

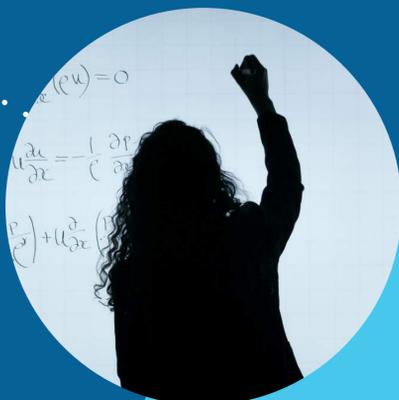


# Prior Learning Assessment in Ontario: an Online Scan of PLAR information for Ontario's 24 Publicly Funded Colleges

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## Introduction

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This report explores the on-line representation of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) information for Ontario's publicly funded colleges. PLAR, or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), is a process that considers an applicant's prior informal educational, life, and work experiences and weighs them against the learning outcomes of a formalized post-secondary credit (Bélanger & Mount, 1998)<sup>1</sup>. Students are given the opportunity, through a variety of potential assessments, to demonstrate equivalency between their experiential learning and the learning outcomes designated by the post-secondary course (or block of courses) for which they hope to gain formal recognition. PLAR is not new, having existed as an internationally recognized process for credit recognition both in the post-secondary sector and in private industry (Harris & Wihak, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. In addition, Indigenous Institutes have been very influential in the development of PLAR policy. Early support for the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), Canada's national voice on PLAR, by First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) was instrumental in its early establishment. Support for PLAR in Ontario has been stronger amongst the publicly funded colleges, as only a handful of universities accept PLAR credits (Harrison, 2018; Conrad 2010).

The goal of this report is to map out the representation of PLAR online through an exploration of publicly funded Ontario college PLAR web pages (if available) or alternative supporting digital documents (i.e. transfer or PLAR guides, policy documents) that describe key features of the PLAR process, such as first steps in application, fees, supports, assessment procedures, and method of credit recognition. While analyzing the content of these web pages, the following research questions guided the analysis:

- 1) What types of information are available about PLAR on college web pages?
- 2) How is PLAR conceptualized alongside Credit Transfer?

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1. Non-formal learning refers to courses and training taken outside of post-secondary institutions that do not result in formal credit, whereas informal learning refers to incidental experiential learning that happens outside of a structured course, through daily workplace experiences, self-study or community involvement.

2. Workplace-based tasks, like computer skills, or book-keeping and accounts payable are examples of the informal learning that is often considered for recognition in PLAR assessments.

## Literature Review

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As Ontario post-secondary institutions work towards building a more equitable, seamless, and efficient credit transfer and articulation system, the issue of how to recognize prior learning, in all its forms, is sure to commingle with formalized credit transfer more broadly. PLAR (also referred to as RPL<sup>3</sup>) has been conceptualized together with credit transfer, as both processes aim to help learners achieve credit for prior learning (Harrison, 2018). While the nature of that learning differs – formalized educational credits (credit transfer) versus informal learning characterized by life experiences often gained in spheres of employment (PLAR) – the outcome of the two processes is the same: receiving post-secondary credit. However, in Ontario the two processes are administered and resourced differently because they are funded and reported on separately. For example, in the 1990s the Ontario government directed 3 million dollars to each Ontario college to establish a PLAR facilitator position (Harrison, 2018). Unfortunately, PLAR funding is now part of the overall operational grants for institutions, so it is unclear how institutions are using government resources to support PLAR processes. While the Ministry of Colleges and Universities provides the Credit Transfer Institutional Grant (CTIG) which can be partly used towards advising services (Young, Piché & Jones, 2017), they make it clear that funds cannot be used for PLAR assessments (Ministry of Colleges and Universities, 2021). While some institutions may decide to use that funding to hire transfer advisors/officers whose job is to help students access and learn about available credit transfer opportunities, it is unclear whether these staff also handle PLAR duties. This matter is complicated by the fact that several institutions consider PLAR as a part of the credit transfer umbrella.

There has been interest in and support behind the scenes for PLAR for decades, tracing all the way back to the 1940s in the U.S., as colleges used to look at creating a link between training in the military and ways to account for that experience in college credit granting (Belanger & Mount, 1998). However, there has also been some resistance from degree granting universities, both in the U.S. and Canada, as they strive to preserve the integrity of their programs (Harrison 2018).

Despite this hesitance, colleges in Ontario and other proponents of PLAR have framed its emergence as a necessary step in promoting the transfer of experiences of underrepresented populations, like adult learners and certain immigrant groups, towards filling labour market positions, where a shortage of skills remain (Morrissey et al. 2008). However, despite the presence of qualified immigrants to Canada with credentials like Nursing from their country of origin, Andersson & Guo (2009) argue that less than 20% end up working in their former occupations as their credentials are not considered equivalent; instead of PLAR acting as a portal towards gaining credit equivalency and filling shortages in certain occupational sectors, they argue that it has functioned more as an institutional assessment tool, potentially acting as a disqualifying mechanism. Conrad (2010) argues that because PLAR requires a large time investment from faculty that it has not been fully adopted or considered a priority. For these reasons, and for a lack of a PLAR presence in Ontario universities, the current scan focuses on Ontario colleges.

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3. PLAR is most commonly used acronym in Canada for describing this process, RPL which is used in South Africa is also used, and in the U.S. PLA is used (Conrad, 2014).

## Methods

To undertake the scan of PLAR web pages, I referenced recent work in Ontario and BC, utilizing the same information categories used in those scans (Harrison 2018; Overton, 2019). I began the first scan of web pages using these categories, to assess their applicability with the Ontario context. Categories included: PLAR fee amounts, how PLAR is reflected on transcripts as well as available student resources for PLAR. Using best practices for assessing the ease and usefulness of credit transfer information on college websites conducted by researchers in the US (Schudde, Bradley & Absher, 2020)<sup>4</sup>, I undertook a second scan of the information recording patterns using NVIVO qualitative software. One of the themes that emerged, for example, reflected the lack of a designated web page for PLAR (6/24 institutions); for those institutions I had to refer to their online PLAR policy or student guide pdfs as the sole document for PLAR information. If an institution did not have a webpage for their PLAR information, I used the institutional search bar to recover any records, which could often be found on these separate documents. However, I stopped my search for relevant PLAR information if after 5 different searches, or clicks, the information was unattainable. In those cases, I coded a particular PLAR category as “information not available.”

## Findings: Overall Impressions

PLAR has been referred to as a “holistic” process, likely referring to the multiple goals that RPL hopes to provide for the applicant (Harrison, 2018). In addition to the primary purpose of the granting of credit for prior experiences, the assessment process itself, characterized by multiple modes of assessment, allows opportunities for adult learners to self-reflect, advocate on behalf of their prior experiences, and most importantly, validate their experiences as learners outside of formalized settings. This scan of Ontario college PLAR web pages demonstrates that Ontario colleges provide multiple ways for PLAR applicants to validate their learning, from the presence of learning portfolios to written or oral tests and interviews. In addition to these multiple assessment opportunities, the steps required for PLAR applicants are clearly outlined on the available web pages. There are exceptions, as 6 institutions did not provide steps, nor did they have designated PLAR web pages. While the cost for assessing a course via PLAR is not cheap, averaging around \$130, the opportunity to use PLAR for a good portion of a student’s college program is available, as most institutions allow up to 50 to 75% of program credits to undergo the PLAR process. However, the information for block assessment seems to be scant, as most institutions provide only information about course-specific PLAR. The process does seem lengthy and complicated as it could take up to 6 to 8 weeks for a decision; this could be problematic when students are required to withdraw from the course and potentially not be granted a credit if unsuccessful. It is also an issue with regards to OSAP funding as any PLAR course could compromise the funding that students receive from the government.

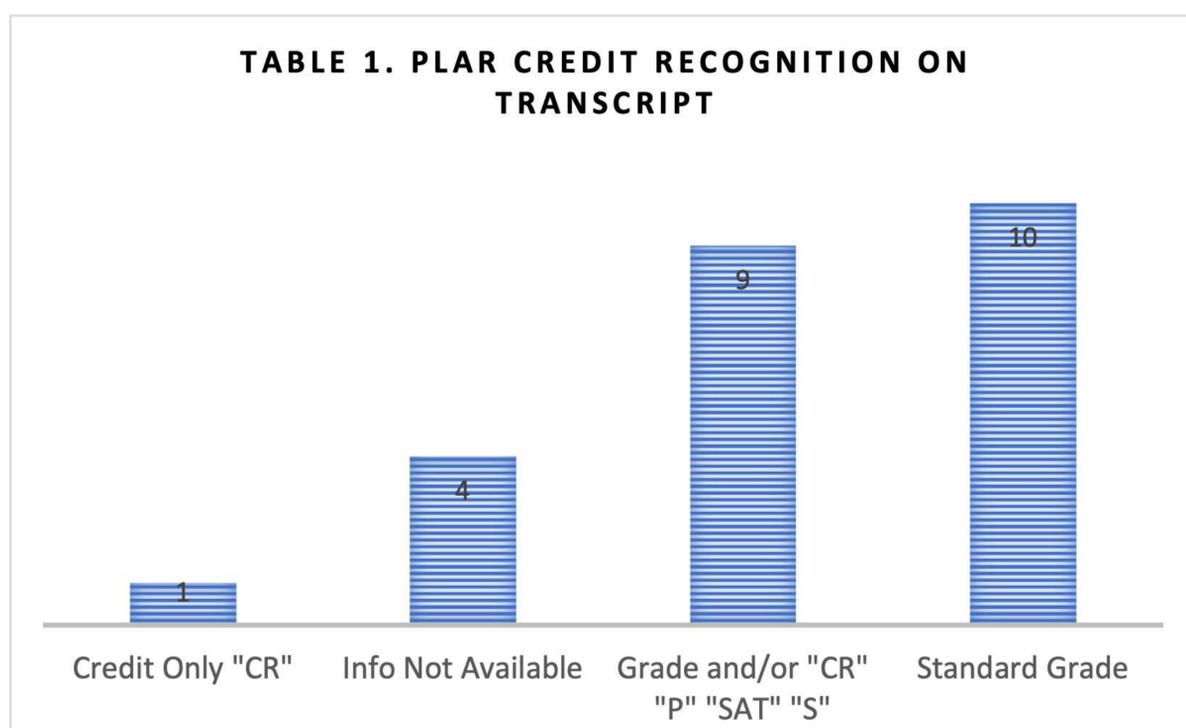
4. Schudde and colleagues assessed websites based on two metrics, ease of access and usefulness. The first looked at how many clicks were required to locate necessary information while the latter looked at the relevance of information and whether it was up to date.

## PLAR and Credit Transfer: Cohesion or Separate Entities?

Through conducting this scan of Ontario College PLAR websites, we can see examples of how PLAR and Credit Transfer fit together and also how they are entirely separate processes. For example, Canadore College provides a brief summary of PLAR on their transfer page, but one has to link to their PLAR Student Guide for more comprehensive information. While PLAR information is also found within the Transfer Guide, it is located as its own section entitled "Earn College Credit Through Life Experiences PLAR." In contrast, Sheridan, which also does not have a dedicated PLAR web page, includes PLAR as one of their credit transfer options on their pathways page. Of the institutions scanned, 6/24 colleges did not have their own designated PLAR webpages. Either a separate google search was required to find evidence of PLAR information embedded in other pages or policy documents, transfer guides, or the institutional home search function had to be utilized to produce the appropriate links. Other institutions, like Humber, in contrast, had their own PLAR webpage with much of the relevant information contained therein; the URL path shows the page embedded within the transfer options page which suggests that while the information and processes for PLAR are separate, it is still conceptualized as belonging to the credit transfer family.

## PLAR Credit Recognition and Acceptance Between Institutions

PLAR is closely connected to conventional credit transfer processes, thus making it important for institutions to explain how PLAR credit is recorded on transcripts, as well as their procedures for accepting the transfer of PLAR credits. However, none of the 24 Ontario colleges provide information online about how and whether PLAR credits from other institutions are accepted. This is concerning, given that the two processes, while different, are conceptualized in similar ways, as access points to gaining credentials. Thus, it would be critical for aligning credit transfer and PLAR to know under what conditions PLAR credits are transferable to other institutions. One encouraging trend discovered in this online scan is that 42% (10/24) of institutions reported assigning letter grades for PLAR credit in the same way they record credits for non-PLAR credits (see Table 1.). Additionally, a similar number (9/24) of institutions indicated that they assign letter grades and/or a "CR" "SAT" "S" or "P" designation<sup>5</sup>.

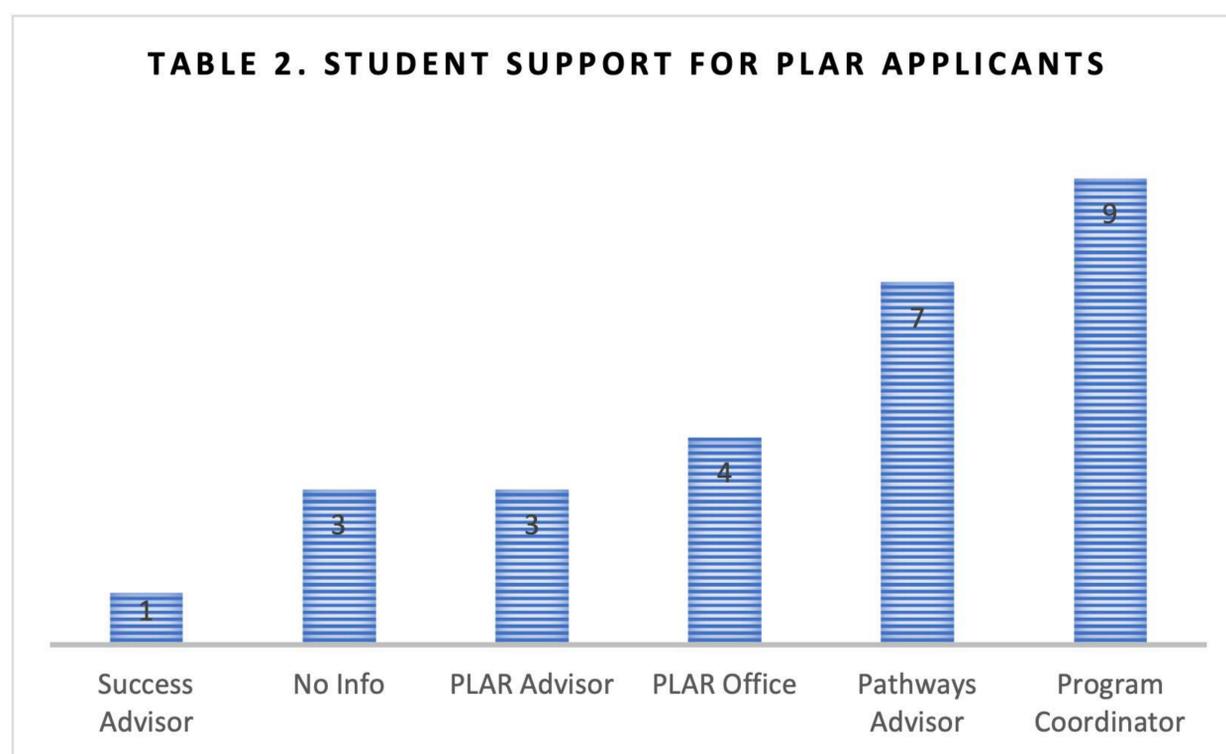


5. "CR" refers to "Credit"; "SAT" refers to "Satisfactory" and "P" refers to "Pass".

A single institution indicated that PLAR credits are recorded as a “CR” earned, while 4/24 institutions did not provide information regarding how PLAR credits are assigned credit on transcripts. Therefore, it seems that the 19/24 institutions who record PLAR grades in the same way as other courses, should technically be in a position to accept similarly graded PLAR credits from other colleges, given that the same grading conventions are used. However, they do not explicitly state whether this is the case, leaving questions as to whether PLAR credits can be transferred successfully between institutions in the same way as conventional credits. One potential obstacle worth investigating in future studies is the role of course outlines in credit equivalency decisions, and whether students transferring PLAR credits can submit the same course outlines for transfer credit as students that took the course. PLAR credits are assessed using other assessment criteria (i.e. portfolios, demonstrations) that may satisfy the learning outcomes of a course, but are not part of conventional course delivery.

## Student Supports for PLAR

Prior research has found that institutional stakeholders understand the effort and challenges that exist with the assessment and administration of PLAR credits, necessitating targeted investments in human resources to help support students through PLAR (Harrison, 2018). Thus, as part of this scan, I looked for the presence of PLAR support staff available to help students through the process (see Table 2). As expected, given the recurring theme of PLAR as one of a few potential transfer mechanisms, several of the cited supports for PLAR are phrased as broader “pathways” support, specifically citing the availability of pathways advisors (7/24), whose job it is to help shepherd PLAR students through the process. This cross pollination between advising duties is evident in the example of Fanshawe, who advise students to consult with their Pathways Advisor for PLAR information. Fanshawe was one of 7/24 institutions that directed students to a Pathways Advisor for PLAR information, while a select few referred students to specialized PLAR Advisors 3/24 or a PLAR Office 4/24. It would be interesting to know whether and to what extent transfer and ‘pathways’ advising duties cross pollinate with PLAR and precisely what is the role of a Pathways Advisor (7/24), particularly in those institutions that frame PLAR and credit transfer more closely together.



## Discussion

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This scan of Ontario college PLAR webpages has revealed that while information is not standardized across the sector, there are certain categories of information that are consistent across the 24 colleges analyzed in this report. For example, all but 4 of the colleges in Ontario provide information about credit award limits pertaining to PLAR credits. Most institutions also reported the cost of PLAR per credit, as well as outlining the steps required to successfully complete a PLAR. However, there were a handful of institutions (6/24) who did not have a designated PLAR webpage, instead offering policy documents, a few of which were dated and not easily accessible.

While there have been recent calls to better integrate PLAR with Credit Transfer (Harrison, 2018), there seems to be a lack of clarity with regards to what this integration may look like. In fact, 6/24 institutions' PLAR websites include information which frame PLAR as distinct from credit transfer. For example, on Mohawk College's PLAR webpage it clearly states: "Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) focuses on the evaluation of prior learning rather than the formal educational courses used in the academic transfer of credits or course exemptions." Here, a clear distinction is made between PLAR and credit transfer, whereas the distinction is less clear at other institutions. For example, at Northern College, information about PLAR is introduced on their website under the heading "Transfer Credit, Challenge Exams, and Prior Learning Assessments" giving the impression that PLAR is closely associated with transfer credit. Similarly, on the Sheridan page, PLAR is first located as part of one of the options for "Credit Transfer" with the explanation that: "Credit Transfer allows Sheridan students to apply previously acquired learning credits or workplace experience towards their current program of study." This type of framing arguably suggests that PLAR is a type of transfer – a transfer of experience versus the transfer of acquired learning credits. While all of these various ways of conceptualizing PLAR are true in some respects, this variegated way of conceptualizing PLAR may make it more difficult for the sector to achieve clarity on how these two processes can and do complement one another.

Future ONCAT research hopes to complement this type of web scan with interviews with PLAR practitioners at the institutions to understand more about how these online representations are carried out in practice. Are PLAR supports as readily available as they appear online? How seamless is the process for students? Are there many students who opt for PLAR? How is student support for PLAR funded? These questions are better answered through qualitative work that can probe more deeply and expand the surface impressions which are available through content analysis.

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