

# PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Update, May 1994

## Encouraging signs

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) developments in the British Columbia post-secondary system are encouraging. Approximately 85 representatives from universities, colleges and institutes participated in a March workshop in Richmond, sharing experiences and perspectives related to PLA.

As dialogue continues, definitions and policies become clarified. The March workshop adopted the following definition for PLA as it is being applied in British Columbia:

*PLA is assessment by some valid and reliable means, by a qualified specialist, of what has been learned through non-formal education/training or experience, that is worthy of credit in a course or program offered by the institution providing the credit.*

The Council's standing committee on Prior Learning Assessment continues to advocate a service that is institution- and program-based but that has system-wide co-ordination. Because students are best served by PLA which is integrated with other support services and with instructional programs, it should occur within the institution offering the credit. Students need opportunities for assessment of learning achieved; for clarification of suitable educational and career goals; and access to learning opportunities which are most helpful in achieving their goals. Individual institutions and programs will often choose to develop co-operative and collaborative ways of delivering these services so as to realize efficiencies or to provide a more comprehensive and effective service within available resources, and the Council is committed to facilitating such collaboration. Those involved in current pilot projects have enjoyed and benefited from the sharing of experience with their colleagues in other institutions and programs.

## Current projects

Faculty in Human Services areas at Malaspina University College, Douglas College, and the University of Victoria have been developing innovative curricula and methods of instruction which facilitate progression from certificates to diplomas to degrees, and which give credit for learning that has occurred experientially or in other training settings. At Malaspina University College, Lori Goodwin with Home Support/Residential Care programs, and Paul Best with the Community Support Worker program, are complementing the training provided by employers and enabling employees to pursue their professional and career goals.

Carol Ebner at Douglas College has led a team developing a portfolio course for students requesting PLA in

Human Services fields, and is co-operating with faculty from the University College of the Fraser Valley and the Open Learning Agency (OLA) in the development of a portfolio course and handbooks which explain PLA procedures. These PLA developments are closely related to the development of integrated and ladder curriculum and delivery strategies.

Douglas College is also developing a project involving PLA for employees of a large provincial care institution which is in the process of downsizing.

Faculty in post-secondary institutions will also make use of PLA in their own career progression plans. Douglas College will provide opportunities for PLA within their *Teaching Excellence Program* by which new faculty will qualify for an instructional credential. The possibility of such a credential then laddering into a new Adult Education Degree at UCFV is being considered. Ron Coreau at UCFV has included provision for up to 30 PLA credits in the proposal for a new B.A. program in adult education.

## What will happen next?

Among the roles which workshop participants anticipate in PLA are: co-ordinating/administering PLA services at their institutions; assessing portfolios for credit; counselling/advising mature students; developing challenge exams; designing and delivering portfolio development courses or seminars; monitoring and evaluating the results of PLA; and a number of other related tasks.

A majority of those at the workshop said that they needed access to some additional education/training related to PLA and would value additional one- or two-day workshops and access to sample manuals and materials. Some education is seen as urgent by those who are ready to proceed, especially in the specific skills of portfolio assessment. Others noted that we should target May-June in 1995 for an intensive training experience. They also suggested that funding for such training should be shared among the institutions, the staff professional development funds, the government and the Council. They also urged the Council to maintain a system co-ordination role on PLA development and training.

The PLA Steering Committee, chaired by Susan Witter from UCFV, intends to continue providing leadership in training, in co-ordination, and in supplying materials and information as resources permit. Help is available from the Council, from the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and from workshops in other jurisdictions. Any post-secondary institution or program wishing to establish PLA should give first priority to gaining some knowledge of the resources available.

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## PLA standards and implementation guidelines

THE Council on Admissions and Transfers has formally approved a statement of Standards and Implementation Guidelines and recommends that post-secondary institutions and programs adopt them in their own planning and policy development.

The Standards and Guidelines, which have been developed by the Standing Committee on PLA, are based on those developed over the years by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). Last fall, all British Columbia post-

secondary institutions were invited to review and comment on the standards, subsequent revisions were made, and the Standards and Guidelines were reviewed in detail at the March workshop. Based on the workshop responses, the committee again revised the statements for presentation to the Council. At its April meeting, the Council formally adopted the statements as they appear in this publication. The Council suggests that in 1996 these be reviewed in light of experience to that date.

### PLA standards

#### Education standards

1. Credit should be awarded only for demonstrated learning and not for experience.
2. Credit should be awarded only for learning which is relevant to the content and learning outcomes of the course or program to which the credit is being applied.
3. Credit should be awarded for learning which is consistent with the achievement levels required by the post-secondary credential to be awarded.
4. Credit should be awarded for learning which has both the theory and practical applications which are appropriate to the subject, course or program.
5. The assessment of prior learning and the determination of credit awards should be made by content specialists, with external advice as necessary.

#### Administrative standards

6. Credits awarded as a result of PLA should be identified as such on the transcript issued by the institution.
7. Credit awards and the transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving PLA credits and other credits for the same learning.
8. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed.

9. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
10. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development in areas related to PLA.
11. PLA policies and practices should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed.

### PLA implementation guidelines

#### PLA context

1. PLA should occur within the broader context of education, career, or life planning.
2. Institutions should provide adequate support services for those learners accessing PLA.
3. PLA courses and assessment services should be offered only in the language of instruction of the institution granting the credit. Supplementary language instruction may occur prior to, or concurrent with, the PLA portfolio development.
4. The ongoing development and monitoring of PLA services should involve external representatives from groups such as business, industry, licensing and accrediting bodies and professional associations.

## PLA access

1. PLA should be considered as a vehicle for enhancing access to education/training. Where possible, orientation or portfolio development courses should be offered at employment sites.
2. PLA should be developed first for those programs where the labour market demand or learner need has been identified, and institutional readiness and capacity are evident.
3. Ultimately, as PLA credibility is established and adequate assessment procedures and supporting resources are in place, the goal should be to provide PLA access to the most comprehensive range of programs to accommodate the broad range of prior learning.

## PLA assessment

1. Learning assessed for post-secondary credit should be:
  - defined in terms of what was learned and what the person can do as a result, rather than the amount of time spent;
  - transferable to contexts other than the one in which it was learned;
  - current;
  - at a level of achievement equivalent to that of other students engaged in studies at that level in that program/subject area.
2. The number of credits to be granted is determined by the institution, following assessment of the learning by content specialists.
3. The names and qualifications of those making an assessment should be recorded.

## Client orientation/preparation

1. Persons seeking credit through PLA should start with an adequate orientation to the process. This may occur in two phases — a short orientation seminar, followed, for some, by a more comprehensive course in education/career planning of which PLA is a major component.

## Training of PLA personnel

1. All personnel involved in PLA (PLA assessors, student advisers, instructors of portfolio development/career/educational planning courses) should have appropriate skills and knowledge

acquired through either the completion of courses which fulfill system specifications, or demonstration of equivalent learning from other sources.

## Fee assessment

1. Costs of conducting PLA should be assessed in ways that are equitable to the students as consumers and to the specialist assessors and the institution as providers.
2. Fees for assessment should be set in terms of the learning to be assessed, and the amount of credit requested. Fees should not be set in terms of the number of credits awarded.
3. Fees for a portfolio development course or seminar should be set within the institution's policy for course fees.

## Transcripts/transfer

1. Transcripts should identify credits awarded through PLA. Grades should be assigned to credits awarded through PLA consistent with the grading policy applied to conventional courses in that area.
2. The transferability of credit for PLA courses should be determined within the context of the articulation process and institutional admissions policies. Prejudicial judgment and decision against credit awarded by PLA should be discouraged.
3. The assessment of transcripts and credentials from offshore institutions is not considered part of the current PLA program, but an individual preparing a portfolio may include these as evidence of learning which is believed to be relevant to the program for which credit is being requested.
4. The percentage of a program's credits which can be obtained through PLA should be determined by the institution awarding the credential.

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Report prepared by Lloyd Morin

## An institutional PLA policy statement

One role of the Council is to facilitate the sharing of experience among post-secondary institutions in the province. The board of the University College of the Fraser Valley recently adopted the following as its statement of policy and guidelines related to PLA.

### Definition

Prior Learning Assessment is defined as a method which may be used to evaluate learning and grant credits to adults who have documented or demonstrated by some valid means that they have achieved a level of learning equivalent to that which would normally be acquired through formal study in the public post-secondary system. PLA may be used to evaluate knowledge, skills and competencies obtained outside the formal post-secondary system, and which may have been acquired through work experience, independent reading, hobbies, volunteer work, informal and non-formal learning, travel, or artistic pursuits. PLA may be used to relate that prior learning to the educational goal pursued by the learner.

### Policy

UCFV recognizes that adult learners acquire knowledge and skills through life and work experience. Through Prior Learning Assessment, UCFV will assess this knowledge and skills and will grant credits for the learning that took place.

### Guidelines

Applicants requesting PLA must be admitted to a certificate, diploma or degree program before PLA will proceed.

All learners considering PLA will participate in a course designed to prepare them for the Prior Learning Assessment.

The learner has the primary responsibility for preparing the evidence that college-creditable learning has taken place and that it contributes to an appropriate balance of theory and practical application.

UCFV will award credit only for prior learning which is documented in a portfolio and which is at college level. This process challenges learners to claim and articulate their knowledge, skills, abilities and values based on documentation that describes learning or provides evidence of learning on a course-by-course basis.

The portfolio should demonstrate to the assessor that the learner meets the course objectives or learning outcomes of the particular course for which she/he is seeking credit.

The portfolio will include:

- a) a chronological record detailing significant activities including work experience, volunteer experience, and non-formal learning;
- b) a paper detailing educational and career goals;
- c) a description of competencies, knowledge and skills;
- d) documentation materials such as job descriptions, performance appraisals, transcripts, samples of work, testimonials, certificates of attendance, previous credentials and awards;

- e) a narrative that will convey to the assessor that the learner has the knowledge applicable to the course description under assessment;
- f) other materials that document evidence of the learner's knowledge of the assessed subject area.

Challenge examinations rather than portfolio assessment are most appropriate to determine credit for courses that are highly theoretical. However, students should prepare a portfolio so that their prior learning may be evaluated against the course requirements. If the Faculty Assessor agrees that there is some similarity, then the student would be encouraged to request a challenge examination.

Learners who receive an unfavourable decision from the Faculty Assessor will have access to UCFV's appeal process.

Prior learning will be assessed only by faculty who have expertise in the area to be assessed.

The Faculty Assessor will be responsible for ensuring that the documentation provided by the learner supports the claim for credit. If the assessor believes that the knowledge the learner has demonstrated is sufficient and appropriate for each course the learner has specified, the recommendation will be that credit be awarded.

The courses for which credit is given will use the same grading scheme as similar courses taught on a scheduled basis.

UCFV will award credit for prior learning which is directly applicable to the UCFV program to which the student has been admitted. Credit awarded will not necessarily be transferred to other degree programs or institutions.

The student's transcript will show that credit has been earned through PLA.

Normally, no more than twenty-five per cent (25%) of the credits required in a program will be awarded for prior learning.

## PLA professional development

Anyone attending a workshop or training session in PLA — perhaps in Ontario, the United States or Europe — is encouraged to provide reports and materials for sharing with colleagues in the British Columbia system.

The Council will receive any such reports and materials and make them available to others as requested.

We have received information about the Annual PLA Conference in Belleville, Ontario from May 25 to 27, with pre-conference workshops on May 24. Anyone interested in attending the conference can call registrar Susan Maracle at (613) 396-2122 or 1-800-267-0637.

The Council is compiling an inventory of resource persons for training in British Columbia. If you have attended a session in which you met a particularly capable resource person, please call us at (604) 356-7656.