

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

An Update

September 1993

PLA defined

Support for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) depends, in part, on a shared understanding of what PLA is and what it is not. PLA is defined as **the assessment of knowledge and skills acquired through life experiences, work, and study not associated with formal education, and the relating of that prior learning to educational program objectives and to course or program credits.** PLA does not offer credit for experience, but it does produce credit for learning that has been responsibly assessed. For all professional educators this distinction is critical to ensure that the reputation of the institution awarding the credential is not jeopardized, and that students are receiving a credential with true value.

PLA need not be limited to a specific age group of clients, but it has demonstrated its worth for mature adults especially. Many adults in British Columbia and elsewhere need to improve their qualifications to meet new career demands or personal objectives. Their educational planning typically includes access to the post-secondary system, but they are often loath to accept institutional procedures and policies that they perceive to have been devised for much younger and less experienced students. Faced with competing demands on their time and finances, adult students want to achieve their objectives as effi-

ciently as possible. Rather than endure repetitions of what they already know, they wish to progress to new levels or domains of learning.

Institutions also have a concern for the efficient use of resources. With demand exceeding supply, they want to ensure that all available seats are being occupied by individuals who have a need for the learning provided, rather than by those who are just repeating known material to fulfill requirements for credits. Understandably, institutions are pleased to recruit mature, goal-oriented students who tend to achieve the most productive outcomes as a result of the college, institute or university experience. In British Columbia, it has become accepted practice for many institutions to provide challenge examinations and to accept 'advanced placement' courses for credit to facilitate the entry and progress of mature students.

Because growing numbers of adult students are seeking admission to public post-secondary education and training, institutions are being faced with the challenge of providing admission and program services appropriate to the needs and backgrounds of these older students. In an increasing number of institutions in North America, Europe and other jurisdictions, an important aspect of institutional responsiveness is the provision for Prior Learning Assessment (PLA).

Applications

The areas of human and social services are facing immediate demands for education as their delivery systems are substantially restructured.

Not surprisingly, many persons in colleges, universities, and government ministries are eager to proceed with PLA in these areas. With some funding from the Council, Beverly Miller — director of child, family and community

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studies at Douglas College — is working to develop a procedure and set of guidelines for PLA in the human services field. Miller is working with a team of program heads from her college, as well as representatives from the Human Service program articulation committee, the provincial Core Curriculum Project, and program advisory committees, including employers, the University of Victoria School of Child and Youth Care, and the Ministry of Advanced Education. Other areas expressing interest in PLA include business-related careers, education/training-related careers, and liberal arts.

The province is undergoing wrenching restructuring of the labour force at all levels. In the face of such change, many believe that the time has come to implement additional means of helping individuals build on their existing knowledge and skill base to acquire knowledge, skills, and credentials needed for alternate, emerging careers. Based on extensive discussions around the province, the British Columbia Human Resource Development Report specifically urged the provision of PLA in the post-secondary system.

Growing from the experience in the United States and increased interest in other countries, an international Council has emerged which provides considerable assistance to any new jurisdiction or institution considering PLA. Over many years, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has developed a statement of standards that is often accepted as the norm by systems and institutions embarking on a PLA program. (Page 4). The clear emphasis in the CAEL is that the service must be readily available to qualified adults, but must never compromise the quality and credibility of the credential being awarded.

More information

Institutions or program areas wishing to proceed with aspects of PLA are invited to contact the Council office for references to resource materials and persons.

Institutions see value

Most institutions have discovered that the investment of time and care in the establishment of PLA procedures, including credible assessment techniques, yields appropriate returns. Examples of use abound in both small and large colleges and universities. Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington, advises about 70 PLA applicants per year. Some of these earn credit through course challenge, or standardized (CLEP) exams. About 10 per year will complete a detailed portfolio, and others will determine that PLA does not apply to their situation.

Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ontario, after some years' experience, now responds to more than 1,000 PLA inquiries per year. Of these, 300 will probably submit portfolios for assessment, and an additional 300 will write challenge exams. The others will be counselled to pursue other educational plans. Each term, the college offers one section of a portfolio development course, typically for those who plan to seek assessment for a number of courses comprising a major portion of a program.

The University of Maryland offers a two-hour orientation seminar twice a month and 100 to 130 of the participants per semester register in a portfolio development course. Because of this pre-selection process, most students completing the portfolio development are eligible for some credit, the average number of credits earned being 18.

Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, has offered PLA since the mid-1970s. They report that during the decade of the 1980s, more than 3,500 students took portfolio development courses, of whom 72 per cent were between the ages 26 and 45. More than 5,000 portfolios assessed since 1980 produced from three to 76 credits per individual, with a mean of 12 credit hours. The divisions making the greatest use of the service are allied health, business, engineering, liberal arts, sciences and, to a lesser extent, fine and performing arts.

Council initiatives for the B.C. system

In the spring of 1993, the Council on Admissions and Transfer circulated a discussion paper about Prior Learning Assessment, providing some basic definitions and suggesting some of the substantive issues to be considered. In April, a workshop involving more than 80 participants from throughout the British Columbia post-secondary system and some resource persons experienced in PLA, met to discuss the issues raised in the paper and to present their advice regarding appropriate next steps. At the conclusion of the workshop, 57 participants produced the following responses to the questions posed:

1. Should credit be granted in our public post-secondary system through the assessment of LEARNING achieved outside the formal education system?
Yes - 96.5 per cent No - 3.5 per cent
2. Is this the time for British Columbia to develop and implement a more comprehensive PLA service?
Yes - 98 per cent No - 2 per cent
3. Should all institutions in the British Columbia public post-secondary system accept for transfer PLA credits awarded by another British Columbia public institution on the same basis as credits earned through regular, formal instruction?
Yes - 92.7 per cent No - 7.3 per cent
4. Students who successfully complete some credits through PLA should be treated as continuing students when they seek admission to subsequent courses.
Agree - 76 per cent Disagree - 24 per cent

Participants' comments elaborated on these responses and frequently emphasized their interest in proceeding with the development of PLA. Subsequent discussions have confirmed this consensus. In June, 1993, meetings with college and institute instructional officers, education support officials, deans and directors of career and acad-

emic programs have supported the continuation of development work for PLA.

When asked what system of organization of PLA would be most appropriate to develop in British Columbia, 70 per cent of those responding to the workshop questionnaire chose a system-wide service combined with institution delivery. Subsequent meetings with both institutional and system personnel have reinforced the choice of this model, which Ontario has already selected. For the service to be most accessible and relevant, institutions throughout British Columbia should be the points of entry for PLA but, for reasons of consistency and efficiency, there should also be a system involvement.

The discussions around this issue serve to reinforce the involvement of the Council on Admissions and Transfer. A system-wide service sharing standards, policies and guidelines is essential if the objective of transferability of credit — identified as desirable by workshop participants — is to be achieved. Any responsible institution will want to be satisfied that credit awarded elsewhere has been subjected to reliable and valid assessment. The assurance that other institutions are adhering to agreed standards certainly facilitates the granting of transfer.

A system-wide service can be very helpful, especially in the implementation phases. The education, training and orientation of faculty, counsellors and administrators who will be most directly concerned with PLA can be initiated most effectively and efficiently system-wide. Materials and procedures can also be made available for regional and institutional applications. The development of sound assessments and portfolio development, and evaluation of structured courses and programs offered outside the public system can all be facilitated by province-wide services.

It is not essential that all institutions participate initially in the delivery of PLA service. However, those who do should provide some consistency of response to clients and work collaboratively to bring about the greatest effect with the most efficient use of time and resources.

Plan for development

At its June meeting, the Council on Admissions and Transfer adopted the following plan for proceeding with system-wide development of PLA:

1. Establish a standing committee to advise the Council on implementation of PLA in British Columbia including issues related to guidelines, training, and pilot projects.
2. Provide for the system and for participating institutions standards, guidelines, and policies for PLA implementation, and leadership in providing training.
3. Submit a proposal for supplementary funding from the Innovations Fund to support the system-wide aspects of PLA.
4. Fund one or more pilot projects as resources permit.
5. Develop a strategy for research and monitoring of PLA within the post-secondary system.
6. Provide a second workshop on PLA to discuss system PLA implementation issues, tentatively scheduled for March 18, 1994.

Committee members

The following persons have agreed to serve on a standing committee on PLA. This committee will be meeting to develop proposed standards, guidelines, and policies and to advise on implementation of PLA in British Columbia:

Council members:

Susan Witter (Chair), UCFV;
Richard Vedan, VCC;
Dennis Macknak, UNBC;
Grant Fisher, Co-Chair and Executive Director.

Institution members:

Bob Brown, Camosun College;
Roy Ferguson, UVic;
Norma Macovi, OLA;
Bev Miller, Douglas College;
Gary Morrison, Northwest CC;
Bob Will, UBC.

Ten standards for quality assurance in assessing learning for credit

Academic standards

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

Administrative standards

6. Credit awards and the transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

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