners first and foremost by providing faster, fairer recognition of prior learning, reducing costs, and improving mobility. Institutions gain from uniform standards, reduced redundancy, and enhanced operational efficiency, while the province benefits from a more responsive, cost-effective postsecondary system aligned with workforce priorities. Backed by evidence-based reports endorsing centralized PLAR frameworks (Morrissey et al., 2008; Harrison, 2018), OntarioPLAR™ represents a modern, scalable solution that advances efficiency, equity, and economic growth.

### About OntarioLearn

OntarioLearn emerges as the ideal host for the proposed PLAR Hub for several key reasons. As a long-standing collaborative partnership, OntarioLearn unites Ontario’s publicly assisted colleges by enabling one college to develop and deliver a course (the “host”), while other colleges offer it to their students (“registering” colleges). This model expands program options, increases flexibility, and streamlines course delivery across the province. A popular platform for students and a reliable partner for colleges, OntarioLearn supported 82,914 course enrolments in 2024–25.

Learners register and pay tuition to their home institution and continue to access standard academic and student support services, while course instruction is handled online by another Ontario college through OntarioLearn. These courses fulfill program requirements, are documented on official transcripts, and allow students to retain access to the registering college’s support resources throughout their studies. This results in greater flexibility in scheduling, increased options for program completion, a wider range of elective choices, and the availability of specialized electives or credentials that may not be offered due to limited enrolment. For working professionals, parents, and learners residing outside major urban centres, OntarioLearn provides adaptable and high-quality educational opportunities designed to accommodate diverse needs.

OntarioLearn’s revenue-sharing model compensates both host and registering colleges, supporting a sustainable and cooperative approach. All courses are delivered asynchronously online via OntarioLearn’s learning management system, with facilitation provided by part-time faculty from the host college. This proven coalition of the willing has the governance, cooperative culture, and technical infrastructure capable of supporting a robust, province-wide PLAR solution. Strong institutional relationships further facilitate mutual recognition of PLAR credits and ongoing improvement in shared processes.

OntarioLearn’s student population is particularly well-suited for PLAR initiatives, with 75% of the students over the age of 29, 68% employed during their studies, 61% choosing online courses for work-related flexibility, 43% seeking career advancement or change, and 16% being newcomers to Canada with valuable international experience (OntarioLearn, 2025). These demographics underscore the need for accessible, recognition-based processes to support lifelong learning and career mobility.

Building on OntarioLearn’s robust infrastructure and expertise, the next section outlines the key features of OntarioPLAR™ and how it will deliver an integrated, learner-centred PLAR system across Ontario’s publicly assisted colleges.

## **Key Features of OntarioPLAR™ (Hosted on OntarioLearn)**

### **1. One-Stop Learner Portal**

OntarioPLAR™ will provide a single, province-endorsed entry point (via OntarioLearn) where potential learners be informed about PLAR, complete a guided self-assessment, and receive instant, personalized credit estimates based on a provincial equivalency database and prior outcomes (as demonstrated by ACE and RAC). Integration with OCAS surfaces PLAR opportunities at application, enabling applicants to see potential credits, mapped courses, and evidence requirements up front. This makes PLAR visible and frictionless from the start (i.e., prior to applying to a program), improving participation, planning, and time-to-decision.

### **2. Provincial Credit Bank and Common Assessment Assets**

At the core of OntarioPLAR™ sits a provincial credit bank: a curated, continuously updated catalogue of pre-assessed non-formal learning (e.g., employer training, industry certifications, continuing education), complementary to ONCAT’s formal credit transfer focus. Subject committees develop and maintain shared challenge exams, portfolio templates, and rubrics for frequently challenged courses and competencies (mirroring TRU’s credit bank and ACE’s “assess once, recognize many” approach). Colleges draw from the same assets, eliminating duplicate effort and ensuring consistent, portable outcomes across the system.

### **3. Program-Embedded, Workforce-Aligned Pathways**

PLAR pathways will be built into program maps, beginning with programs with high student demand (e.g., trades, early childhood education, personal support worker, information technology) and aligned to employer-validated competencies and Ontario colleges’ outcomes. Fast-track options (challenge routes, portfolio-based recognition, credential crosswalks) shorten time-to-credential while addressing labour-market needs, as shown by program-integrated PLAR in Nova Scotia and competency-based models in open learning divisions.

### **4. Shared Pool of Trained Assessors (with a Provincial Assessor Academy)**

A province-wide roster of trained assessors, faculty, and subject matter experts will be coordinated centrally and assigned to requests based on discipline and specialization. The model establishes standardised

compensation, clarifies workload (contracted outside regular teaching), and supports calibration practices, while including roles for Indigenous knowledge keepers and other equity-informed expertise. The Provincial Assessor Academy, aligned with CAPLA’s quality guidance, will offer training, certification, and a community of practice to promote consistency and quality across the system (CAPLA, 2015).

## **5. Advising and Preparation Services (Human-Led, AI-Enabled)**

OntarioPLAR™ consolidates self-service resources (guides, exemplars, study materials, portfolio builders) and offers personalized advising through a central team, with dedicated supports for Indigenous learners, internationally trained individuals, veterans, and other priority groups. AI tools (e.g., a PLAR chatbot, resume-to-credit matcher, real-time triage) provide 24/7 assistance while preserving human oversight for complex cases. This mirrors the proactive, structured supports seen at Athabasca, TRU, and NSCC, which are associated with higher uptake and completion.

## **6. Streamlined Processes, Turnaround, and (Safe) Automation**

The platform enables online challenge exams (with secure proctoring), auto-recognition for mapped credentials (e.g., Red Seal, Cisco), and API-based verification with credentialing bodies. A case-management layer routes complex files to assessors and tracks milestones. Service-level targets guide performance (e.g., instant decisions for auto-mapped cases, 7–10 days for assessor-reviewed portfolios, 48–72 hours for verified certification credits). Offer letters from colleges could include confirmed credits, providing learners upfront clarity about their path to a credential and accelerating their enrollment decisions.

## **7. Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement**

System-wide standards, rubrics, and moderation are used to maintain consistency of decisions across colleges. Periodic sampling and second-marker reviews help establish reliability, comparable to standardized testing moderation and CAPLA-aligned QA processes. The platform collects performance and equity metrics such as turnaround time, award rates, learning satisfaction, graduation rates, and demographic recognition. These metrics inform ongoing improvement cycles. Governance includes a cross-college council, similar to OntarioLearn, along with employer advisory input, resembling a Program Advisory Committee, to update assets and policies and maintain rigor, relevance, and public confidence.

## **8. Common Recognition and Inter-Agency Coordination**

As usage grows, OntarioPLAR™ identifies high-frequency patterns, professional credentials and trainings repeatedly yielding the same outcomes, and proposes automation rules for cross-college committee approval. OntarioPLAR™ also provides workflows to triage cases across agencies (e.g., ONCAT referrals to OntarioPLAR when transfer is not viable; alignment with WES/CICIC evaluations for international learners). This coordination reduces hand-offs, speeds decisions, and expands recognition options for diverse learner profiles.

## **9. Technology Backbone and Enterprise Integrations**

OntarioLearn’s cloud infrastructure, technical helpdesk, and virtual proctoring provide the delivery backbone. OntarioPLAR™ could implement SSO for learners and staff to integrate with OCAS to seamlessly introduce PLAR at the application stage, with the Registrar/SIS systems for automated transcript posting, and with institutional LMS for assessment or learning content delivery. The shared platform reduces per-college technology costs and accelerates feature rollouts province-wide.

# Benefits of Proposed Solution

OntarioPLAR™ provides measurable benefits for learners, institutions, and the province:

## Benefits for Learners

### **Faster Admissions, More Flexible Options:**

OntarioPLAR™ provides a single, reliable access point for PLAR, allowing learners to explore options across all colleges, plan confidently, and move between institutions without repeating assessments. Automated tools and AI systems offer instant eligibility feedback, reducing delays and uncertainty, while faster challenge and assessment processes speed up decisions.

### **Reduced Costs and Time to Completion:**

By recognizing prior learning early and quickly, students avoid paying for redundant courses and can complete programs faster. Even after PLAR fees, the savings can be significant, especially if it involves experiential learning courses. For adult learners with work and family responsibilities, this acceleration may allow them to complete their studies earlier while maintaining employment.

### **Greater Transparency and Support:**

Learners benefit from consistent, accurate information and proactive advising. Centralized resources, such as portfolio templates, study guides, and 24/7 AI chat support, reduce confusion and build confidence. Dedicated advisors, including specialists for Indigenous learners and internationally trained professionals, ensure that diverse learners receive tailored guidance.

## Benefits for Institutions

### **Efficiency, Scalability, and Innovation:**

OntarioPLAR™ replaces duplication with a “develop once, use many” model, allowing colleges to share assessment assets and respond quickly to changes in demand. Centralized workflows and automated notifications further reduce administrative overhead, freeing staff for higher-value tasks and enabling the deployment of new technologies system-wide.

### **Faculty Workload and Quality Assurance:**

A shared pool of trained assessors ensures that PLAR evaluations are handled by experts, improving consistency and turnaround times. Faculty no longer need to manage occasional PLAR requests outside their teaching load, reducing workload stress. Standardized training and moderation protocols maintain academic integrity and fairness across the system.

### **Enrollment Growth and Retention:**

By making PLAR more accessible and predictable, colleges can attract adult learners who might otherwise not have considered a return to school and/or would have chosen an out-of-province option to pursue their studies. Research shows that students who receive PLAR credits are more likely to persist and graduate, improving retention and performance-based funding outcomes.

## Benefits for the Province

### **Economic Impact and Workforce Readiness:**

A centralized PLAR system lowers the cost per graduate and accelerates credentialing, helping Ontario deploy skilled talent in critical sectors more efficiently. This supports government priorities for efficiency, accountability, and economic growth.

### **Equity and Reconciliation:**

By embedding Indigenous PLAR frameworks, Ontario can advance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action related to education (TRC, 2015) and create a more inclusive and culturally responsive postsecondary system.

### **Transparency and Provincial Leadership:**

OntarioPLAR™ provides real-time data on participation and outcomes, supporting evidence-based policy decisions and enhancing Ontario's reputation as a leader in recognising prior learning.

## Estimating Long-term Savings and System-wide Efficiencies

While the initial costs of developing a centralized PLAR Hub are not trivial, the long-term benefits for learners, and the efficiencies for the broader system, are substantial:

- **Direct Benefits for Learners:** Faster recognition of prior learning means students can complete programs sooner, reducing both tuition and opportunity costs. By eliminating redundant coursework, learners save time and money, enabling them to re-enter the workforce or advance their careers more quickly. This acceleration is particularly critical for adult learners balancing work, family, and education.
- **Improved Outcomes:** Students who receive PLAR credits are more likely to persist and graduate, leading to higher completion rates and better employment outcomes. These improvements translate into greater confidence for learners and a stronger return on their educational investment.
- **Centralized System Efficiencies:** A shared PLAR system allows colleges to collectively manage technology development, policy alignment, and assessment resources, eliminating the need for each institution to invest independently.
- **Economies of Scale:** Centralized investment in AI tools and assessment platforms results in lower per-student costs as system usage grows. Minor process improvements yield cumulative savings across the sector.
- **Revenue Creation and Retention:** By making PLAR more accessible, colleges can attract new learners and retain Ontario students who might otherwise seek faster and more convenient academic options elsewhere (e.g. Athabasca University), strengthening institutional revenues and optimizing public investments in postsecondary education.
- **Economic ROI for Ontario:** Accelerating upskilling and reskilling helps learners return to the workforce sooner, reducing reliance on social supports and increasing tax contributions. This approach supports provincial priorities for workforce readiness and economic growth.

These long-term efficiencies underscore the urgency of moving forward. Ontario must act decisively to unlock the full potential of PLAR.

# Call to Action: Why this Moment Matters for Learners

Ontario's adult learners are central to the province's economic and social resilience. Many adult learners are already in the workforce — underemployed adults seeking to develop new skills, mid-career professionals working to upgrade their credentials, and newcomers wanting to acquire a Canadian-based education. These groups require clear and accessible ways to return to skilled employment quickly. For these individuals, time and cost represent significant barriers. A centralized PLAR platform directly addresses these challenges by enabling learners to leverage prior experience for academic credit, thereby reducing duplication, accelerating credential completion, and lowering financial burdens. This approach allows learners to re-enter the workforce sooner, maintain family stability, and advance their careers without unnecessary delays.

## A System-Level Imperative

While the primary objective is to improve outcomes for learners, the benefits extend to institutions and the province. A centralized PLAR model promotes efficiency by reducing duplication, standardizing processes, and enabling shared use of assessment resources. This strengthens Ontario's capacity to respond to urgent labour market needs in sectors such as healthcare, skilled trades, and technology. For the province, these improvements translate into a stronger workforce, enhanced economic competitiveness, and a higher return on public investment in education.

PLAR is not simply a response to current pressures; it is a strategic mechanism that should have been leveraged more effectively in the past. Today's convergence of demographic, economic, and policy factors makes the adoption of a coordinated, learner-focused PLAR system both timely and essential. A centralized PLAR service offers a direct solution — reducing time-to-credential, lowering costs, and improving mobility across the college system. To make this vision a reality, we recommend the following actions:

### 1. Fund a Two-Year Pilot Led by ONCAT

Launch a pilot project, managed by ONCAT as the funding and governance hub, to build and test a centralized PLAR service model. The pilot will:

- Leverage OntarioLearn's existing infrastructure to minimize risk and accelerate implementation.
- Focus on 4–5 high-demand programs (e.g., trades, early childhood education, personal support worker, information technology) that already demonstrate PLAR activity.
- Include core features: a learner portal for PLAR information, shared assessment assets, a provincial credit bank, and a centralized assessor pool to ensure quality and consistency.
- Integrate with OCAS so learners see PLAR opportunities early in the application process.

### 2. Establish Clear Goals and Metrics

Define measurable outcomes to evaluate success:

- Reduction in PLAR processing time (target: 50% faster than current average).
- Increase in PLAR participation and credits awarded.
- Improvement in learner satisfaction and graduation rates.
- Operational savings and avoided duplication across participating colleges.

### 3. Build a Collaborative Governance Model

Form a steering committee with representation from:

- ONCAT (governance and accountability lead)
- OntarioLearn (technical and operational lead)
- Participating colleges
- OCAS
- Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security
- Employer and industry partners
- Equity and accessibility advocates

This group will oversee policy harmonization, quality assurance, and continuous improvement.

### 4. Engage Stakeholders and Promote Awareness

Develop a communications strategy to:

- Inform learners about PLAR opportunities at the application stage.
- Equip faculty and staff with training and resources.
- Highlight the benefits of PLAR to employers and community partners.

## Role-Specific Calls to Action

### For Postsecondary Leaders (e.g., VP Academic)

Champion the pilot at your institution. By participating in OntarioPLAR™, your college can lead the way in serving adult learners, improving retention, and accelerating credential completion.

### For ONCAT

Position the pilot as a natural extension of your mandate to improve learner mobility and recognition of prior learning. By integrating PLAR into ONCAT's learner mobility ecosystem, you can deliver on your Strategic Priorities 1 and 2: creating transparent pathways and a one-stop portal that empowers learners to build on what they already know.

### For MCURES

Support the pilot as a strategic investment in access, equity, and efficiency. Backing this initiative demonstrates a commitment to innovation and fiscal responsibility.

### For the Minister's Office

Endorse OntarioPLAR™ as a forward-looking solution that strengthens Ontario's workforce, reduces duplication, and positions the province as a national leader in recognizing prior learning.

## Conclusion: Ontario's Moment to Lead

Ontario's postsecondary system stands at a crossroads. The province's adult learners require faster, more affordable, and more transparent options to access postsecondary opportunities and earn postsecondary credentials. Without these opportunities, too many learners face unnecessary delays, higher costs, and lost opportunities for advancement. A centralized PLAR platform is essential to ensure that learners can leverage their existing skills and experience to achieve their educational and career goals.

The proposed two-year pilot, managed by ONCAT as the primary point of accountability, offers a practical and scalable way to deliver these benefits. By centralizing PLAR services, the pilot will provide learners with a clear, consistent process for earning credit for prior learning, reducing duplication, and accelerating time-to-credential. This approach will also enable institutions to share resources and streamline operations, while positioning Ontario as a national leader in recognizing prior learning.

OntarioPLAR™ offers a triple win:

- For learners: Faster, fairer recognition of prior learning, reducing costs and accelerating career advancement.
- For institutions: Streamlined processes, shared resources, and the ability to attract and retain adult learners.
- For the province: A more efficient, accountable education system that produces job-ready graduates quickly, strengthens the workforce, and maximizes public investment.

Ontario can either continue with fragmented and inefficient PLAR practices, or lead the nation with a centralized, technology-enabled system that accelerates skills recognition, strengthens our workforce, and drives economic growth. The tools, the talent, and the infrastructure already exist. What is needed now is the will to act.

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