



# Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Framework for Nurse Practitioner Education and Regulation in Canada

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This document was prepared as part of the broader objective of the Canadian Nurse Practitioner Initiative (CNPI), which is to develop a pan-Canadian framework to promote the sustained integration of the role of the NP in health care across Canada.

Over the past 30 years, the application of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) principles and processes in Canada and elsewhere has been steadily evolving. Many post-secondary institutions in Canada now routinely support PLAR processes to facilitate access to educational programs. PLAR is also used by employers, regulators and others to give credit or recognition for prior learning.

Despite growing acceptance of the benefits of PLAR, considerable variation exists across Canada regarding the use of PLAR in the education and regulation of NPs. For example, not all NP educational programs offer access to PLAR and those that do differ considerably in their approach. Furthermore, regulatory bodies responsible for NP licensure or registration have varying approaches to PLAR. This lack of consistency in the application and use of PLAR processes presents a potential barrier to NPs and nurses wishing to become NPs across Canada. Students considering entry to NP educational programs may be discouraged from applying if there is no provision for recognizing prior learning or if they are uncertain about how the PLAR process is applied. Similarly, registered nurses (RNs) with experience working in extended/expanded roles or NPs who may wish to practice in another jurisdiction may become frustrated without a formal process to have their competencies recognized. PLAR offers a means of obtaining formal recognition for their prior learning.

Greater consistency in the use of PLAR both by Canadian NP educational programs and regulators supports the goal of sustained integration of the role of NP in Canada's health system by facilitating access to NP education and licensure. As efforts to achieve a more coordinated pan-Canadian approach for the NP role gain momentum, NP educators and regulators will need to examine ways of harmonizing their approaches to PLAR. The adoption of the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Framework for Nurse Practitioner Education and Regulation in Canada, referred to as the Framework, would help facilitate that process.

This document provides an overview of the current state and proposed application of PLAR in NP education and regulation across Canada. Section 1 provides a brief introduction. Section 2 provides a summary of the literature overview on PLAR. Section 3 presents a summary of PLAR-related findings from consultations held with stakeholders throughout the CNPI process. Section 4 presents a brief discussion of PLAR as it is currently used in the education and regulation of NPs in Canada. Section 5 presents a PLAR framework that is designed to be used in the education and regulation of NPs in Canada.

## 2. SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

In a review conducted by the Education Component of CNPI, no literature was found that directly addressed Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition with reference to NP education. Therefore a broader range of literature was used.

There is no single uniform definition of PLAR in the literature although virtually all definitions embrace the concept of “credit” or “recognition” for prior learning (RPL). Indeed, although the terms PLAR and PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) are commonly used in Canada, their use is by no means universal. For example, Day (2001) noted that in the U.K. ‘accreditation for prior learning’ or APL is the general term used.

In a cross-Canada study, Aarts et al. (1999) described PLAR as “*a process of identifying and measuring learning acquired outside known public educational institutions for recognition through academic credit*”. Kennedy (2003) outlined a more specific definition of PLAR for a snapshot of the use of PLAR in Canada’s public post-secondary institutions:

*All the processes (advising, assessment, evaluation, transcription) associated with informal learning acquired by adults through employment, on-the-job training, volunteer work, independent study, military service, credit for workplace training and other life experiences, which are evaluated against the learning outcomes of a program or course through the use of a challenge test, demonstration, case study, or portfolio assessment. (p.6)*

Other definitions can also be found. For example, the online community of practice Recognition for Learning defines PLAR as “*a systematic process which uses a variety of tools to help learners reflect on, identify, articulate, and demonstrate learning for the purpose of gaining recognition by educational institutions, workplaces, credentialing organizations, regulatory bodies and others.*”<sup>1</sup> In a report for the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), Day defined PLAR as “*a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values).*”<sup>2</sup> The University of Saskatchewan describes PLAR as “*a systematic process to evaluate and give credit for learning that takes place outside formal educational institutions*”.<sup>3</sup> Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) defines PLAR as “*the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of competencies that have been acquired through many means of formal and informal learning*”.<sup>4</sup> HRDC underscores three important assumptions about PLAR, namely:

- Significant learning can and does take place outside the classroom;
- Such learning can and should be evaluated for credit by educational institutions and by the workplace for hiring and promotion; and,

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved Jan. 30, 2006 from <http://recognitionforlearning.ca/practitioner/aboutPLAR.php>

<sup>2</sup> Day, Malcolm, 2000, *Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, Practical Perspectives*, Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved Nov. 18, 2005 from <http://www.extension.usask.ca/ExtensionDivision/resources/PLAR/defns.html>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved Nov. 18, 2005 from [www.globalx.net/hrd/plar](http://www.globalx.net/hrd/plar)

- Education and training practices that force adults to repeat learning that they have already acquired are inefficient, costly and unnecessary.

Common to all these definitions is the key notion that PLAR recognizes and gives credit for prior learning. An important distinction is that it is the learning that counts not the experience i.e. experience alone does not guarantee learning.

There are two aspects to the recognition of previously acquired knowledge and experience; one is at an institutional level and one is at an individual level (CAETO, 2003b). At an institutional level there is a need for systems of credit and transferability between programs – also called articulation. This involves a comparison of course outcomes including block transfer of credits from one institution to another, or individual credit transfer for specific courses in a given credential program (CAETO, 2003b). At an individual level, recognition of prior learning is done using PLAR processes. In theory, PLAR in its broadest sense refers to all learning that has occurred in the past. In practice, many institutions make a distinction between learning obtained through formal study and learning that has been acquired through experience (CAETO, 2003b). PLAR provides a process for assessment of competence and of non-traditional learning by providing a way to document a connection between the sources and outcomes of learning (CAETO, 2003b).

The benefits of PLAR are well documented but implementation presents many challenges. For example, Aarts et al. (1999) suggested that most learning exists below the surface (as in an iceberg) and, therefore, it is difficult to identify, assess, and recognize this learning. Within the educational context, PLAR policies and practices must take into consideration the needs and concerns of institutions, educators, and students. A PLAR process must be fair and equitable to students and at the same time it must be credible and acceptable to the institution (Esson et al., 2002).

PLAR is not a new concept. It has been noted, for example, that PLAR has been practised in Canadian universities, such as Queen's and Laurentian, for more than 30 years (Day, 2001). Processes for prior learning assessment originated in the U.S. in the early 1970's (Howard, 1993; Day, 2001). The impetus for giving credit for prior learning at that time was related to active recruitment of older entrants to colleges where it was also important that academic standards not be compromised. In the U.S. the reasons cited for attention to PLA included financial constraints; political desire to increase access to higher education for a greater number of students; the need to attract mature students by allowing students to complete courses in a shorter time and at a lower per capita cost; the need to retrain for existing and new jobs in a time of economic recession and rising redundancy rates; and an evolving philosophy valuing both experience and self-direction for the student (Howard, 1993).

Influences on the development of PLAR in Canada have been closely related to the international flow of students, international migration and refugee movements, academic mobility and international research collaboration (CAETO, 2003a). In addition, information and communication technologies have advanced and higher education systems have expanded with changes in education and training methods leading to a greater need for the development of

methods to recognize knowledge and experience acquired in a different jurisdiction (CAETO, 2003a).

In a cross-Canada study on PLAR (1999), Aart et al. described the student users of PLAR processes. Most PLAR student users were mature adults. Nationally, 52% of PLAR students were over 30 years of age with 12% over the age of 45. The average age of PLAR student users was 33 years compared to 27 years for traditional students. The older age allowed for more time to acquire knowledge and skills through work and life experience. These students wanted to complete their training programs in the most efficient way, avoiding unnecessary repetition of training, reducing course load, and freeing up time for other courses. Many were motivated by the need to obtain or upgrade their credentials for employment purposes and used PLAR to confirm existing work-related knowledge and skills, to obtain credentials required by changing job standards, and to plan for future job uncertainty. Almost all of the students surveyed used PLAR in the first year of their program; 63% were part-time and 37% were full-time students.

Aart et al. (1999) showed evidence that the students who used PLAR processes had successful learning outcomes. In fact, the overall passing grade in courses acquired through PLAR was slightly higher than in traditional courses. Students who had accessed the PLAR process had overall academic performances equal to or higher than traditional students in the same programs. Early concerns about learners acquiring large percentages of their credentials through PLAR, thereby jeopardizing the legitimacy of those credentials, were unrealized.

Introducing PLAR processes presents many institutional challenges. Aart et al. (1999) noted that the difficulties of implementing a flexible tool in an inflexible system may be at the root of PLAR's growing pains. There are tensions within educational institutions and among various types of educational organizations, business, trade unions, and equity groups related to how PLAR is defined and implemented (Day, 2001). Kennedy (2003) found that although respondents to a PLAR survey believed in the credibility of the process and that students benefited from PLAR, there was a lack of institutional support. In some cases there was faculty resistance to the fundamental purposes of PLAR. Some survey respondents reported that the policies currently in place require some clarification because they sometimes lead to confusion and inconsistencies in PLAR implementation.

At least one study points to a difference in PLAR implementation between colleges and universities. Kennedy (2003) noted that while there is a gap between the existence of a formal PLAR policy in universities (31%) and the existence of a policy for admission of adult learners into specific programs (69%), this gap does not exist in colleges. Colleges appear to be more positive about the implementation of PLAR policies. At universities there is more skepticism and concern that using PLAR will negatively impact the value of a degree as well as the reputation of the institution. Some survey respondents from universities also perceived the PLAR processes to lack credibility.

There is some speculation that it is the nature of university education or the lack of understanding of the rigour associated with the PLAR process that causes this unease. Survey respondents noted that universities in general have goals that focus on research, in addition to education and

that colleges are more focused on educating students in a manner that will help them with their particular line of work. Thus, the assessment of experiential learning is seen as being much more compatible with goals of a college than goals of a university. Since most respondents seem to believe that ‘policy drives application’, adoption of formal PLAR policies might help more systematic, broader implementation of PLAR practices in universities (Kennedy, p. 60).

The use of PLAR also presents challenges to the individual student. Aart et al. (1999) noted that successful use of PLAR processes, resulting in the lowering of the number of classes required, can reduce students’ status from full-time to part-time thus eliminating student eligibility for government-funded financial assistance. Some institutions had financial disincentives that required students to pay PLAR assessment fees in addition to tuition for the courses in which they were being assessed – particularly when students paid by program rather than by individual course fee. A rigid ‘lock step’ program delivery structure that required full-time attendance and limited class scheduling also impaired students’ ability to benefit from PLAR (Aart et al. 1999). In addition, the PLAR process could be lengthy and time-consuming for both the student and the PLAR assessor (Esson, 2002). Aart et al. noted that the ways of demonstrating prior learning included portfolios, oral examinations, interviews, written challenge exams, and observation of work performance.

The advantages of using a PLAR process were outlined in the literature. PLAR provided important efficiencies to adult learners including shortening the program, reducing course load, and saving money for part-time learners (Howard, 1993; Aart et al. 1999). PLAR also reduced the pressure on mature adults by keeping the time away from work and family responsibilities to a minimum (Aart et al.) and enabled the students to focus on specifically needed or desired learning (Howard, 1993). PLAR increased adult learners’ confidence in their ability to learn and motivated them to pursue further education at the same time as contributing to many learners’ employability and providing an increased pool of qualified professionals for employers (Aart et al.). Students became more self-directed in their learning, developing stronger problem-solving and negotiating skills (Howard, 1993). PLAR is also viewed as a catalyst for other educational reforms including diversification of assessment practices and expansion of a learning outcomes approach to training and education (Aart et al.). Institutions may also benefit by a reduction in per capita costs due to the faster throughput of students (Howard, 1993).

Some of the disadvantages of PLAR were also outlined in the literature. Howard (1993) expressed concern that PLAR has the potential to move the focus of learning from the process to the product. If PLAR is not properly implemented, “it will become a ‘cut price’ approach to education, with all the connotations associated with that phrase, of sub-standard goods with limited market value” (Howard, p. 1822). As mentioned previously, universities had issues with PLAR’s potential impact on the credibility of the degrees offered by their schools, and both colleges and universities had issues related to faculty resistance to the process (Kennedy, 2003).

Kennedy (2003) suggested that the top disincentive for implementation of PLAR processes was the cost of the loss of revenue that occurred because students were able to obtain credit for courses for which they did not have to pay tuition. In addition, the need for increased numbers of



personnel to tackle the additional work associated with PLAR caused difficulties for institutions (Kennedy). Some of the costs related to PLAR included:

- Co-ordinating and delivering faculty and staff professional development;
- PLAR marketing within institutions and with workplaces and other external community organizations;
- Liaison with assessors and program managers;
- Conducting (assessor) training in learning outcomes;
- PLAR co-ordination with other institutions;
- Participation in internal and provincial policy development;
- PLAR record-keeping and other administrative duties;
- Conducting PLAR orientation for learners;
- Providing information on PLAR to students; and
- Conducting research (Aart et al. 1999, p. 46).

The number of completed PLAR assessments was considered to be low in the 1999 cross-Canada study of PLAR (Aart et al. 1999). This low number was likely due to a combination of factors including institutional reasons such as: “incomplete record-keeping, lack of awareness of PLAR by the public, lack of cost-effective delivery structures, low priority-setting by government and institutions and inflexible program delivery systems that do not accommodate part-time learners” (p. 27). At the time of the study, there was a low demand for PLAR assessments and most institutions were in the developmental stages of PLAR, focusing more on design and pilot projects than volume of assessments (Aart et al.). In 2003, Kennedy reported that more than half of the schools within colleges and universities used informal PLAR practices the previous year, noting that at universities more informal than formal policies were used. Kennedy suggested that since only 21% of the universities indicated they had future plans for PLAR policy implementation this was an area that should be explored in further detail. The only NP reference in the list of institutions that used PLAR in the 2003 report on the status of PLAR in post-secondary institutions in Canada was the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association PLAR committee, which developed a framework for a competence assessment process for nurses seeking licensure as NPs in Saskatchewan (Kennedy, 2003). However, Cragg et al. (2002) noted the use of PLAR in the Ontario NP educational experience, stating that a PLAR process was required by the government to allow NPs already in practice to challenge all or part of the program. Thus, a province-wide set of criteria and process were developed to assess portfolios submitted by NPs seeking credit in the program.

It is useful to review the suggestions and recommendations associated with PLAR in the literature. Kennedy (2003) identified four major areas for improvement related to PLAR in institutions. These were: funding, dedicated staff, implementation of a policy, and institutional support. These four areas were consistent between both colleges and universities. In addition, a need for increased information and promotion of PLAR processes and procedures was cited. Individuals involved as PLAR assessors suggested that the notion of self-assessment be incorporated more broadly into programming. Other suggestions included general policies to better complement PLAR processes thus increasing equity with respect to fees and establishing criteria for assessment based on learning outcomes (Kennedy, 2003). It has been suggested that

the legal framework and mechanisms for quality assurance related to PLAR must be established along with broadly agreed upon techniques for measuring and evaluating competence (CAETO, 2003a). It has also been suggested that there is a need to develop national benchmarks to guide the practice of PLAR. “By providing provincially agreed national benchmarks for best practice, the expectations of learners and the responsibility of those who conduct PLAR assessment can be clarified, and issues such as currency and portability of credentials can be addressed” (Day, 2001, p. 38).

The literature leads to the conclusion that more consistent PLAR processes will need to be established to grant credit for prior learning for the purposes of NP education and regulation. Development of these processes must be done jointly between educational institutions and regulatory bodies to ensure consistency and equality in both areas and at the nation level to address currency and portability issues.

### **3. SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF CNPI CONSULTATIONS**

The education component of CNPI conducted stakeholder consultations across Canada between September 2004 and February 2005.<sup>5</sup> A wide variety of stakeholder groups was consulted including: educators, students, alumni, employers and representatives from provincial/territorial organizations. Representatives were consulted on a variety of issues and topics pertaining to NP education including PLAR. Stakeholders clearly supported the concept of PLAR; many, including employers, students and alumni, expressed a desire to see PLAR processes more widely implemented while acknowledging that doing so is not always easy.

Stakeholders said there are two different aspects to educational PLAR. In one aspect, an NP student would challenge a whole program; in another aspect, students would challenge individual courses. The second aspect of PLAR is the usual definition. Stakeholders said that there needs to be more access to PLAR processes for nurses working in extended/expanded roles as part of entry into NP programs. PLAR is seen as a very important means to demonstrate knowledge to obtain equivalency and credit for experience. Flexibility with the PLAR process is considered essential so that NP education does not take as long. On the other hand, stakeholders said that PLAR needs to be looked at very cautiously as it is integrated into NP education; they note that it is very difficult to integrate research and theory into clinical practice and students asking for PLAR often “don't understand what they don't know”. Stakeholders felt that determining what students don't know needs to be studied carefully so that students don't reach the end with gaps in their knowledge. Overall, it was felt that PLAR processes need to be based upon a clear NP role delineation and definition.

Stakeholders point out that availability of PLAR processes varies greatly from program to program. Some programs have fully developed PLAR processes or under development, and others have none. The general consensus among stakeholders is that few students have pursued PLAR because they perceive it to be a very arduous and time-consuming process. It is also expensive, costing in one circumstance half of the cost of actually taking the course. It was noted

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<sup>5</sup> Canadian Nurse Practitioner Initiative (CNPI) , Education Component Initial Consultation Report, February, 2005

that a few people who have challenged the PLAR process have failed and the PLAR process can be more difficult than taking the actual course.

Stakeholders from two institutions described their PLAR processes. At Athabasca University, students must apply for PLAR for an entire course – they are not permitted to seek PLAR for only particular course objectives (e.g., only the course objectives related to provision of extended health services or community health development). Students complete a self-assessment of competency based on the course objectives and they arrange to have an individual who meets the requirements of a preceptor (physician or nurse practitioner) sign the extended health skills record for the course to verify they are competent in the skills of the course. If review of the extended health skills record indicates the student is likely to be successful in PLAR, the student must then submit a portfolio for assessment. The PLAR portfolio is written as a scholarly paper, organized according to the course objectives, and including evidence of competence in the course objectives. In Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association (SRNA) determines equivalencies for entry to practice. Nurses must have worked in an expanded role (prescribing /dispensing drugs, assessing and diagnosing, ordering and interpreting diagnostic tests and performing minor surgical procedures). It doesn't matter where and it doesn't matter what educational criteria they have, but they have to be an RN to enter into this competency assessment process.

NP students and alumni commented on the accessibility of PLAR processes. Many said that there was no PLAR process available or offered to them. Some said that they needed the full amount of clinical time despite their years of experience, particularly when moving from one specialty to another. As one alumnus put it, “there was no PLAR and to be honest, I needed all of the time I got in school. Transition from ICU to this head space was a hard one.” Another alumnus was not pleased that she had to complete the full amount of clinical hours even though, in her estimation, she had accomplished 90% of the skills prior to entering an NP program. Students were allowed to challenge the theory, which the student wanted, but were not allowed to challenge the clinical. Another student found the PLAR process to be arduous.

Although different, PLAR is closely associated with transfer of credit and assessment for equivalency. Students commented on the need to assess for transferability of courses between programs. Stakeholders from many NP programs said that courses from other programs can be transferred after faculty members evaluated the courses for equivalency although this process was not well described. In one instance evaluation for equivalency meant comparing the course outlines and course objectives. In another instance, particular courses from one NP program were known to be similar to particular courses in another NP program and therefore they were easily transferable.

Stakeholders indicated that a process of educational equivalency also needs to be developed for transferability of licensure/registration between provinces and territories.

Stakeholders spoke about the possible implications of PLAR processes on their programs. For instance, one stakeholder said that to accommodate a diploma-prepared nurse into a master's program through PLAR would be a large amount of work for the university. This stakeholder

wondered who would do the reviewing. This same stakeholder suggested that institutional elitism is such that no one will agree to missing one layer of education. In addition, it was felt that the student wouldn't necessarily "learn how to learn" as students do when going through a baccalaureate program. Other stakeholders wondered about the impact on their programs if students were required only to take specific courses and not be part of their overall programs.

The stakeholder consultative process leads to several important conclusions. It is clear that PLAR is a complex area that requires careful study and implementation. PLAR is an important component of the transitional support that will be required to reach standardization of NP education and regulation across Canada. PLAR processes need to be based upon clearly defined NP roles and competencies. The best methods for ensuring that NP students are given credit for their past knowledge and experience will need to be determined at the same time as ensuring that NP students continue to receive all of the education required to meet NP practice standards. Educational institutions will need to work together with regulatory bodies to ensure consistent and fair processes are systematically developed and available across Canada, and that measures are put in place to monitor PLAR effectiveness.

#### **4. PLAR USE IN NP EDUCATION AND REGULATION**

It is often said that people don't know what they *don't* know. It might also be said that people often don't know what they *do* know! PLAR is a process that offers people the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and receive recognition for that learning.

It is important to define the scope of PLAR as applied to the educational and regulatory context. In its broadest sense, PLAR refers to all learning that has occurred in the past regardless of whether the setting was formal or informal. A narrower scope sees PLAR defined as all learning which takes place outside of formal educational institutions.

Generally, when conducting PLAR, it is the broad scope definition that is appropriate. The narrower definition is sometimes applicable to educational institutions because systems and protocols often already exist for recognizing learning obtained in certain formal settings. For example, academic transcripts and other records are maintained by educational institutions, and recognition of course equivalencies between institutions is often covered by articulation agreements. These agreements and their related processes are based on the premise that educational institutions have a responsibility to establish connections between themselves so that the repetition of learning is limited. A recent study (CAETO, 2003) indicated that there are a wide variety of articulation agreements in Canada.<sup>6</sup> Most have been created on an ad hoc basis despite consistent efforts over the years to establish a system-wide protocol for transfer of credit among Canada's colleges and universities.

It is equally important to recognize that, with respect to prospective NPs, there are two ways in which PLAR may be applied. The first involves a scenario whereby a student who has been

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<sup>6</sup> Recognition of Learning: An overview of Articulation Agreements in Canada, Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO), September, 2003.

accepted into an approved or accredited NP educational program applies for PLAR in accordance with the dictates of the program in order to receive one or more academic course credits. There are usually a maximum number of credits that will be granted using PLAR for any given program. As has already been noted, not all NP educational programs in Canada offer access to PLAR and, among those that do, policies and procedures differ. A survey of NP educational programs undertaken as part of developing a PLAR framework reveals that of the 26 existing NP programs, only 12 currently have a PLAR process. Furthermore, only two of the 11 acute care programs have a PLAR process. Among NP educational programs that do have PLAR, important differences exist in the number of courses that are eligible for PLAR, in the method of assessment, as well as in the cost of applying for PLAR. Of the programs that have opted not to offer PLAR the reasons for not doing so also differ. These reasons include: “no requests/not an issue”, “to be developed/under review”, and “PLAR is regulated and assessed by provincial association”. Appendix A provides a tabular summary of the status of PLAR use by NP educational programs in Canada. Information on the status of PLAR in NP education programs in Canada can also be found in comparison charts developed by the CNPI Education Component.<sup>7</sup>

The second scenario involves individuals who wish to obtain licensure/registration as NPs by accessing a PLAR process offered by a regulatory body. These individuals include registered nurses (RNs) without formal NP education with experience working in extended/expanded roles, NPs transferring from other jurisdictions not covered by mutual recognition (articulation) agreements, or NPs who do not meet educational requirements that may be newly-mandated as a requirement of licensure (i.e. NPs educated to the diploma or baccalaureate level who may be required to upgrade to a master’s level). Regulators in this scenario are interested in assessing the competence of an applicant to safely perform the role of NP. Based on the outcome of the PLAR assessment, applicants may be deemed eligible for licensure/registration pending successful completion of an examination (provincial or national) or may be directed to undertake additional education and/or experience in order to meet licensure/registration requirements.

A survey of NP regulators undertaken as part of this PLAR framework development reveals that the application and use of PLAR differs considerably among the various Canadian jurisdictions. Among the nine jurisdictions for which information was provided, four currently offer a PLAR process while four do not; one jurisdiction is currently developing a PLAR process. Among the jurisdictions that do have a PLAR process, important differences exist including differences in who is eligible for PLAR and in the PLAR process itself. Of the jurisdictions that have opted not to offer PLAR, the reasons for not doing so relate to perceived lack of need. When NP legislation was enacted in the jurisdiction most jurisdictions had time-limited PLAR processes in place to accommodate the licensing of NPs. Three of the four jurisdictions that do not currently offer PLAR are looking into developing a PLAR process. *Appendix B* provides a tabular summary of the status of PLAR use by NP regulatory bodies in Canada.

Close co-ordination and co-operation is essential between regulators and educators to ensure consistency in the application of PLAR. This is because if an applicant is assessed by a regulator and the regulator has identified competency gaps, the applicant may then need to address those gaps through enrolment in an accredited NP course or education program. Conversely, it is

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<sup>7</sup> Existing Acute Care/Primary Health Care NP Educational Programs <http://cnpi.ca/education/index.asp>

important that credits granted through PLAR by approved NP education programs be accepted by regulators.

Based on responses to the PLAR survey conducted among education programs and regulators as part of this framework development, there appears to be close working relationships between NP educational programs and regulatory bodies in some jurisdictions. However, the extent to which such relationships are formalized, i.e., based on explicit agreements and protocols or simply the product of personal initiative taken by individuals, is unclear. Furthermore, with less than 50% of educational programs and regulators offering access to PLAR, the existing playing field with respect to PLAR in Canada is not level. Even within jurisdictions, there may be access to PLAR at the regulatory level but not at the program level; conversely, there may be access to PLAR at the program level but not at the jurisdictional level.

In a pan-Canadian context, for PLAR to be effective, regulatory bodies will need to work more closely (i.e., formally and systematically) with NP educational programs to provide access to PLAR, to share assessment results and to ensure that individuals have flexible options by which they will be able to demonstrate competencies necessary for licensure/registration.

The wide variation in access to PLAR across Canada poses a challenge to achieving the goal of a pan-Canadian approach to sustained integration of the NP role in the health system. This challenge can be addressed, in part, through adherence to a framework of guiding principles for NP PLAR common to all programs and jurisdictions. The following section presents such a framework.

The framework is the result of an extensive literature review and key informant consultations conducted as part of the broader CNPI Education Component. The framework is meant to be the beginning of a process that would see further refinements, discussion and consultation among stakeholders leading to greater standardization in the practice of PLAR for NP education and regulation across Canada.

## 5. PLAR FRAMEWORK

### 5.1 Introduction

This framework addresses two scenarios. The first scenario referred to here as *educational PLAR*, involves a student who has been accepted to an NP educational program accessing a PLAR process for the purpose of obtaining one or more course credits. The second scenario, termed *regulatory PLAR*, involves an applicant who meets the eligibility criteria for accessing a PLAR process offered by a regulatory body as a route to NP licensure/registration.

Although the immediate objective of educational PLAR and regulatory PLAR differs from the applicant's perspective, the objective from the assessor perspective is the same, that is, to assess prior learning relative to required competencies. This means that, generally speaking, the essential elements of an effective PLAR process are the same regardless of whether that process is for educational purposes or for regulatory purposes.

For the purposes of this framework, PLAR is defined as a systematic process used to assess whether individuals possess the competencies necessary for obtaining educational credit or licensure/registration. This systematic process is one which is structured and formalized, following rigorous guidelines (as opposed to one that is haphazard, inconsistent or ad hoc). Refer to for a graphic representation.

### 5.2 Conceptual Overview

Foundational to this framework is the notion that a systematic approach to PLAR is needed to ensure consistency and rigour in the application of PLAR for the purpose of assessing NP competencies, whether for educational or regulatory purposes. While there are many possible systems models, a systematic approach as applied to learning is one that can be predicated on the following five steps: plan, design, develop, implement and monitor. The following table and graphical representation summarize how the steps inherent in a systematic approach are applied to PLAR in this framework. The model is consistent with broadly defined goals of PLAR which can be stated as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- The identification of learning wherever it has taken place;
- The selection of that learning which is relevant to a desired outcome;
- Demonstration of the validity and appropriateness of the learning;
- Matching learning outcomes to those stated within a chosen accreditation framework;
- Assessment of the evidence against pre-determined criteria to ensure validity; and
- Accreditation within an appropriate and recognized accreditation framework.

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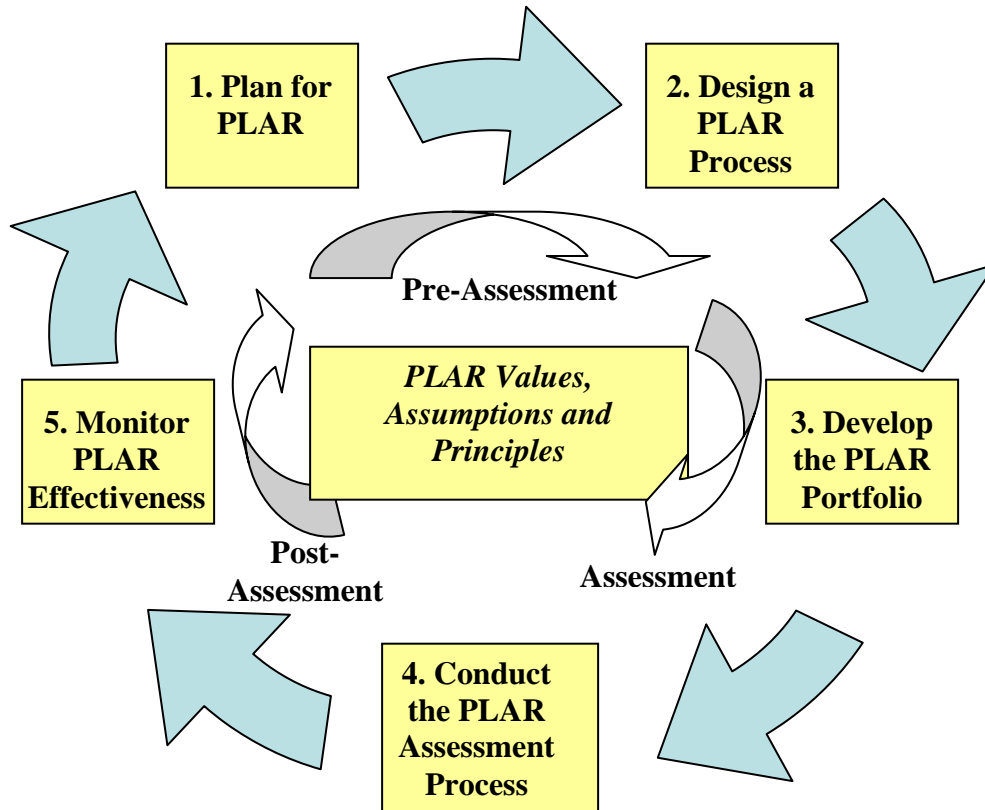
<sup>8</sup>Adapted from Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (CAPLA, 2000)

## PLAR Framework for NP Education and Regulation

<b>A Systematic Approach to PLAR</b>			
1.	Planning for PLAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PLAR objectives</li> <li>• Who will access PLAR?</li> <li>• How many applicants?</li> <li>• What resources are required?</li> <li>• What policies will govern PLAR?</li> <li>• How will PLAR be administered?</li> </ul>	<b>Pre-Assessment</b>
2.	Designing a PLAR Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Portfolio approach</li> <li>• Canadian Nurse Practitioner Core Competency Framework</li> <li>• Standard tools and templates</li> <li>• Pre-screening</li> </ul>	
3.	Developing the PLAR Portfolio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of guidelines</li> <li>• Structure framework</li> <li>• Evidence-based</li> <li>• Documentation required</li> </ul>	<b>Assessment</b>
4.	Conducting the PLAR Assessment /Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessor requirements</li> <li>• Assessor training</li> <li>• Addressing gaps in learning</li> <li>• Communicating PLAR decisions</li> <li>• Extended options for PLAR</li> </ul>	
5.	Post-Assessment and Monitoring of PLAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback mechanisms</li> <li>• Right to appeal</li> <li>• Co-ordination and reciprocity</li> <li>• Monitoring for effectiveness</li> <li>• PLAR co-ordination and excellence</li> </ul>	<b>Post-Assessment</b>
<b>Values, Assumptions and Guiding Principles</b>			



## A Systematic Approach to PLAR



### 5.3 Foundational Values, Assumptions and Principles

Certain foundational values, assumptions and principles are necessary to support the framework upon which a systematic approach to PLAR can be sustained. These can be summarized as follows:

- Learning can and does take place in many settings including outside of formal educational institutions. This learning should be recognized.
- Prior learning can be assessed relative to expected competencies and learning outcomes in a reliable and valid manner using systematic, evidence-based approaches.
- PLAR is effective and efficient when appropriately applied. PLAR enables learners, educators and regulators to focus on the learning that is required to ensure competency instead of repetitive learning, thus saving time, money and effort.
- PLAR is consistent with the values of continuous, lifelong learning and should be an integral feature of educational programs and regulatory processes.

- PLAR is compatible with the maintenance of standards for education.
- PLAR is consistent with a competency-based approach to learning achieved through a combination of theory and experiential practice.
- The focus of PLAR is on credit for learning not for experience. Experience is not equivalent to learning; it is the learning from experience that is recognized rather than the experience itself.
- For the purpose of PLAR, learning must be verifiable i.e. based on fair, valid and reliable standards of assessment.
- PLAR is consistent with a needs-based, client-focused approach to NP education and licensure.
- Canadian Nurse Practitioner Core Competency Framework will be used to establish the pan-Canadian standard of eligibility for registration and provide a foundation for the consistent pan-Canadian application of PLAR for NP education and regulation.<sup>9</sup>

## 5.4 Guiding Practices for PLAR Framework

Following are the key elements of the PLAR framework for NP education and regulation in Canada. The framework consists of a set of guiding practices which can be used to support overall development and implementation of PLAR. This approach recognizes that several NP educational programs and regulatory jurisdictions have made significant strides in the use of PLAR and, indeed, a number of excellent tools already exist for conducting PLAR. The guiding practices contained in this framework are intended to facilitate a common approach to PLAR but one with sufficient flexibility so that both educators and regulators may adapt PLAR to reflect their unique context and circumstances.

### 5.4.1 Planning for PLAR

**Guiding Practice #1:** *That all Canadian NP educational programs and regulatory jurisdictions provide applicants with access to a PLAR process designed to recognize competencies where sufficient evidence of learning is provided.*

- The introduction of a PLAR process requires careful planning. Resources are needed to develop, administer and maintain the process to the required standard. As previously noted, not all regulatory bodies or NP educational programs in Canada currently offer access to PLAR. The reasons for this vary. For example:

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Nurse Practitioner Core Competency Framework, Canadian Nurses Association, January, 2005

- Institutional resistance to PLAR is sometimes rooted in the belief that programs or courses are unique and that equivalent learning cannot be obtained elsewhere;
- Educational institutions may be reluctant to implement or support PLAR due to perceptions that PLAR processes are costly to maintain or that exemptions from courses will result in lost revenue; and,
- Regulators may feel that demand for PLAR would not be sufficient to justify the expense or that PLAR might result in compromising of standards, ultimately posing a risk to public safety.

Yet, despite questions and concerns about PLAR, there is long-standing and widespread evidence that PLAR can and is being used successfully and effectively in many institutions and jurisdictions across Canada and internationally. Increasingly, access to PLAR is viewed as a demonstration of commitment to competency-based, lifelong learning approaches. With respect to NP education and regulation, access to PLAR on a pan-Canadian basis would increase consistency across programs and jurisdictions, contributing to the sustained integration of the NP role.

**Guiding Practice #2:** *That the PLAR process be based on careful analysis of needs and demand for PLAR and that opportunities to collaborate or share PLAR resources be explored as a means to mitigate costs.*

Providing access to PLAR does not mean that every institution or jurisdiction must develop and maintain its own process. For example:

- Certain jurisdictions in Canada have very little demand for PLAR. In such cases, the jurisdiction may simply provide access by adopting a process used by another jurisdiction or even contracting with that jurisdiction to conduct PLAR on a case-by-case basis.
- Collaborating on PLAR, sharing PLAR resources or providing a central clearing house for PLAR are ways in which access to PLAR can be provided economically and efficiently without the need to invest heavily in resources.

**Guiding Practice #3:** *That every NP program/jurisdiction has a clearly articulated policy on PLAR.*

Clear policies on PLAR are needed to manage expectations and inform administrators and applicants about the rules pertaining to PLAR. For example:

- Certain institutions place limits on the number of course credits permissible under PLAR. Typically, PLAR cannot be used for partial credit or for exemption from entire programs.
- Both educators and regulators may have currency requirements (i.e., learning must have taken place within a specified number of years) and both generally charge fees for PLAR.

**Guiding Practice #4:** *That PLAR policies include standard eligibility criteria to determine access to the PLAR process.*

It is important that PLAR policies clearly articulate the rules for eligibility for PLAR. Clear eligibility criteria regarding who can access PLAR will help to manage expectations and avoid misunderstandings or disappointments which may arise further into the process.

- Typically, an NP educational program will require a PLAR applicant to be accepted or enrolled in the program prior to accessing PLAR. Exceptions may occur when an applicant has undertaken a regulatory PLAR process and is required to take a specific course in a recognized NP program as a condition of licensure.
- Regulators will generally require PLAR applicants to meet the requirements of NP practice such as an active RN license, a minimum of two years of relevant experience, and successful completion of any requisite exam(s). Currency of the prior learning may also be a factor in its recognition. In all cases applicants will need to submit the appropriate application, documentation and fees.

**Guiding Practice #5:** *That each NP educational program and regulatory body provides access to a designated PLAR administrator/co-ordinator who can answer questions about the process and provide advice and guidance to the applicant. This individual would perform some or all of the following pre-assessment activities:*

- *answer questions;*
- *pre-screen for eligibility;*
- *help the individual identify relevant learning (clear information, guidelines, tools, advice);*
- *explain how the assessment process works; set expectations; and*
- *help the individual prepare evidence relevant to outcomes.*

Administering PLAR in a systematic and rigorous manner is not a simple process. Potential PLAR applicants will need to know whether to apply for PLAR and, if so, how to apply i.e., what is involved and what to expect from the process. Some potential applicants may decide after reviewing the PLAR criteria that they would benefit more from taking actual courses rather than seeking exemptions, or that they would be better to enrol in an educational program than to seek licensure/registration through the regulatory PLAR route. Educational programs and regulatory bodies should provide advice and guidance to applicants through all phases of the PLAR process. Typical PLAR questions might include for example:

- What are the PLAR policies and eligibility criteria?
- How is PLAR administered? Who is involved and what are their roles?
- What courses are subject to PLAR?
- What are the timelines and constraints?

- What is a portfolio?
- What are acceptable forms of documentation and evidence of learning?
- How does one document relevant learning using a portfolio approach?
- What are the costs involved?

#### 5.4.2 Designing a PLAR Process

**Guiding Practice #6:** *That the Canadian Nurse Practitioner Core Competencies be used as the foundation upon which all Canadian NP educational and regulatory PLAR processes are based.*

There are many possible options for designing a PLAR process. The nature of the process often depends on the context within which PLAR takes place i.e., work related, educational, professional, regulatory, etc. However, central to any process is the need to assess prior learning using rigorous evidence-based methods. These methods include but are not limited to:

- Self-reflection/assessment;
- Documentation of educational and experiential background;
- Documentation of acquired competencies;
- Case studies, essays and scholarly papers;
- Professional references;
- Practical demonstration, presentation and role plays; and
- Written examinations.

In the application of PLAR processes for NP candidates, it is essential that competencies be central to the assessment process. Competencies represent the integrated knowledge, skills, judgment and attributes required of a nurse practitioner to practice safely and ethically in a designated role or setting (CNA, 2005). Furthermore, a more consistent pan-Canadian approach to PLAR for NPs can be supported through the application of common core competencies to the PLAR process. The primary areas of competence based on the Canadian Nurse Practitioner Core Competency Framework (CNA, 2005) are:

- Health Assessment and Diagnosis;
- Health Care Management and Therapeutic Intervention;
- Health Promotion and Prevention of Illness, Injury and Complications; and
- Professional Role and Responsibility.

Each competency specifies a set of performance expectations that provide a foundation for performance measurement. These core competencies are minimum requirements necessary for entry to practice. As NPs move along the continuum of practice from novice to expert, they will increase their breadth and depth of knowledge and abilities. Each NP is expected to be able to demonstrate the core competencies as a condition of licensure/registration.

**Guiding Practice #7:** *That the portfolio approach to PLAR (or equivalent) be used as the basis for conducting PLAR and that standardized tools and templates be developed to support the process.*

The plethora of existing and potential models, processes and approaches for PLAR is a potential source of confusion and inconsistency with respect to NP education and regulation. The different approaches to PLAR currently used by NP educators and regulators in Canada, and indeed whether PLAR is available at all, poses a barrier to the sustained integration of the NP role in Canada. This situation can be mitigated through adoption of a common competency-based PLAR process. The majority of NP educational programs and regulatory jurisdictions that currently provide access to PLAR do so using a portfolio approach.

Some descriptions of portfolios are:

- A portfolio is an organized collection of materials which records and verifies learning achievements and relates them to set educational, career or professional standards.<sup>10</sup>
- A portfolio is a file or folder of information created contemporaneously or retrospectively which describes and analyzes an individual's learning derived from a variety of sources (formal and experiential).<sup>11</sup>
- A professional portfolio is a comprehensive document completed by the nurse that details the current state of his or her practice, background, skills, expertise and perhaps most important, a working plan for professional growth (Trossonan, 1999).

The literature on PLAR practices both in Canada and elsewhere suggests that the portfolio approach is by far the most broadly accepted method of conducting PLAR. Portfolio approaches are familiar and have been used by regulators in Canada to grant NP licensure/registration to RNs working in NP-like roles.<sup>12</sup> Portfolio approaches have the advantage of being flexible within certain defined parameters and being adaptable to the needs of specific programs and jurisdictions. A broad outline of the main components of a course assessment portfolio along with the ten basic steps in the PLAR process is presented in *Appendix C*.

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<sup>10</sup> Retrieved Nov. 18 from <http://recognitionforlearning.ca>

<sup>11</sup> *Portfolio Requirements and Guidelines*, Council of Ontario University Programs in Nursing, January, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association uses a portfolio-based competence assessment process for RN-NP licensure. Similarly, the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta uses a portfolio-based substantive equivalent competence process.

**Guiding Practice #8:** *That PLAR portfolio assessment be supplemented with additional or extended evaluative components when deemed necessary to ensure assessment of clinical competencies.*

Greater consistency and commonality in PLAR processes across Canada will provide greater assurance to educators and regulators that NPs have been prepared to meet the same standards. PLAR processes will be more consistent if those processes contain design features and attributes common to a portfolio model/process. Following are typical stages in a standard PLAR portfolio process:

- Pre-screening (self-assessment/reflection tools, access to PLAR co-ordinator);
- Application;
- Portfolio development (instructions, forms and templates);
- Portfolio assessment; and
- Post assessment.

In certain cases, the portfolio process may be insufficient for conducting an assessment of clinical competencies. Regulators may require applicants to pass a clinical and/or written exam prior to licensure. Educational programs will need to determine whether to require a clinical evaluation component as part of an extended PLAR portfolio process for certain courses.

**Guiding Practice #9:** *That applicants proceed with PLAR only if they are deemed through pre-screening to have a reasonable chance of success.*

PLAR can be a time-consuming and expensive process. Pre-screening applicants for PLAR either through an online self-assessment process or a screening application or both will allow applicants and educators/regulators to establish eligibility and determine the likelihood of a successful outcome.

### 5.4.3 Developing the PLAR Portfolio

**Guiding Practice #10:** *That every NP program and regulator publish clear portfolio development guidelines to be followed by applicants and that these guidelines specify in a step-by-step workbook fashion what information is required and provide an organized, structured framework for the applicant to follow.*

Guidelines for developing a portfolio can facilitate any PLAR application process. Guidelines provide a means for applicants to structure and organize their evidence of prior learning. The guidelines should specify what kind of evidence of prior learning can be submitted and in what format, i.e., the methods of assessment. Ideally, templates should be provided to applicants to

ensure that the process is managed in a systematic approach. The focus should be on substantiating *relevant learning* at the *appropriate level* and for the *required competency/outcome*.

**Guiding Practice #11:** *That portfolio documentation contain at a minimum the following documented elements:*

- *Formal and informal education*
- *Formal and informal work experience*
- *Learning from education and experience matched to required competencies and/or course outcomes*
- *Case studies, scholarly papers or equivalent*
- *Self-assessment*
- *Verification documents*
- *References*
- *Authorizations*

Ideally, there would be a uniform approach to portfolio development used by all educators and regulators. However, such an approach may be unrealistic given the differing needs across programs and jurisdictions. Indeed, it might be argued that flexible assessment approaches can and should be built into portfolio development guidelines, providing the essential principles of PLAR are preserved. A look at existing examples of structured approaches to portfolio development is instructive. For example, the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association (SRNA) competence assessment process model uses a five part process for portfolio development:<sup>13</sup>

- Part 1      Formal and informal education
- Part 2      Formal and volunteer work experience
- Part 3      Validation of core competencies
- Part 4      Documented case studies and essays
- Part 5      Authorization to release information

The Council of Ontario University Programs in Nursing (COUPN) requires the following as part of its course assessment portfolio:<sup>14</sup>

- Learning referenced to course learning outcomes;
- Case studies; and
- Verification documents.
- References
- Authorization forms

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<sup>13</sup>Competency Assessment Process (CAP) for Registered Nurse (NP) Licensure, SRNA, 2003.

<sup>14</sup>Portfolio Requirements and Guidelines, PHC Nurse Practitioner Program, COUPN, 2005.



The College and Association of Registered Nurse of Alberta (CARNA) substantive equivalent competence process consists of the following steps:<sup>15</sup>

- Step 1 Application form and initial portfolio review fee
- Step 2 Consent of release of information
- Step 3 Portfolio submission
  - 3.1 Documentation of formal nursing education
  - 3.2 Documentation of informal education
  - 3.3 Self-assessment of NP competencies
  - 3.4 Documentation of nursing experience
  - 3.5 Self-assessment of restricted activities
- Step 4 Documentation of case assessments to verify knowledge and competence
- Step 5 Clinical exam to verify ability to apply knowledge, skills and competencies
- Step 6 Written examinations (when approved by CARNA Council)
- Step 7 Satisfactory references from both a physician and an employer

Portfolio models can be expected to contain some or all of these elements. Guidelines should specify what direct evidence is to be submitted and in what format i.e., papers, reports, case studies, presentations, transcripts, test results.

Guidelines should also specify what indirect evidence (i.e., third party) is to be submitted and in what format i.e., references, testimonials/letters of attestation, awards, evaluations, articles about the applicant's work.

It is important that PLAR applicants be instructed to gather learning from sources that are relevant to the competencies and learning outcomes against which they will be assessed. Often this requires summarization and synthesis of learning from different sources.

#### 5.4.4 Conducting the PLAR Assessment/Evaluation

**Guiding Practice #12:** *That assessment of PLAR portfolios are conducted by one or more competent assessors.*

The integrity of any PLAR process depends on the ability to carry out assessments in a fair, valid and reliable manner. Although many PLAR processes contain self-assessment and validation features, assessment needs to take into account the fact that preparation for NP practice involves advanced level competencies that are integrative and complex. NPs must be able to integrate, synthesize and apply learning to perform safely in complex settings. The assessment process itself is an opportunity for applicants to learn and become aware of gaps or deficiencies in their preparation for NP practice. Competent PLAR assessors are vital to this process. A competent assessor is one who is:

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<sup>15</sup>CARNA Process for Assessing Eligibility for NP Practice Permit Via Substantive Equivalence Process, CARNA, 2005.

- knowledgeable in the outcomes or competencies they are assessing;
- conversant in the guidelines governing the PLAR process;
- equipped to properly evaluate applications; and
- capable of giving feedback that is constructive and sensitive to candidate's needs.

**Guiding Practice #13:** *That each program and jurisdiction initiates steps to train assessors in how to conduct a proper PLAR evaluation.*

A professional and reliable approach to assessing PLAR portfolios is best achieved through formal standardized assessor training. Applicants have a right to expect that PLAR assessments will be conducted in a systematic and professional manner and that evaluations will be determined on the basis of objective benchmarks. Structured evaluation grids, checklists and templates when combined with assessor training can help to standardize the process.

**Guiding Practice #14:** *That those applicants who meet most of the requirements of a regulatory PLAR process have access to educational programs and other means to address competency gaps prior to reapplying to the regulator once evidence is provided that the gaps have been addressed. That those applicants who meet most of the requirements for educational PLAR be deemed successful if the prior learning is judged equivalent to at least a passing grade for the course for which credit is being sought.*

PLAR applicants may be judged to have met some, most or all of the requisite course objectives or competencies. Outcomes will differ depending on whether PLAR is conducted for academic purposes or regulatory purposes. For example:

- With respect to educational PLAR, credit may be granted if the candidate is deemed to have met most or all of the course requirements; and
- With respect to regulatory PLAR, applicants will need to possess all of the requisite competencies to be eligible for licensure; if minor gaps exist; regulatory PLAR applicants are normally afforded an opportunity to address those gaps through referral to an educational program, experiential learning or a facilitated clinical practicum, before reapplying.

A flowchart showing the different outcomes resulting from educational and regulatory PLAR processes is presented in *Appendix F*.

**Guiding Practice #15:** *That the decision resulting from a PLAR assessment be communicated to the applicant in writing along with the reasons for the decision. That gaps in learning, if they exist, be identified along with options for addressing those gaps.*

The different benchmarks (i.e., regulatory versus educational) should be defined and reflected in the tools designed for the intended process. If gaps in required learning exist, those gaps will need to be identified and communicated to the applicant.

The decision regarding whether or not to grant credit or licensure/registration rests entirely with educators and regulatory bodies. The latter may expect successful PLAR applicants to pass a clinical exam and a written exam prior to registration as an NP.

**Guiding Practice #16:** *That extended options for PLAR beyond the use of a written portfolio be encouraged so long as they follow a consistent and systematic approach that is fair, valid and reliable.*

It is possible that in some cases educators and regulators may wish to go beyond the parameters of a written portfolio submission and provide PLAR applicants with additional options for PLAR. For example:

- PLAR practitioners may wish to give PLAR applicants the option of orally defending their submission.
- Alternatively, educators may wish to offer applicants the option of a challenge process. A challenge process is one in which people seek recognition (e.g. college or university credit) for what they already know and can do. Challenge processes may include a performance or demonstration by a learner, structured interviews, product assessments, role-plays, simulations, presentations, oral exams and standardized tests.<sup>16</sup>
- Other performance-related assessments include video, audio, web simulations, Objective Structured Clinical Evaluations, peer review panel and structured interviews.

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<sup>16</sup> Retrieved Nov. 18, 2005 from <http://recognitionforlearning.ca>

#### 5.4.5 Post-Assessment and Monitoring PLAR

**Guiding Practice #17:** *That PLAR processes contain an appeal mechanism to enable applicants to seek independent recourse where applicants have put forth in writing reasonable grounds to suspect their application has been treated unfairly.*

PLAR applicants will need to be informed of the results of their assessment and how to address any gaps in learning that have been identified. Typically, regulators should provide applicants with information about:

- specific approved NP educational programs or courses; and
- experience that could lead to the acquiring of the requisite competencies.

If gaps are relatively minor, regulators will normally give the applicant the option to reapply for registration/licensure once the applicant provides evidence to the regulator that the gaps have been addressed. If gaps are large, applicants are generally referred to a recognized educational program. Significant gaps in educational PLAR usually mean that the application for credit is denied and the applicant is simply required to take the prescribed course.

Some PLAR applicants may feel that they have been treated unfairly as a result of the PLAR assessment. They may not understand why they were not successful or they may feel that the assessors overlooked or misjudged certain evidence. PLAR applicants would normally be expected to seek clarification of PLAR decisions through the PLAR co-ordinator. However, if still dissatisfied, a PLAR applicant might, with justification, expect to be able to access a more formalized appeal process provided reasonable grounds for an appeal can be substantiated.

**Guiding Practice #18:** *That regulatory bodies and educational programs work closely to co-ordinate PLAR policies and that reciprocity (mutual recognition) of PLAR be established among educators and regulators in different jurisdictions based on acceptance of a common set of PLAR principles and guidelines.*

When a regulatory body identifies a learning or competency gap in a PLAR applicant, the means to address that gap should be provided to the applicant. This requires that NP regulators and educators work in close co-ordination to ensure that the needs of PLAR applicants with learning gaps can be met. There is little point in an applicant being told he/she must take a specific approved course if the applicant cannot obtain access to that course due to program administrative policies. Similarly, regulators should recognize and give credit for PLAR processes conducted by educational programs. Finally, regulators and educators should accept that PLAR conducted by one jurisdiction or institution is equivalent to PLAR conducted in another. Otherwise, the mobility of students and NPs could be significantly constrained.

**Guiding Practice #19:** *That NP programs and jurisdictional regulators monitor and measure NP PLAR effectiveness against pre-established benchmarks. That educators and regulators collaborate to establish the key performance indicators for measuring PLAR effectiveness.*

An effective PLAR process is one that is constantly evolving in response to needs and research. It is important that NP regulatory bodies and educational programs monitor how well PLAR is working and identify strategies to improve the effectiveness of PLAR processes. For greater pan-Canadian consistency, however, PLAR must evolve within a coherent framework which defines parameters for effective NP PLAR administration, practice and performance. A common set of performance metrics developed and co-ordinated across NP programs and jurisdictions will help ensure that PLAR is applied rigorously within a context of continuous improvement.

**Guiding Practice #20:** *That a pan-Canadian centre of excellence for the study of PLAR and for the sharing and co-ordinating of PLAR resources be established with the aim of supporting consistency and rigour in the application of PLAR in NP education and regulation.*

Differences in the application of PLAR are a barrier to the sustained integration of the role of NPs. Investments in the ongoing study of best practices in PLAR processes and in the development and sharing of PLAR expertise and resources will help ensure that PLAR is practiced more systematically and rigorously. Greater consistency and rigour in the application of PLAR will ultimately benefit all stakeholders and will facilitate the provision of safe, competent and ethical care.



## Appendix A – PLAR Use in Canadian NP Educational Programs

The following table presents a summary of the status of PLAR use by NP educational programs in Canada.

PRIMARY HEALTH CARE	PLAR	FEATURES AND COMMENTS
Athabasca University	Yes	Can PLAR up to residency requirements (MN-ANP 15 credits of 5 courses / AGD ANP 9 credits or 3 courses of 7). Maximum 4 of 8 NP courses are PLARable. Process includes submission of a scholarly paper based on course syllabus and a skills checklist signed and validated. Assessment is online and performed by course leader. This is not a portfolio process. Cost is \$250 per course.
Aurora College	Yes	PLAR process available for theory and clinical. Applicants can receive credit for up to 40% of courses but must complete the on-site program. PLAR process includes transfer of credit; challenge exam practical or paper; review of employment practices relevant to credit. Fee same as course fee: \$203.
Centre for Nursing Studies	Yes	The Centre for Nursing Studies has PLAR Guidelines developed for use in all program areas. PLAR has been used for the two community health courses in the NP Program. Students are given either full or partial exemption from the courses. We have not, to date, charged a fee for students availing of this service in the NP program.
COUPN	Yes	PLAR available in 8/10 universities; can challenge 5/7 courses. Must do the practicum course. Assessed by two people, usually NP faculty, using portfolio approach. Guidelines have been developed. Candidates must be accepted to NP program to apply for PLAR. Cost is \$375 per course.
Dalhousie University	Yes	No information reported or provided
SIAST	Yes	Recognition of some clinical experience
University of Alberta*	No	Have had no requests – would deal with on a case-by-case basis. Provincial association currently developing guidelines for PLAR.
UBC	Yes	No information reported
University of Calgary*	Yes	No information reported
University of Manitoba*	Yes	Dictated by University Studies guidelines
University of Moncton	No	N/A
University of New Brunswick	No	PLAR has not been an issue. If needed, arrangements would be made on a case-by-case basis as required.
University of Northern BC	No	To be developed

<b>PRIMARY HEALTH CARE</b>	<b>PLAR</b>	<b>FEATURES AND COMMENTS</b>
University of Ottawa	Yes	Can challenge 5/7 courses. See COUPN framework
University of Victoria	No	PLAR is regulated and assessed by provincial association; program offers courses. There is no support for PLAR at the master's within the faculty of graduate studies. Program provides opportunities to NP candidates for upgrading as determined by CRNBC PLAR process.
<b>PENDING</b>		
University of Quebec	No	N/A
University of Saskatchewan	N/A	
<b>ACUTE CARE</b>		
BCIT	No	Not at this time – under review. BCIT program prepares students to work as NPs with adults across a continuum of settings (including primary health care and/or acute care)
Dalhousie University	No	N/A
McGill University	No	N/A
Memorial University	No	Have not had a request from any student for PLAR. Graduate programs at the university have traditionally not allowed any type of PLAR.
University of Alberta*	No	N/A
University of Calgary*	Yes	No information reported
Laval University	No	N/A
University of Manitoba*	Yes	Dictated by University Studies guidelines
University of Montreal	No	N/A
University of Toronto	No	N/A
McMaster University	No	N/A

\* Denotes combined primary health care/acute care program



## Appendix B – PLAR Use by Canadian NP Regulatory Bodies

The following table presents a summary of the status of PLAR use by NP regulatory bodies in Canada as of November 2005.

Jurisdiction	PLAR	Process, Features and Comments
BC – CRNBC	Yes	<p>Three phase project - currently under development - Plan to use PLAR for assessment of formal and informal learning assessment (competency-based) for those who have not gone through a CRNBC recognized NP program (BC). All potential NP applicants will complete a pre-assessment which comprises a self-assessment against the CRNBC competencies and the NP scope of practice standards, limits and conditions which is submitted to CRNBC and reviewed by staff. PLAR addresses three groups: 1) Phase I - those with master's seeking to become NPs; 2) Phase II those with formal NP education but not prepared at the master's level; 3) Phase III those without formal NP education. Phase I is completed. This group completes the pre-assessment and is assessed by an expert panel for their educational equivalency with the BC programs. Their educational transcripts and program information (course content) are assessed against competency-based criteria to determine the equivalency of their NP education. Applicants with educational gaps (clinical and theoretical) are required to complete qualifying courses from a CRNBC recognized program before they can proceed with the registration process. Phase II is in the early stages of development and will include completion of the pre-assessment and a portfolio assessment and panel evaluation. It is expected to be in place by early 2007. Phase III will be two part: i) CRNBC will carry out (in 2006) an educational process directed primarily at registrants currently working in rural and remote practice. The education will focus on certified registered nursing practice as a possible option for nurses wishing to continue to practice in roles beyond the RN scope versus registration as a nurse practitioner through a PLAR process; followed by: ii) CRNBC will establish a six month notice period for all who have not completed a formal NP program to complete the pre-assessment process and, following a review with staff of their options, they will be asked to advise the College in writing of their intention to use a PLAR process if it were developed. The Board will make a determination at that time (late 2006 or early 2007) as to the feasibility of having a PLAR for applicants who have not been formally prepared as an NP. If there is a need to have such a PLAR it would not likely be ready until late 2007. For more information on certified practice, please read the document on registered nurse scope of practice, see Section 10 pages 35 – 37 and Appendix D pages 20 – 22. on the CRNBC website (retrieved November 2005)at <a href="http://www.crnbc.ca/downloads/433.pdf">http://www.crnbc.ca/downloads/433.pdf</a></p>

Jurisdiction	PLAR	Process, Features and Comments
AB – CARNA	Yes	Provision contained in the Health Professions Act (HPA). When NPs first legislated (1999) Alberta had a two year time-limited window for grand fathering of NPs who did not meet the legislated education requirements but did have experience. During 2001-2005 there was no possibility to register applicants who didn't have the education requirements. New process began Nov. 30, 2005 and people have been waiting for it. Involves the application of new HPA legislated requirements to determine the substantive equivalent competence of an applicant and not to assess them on the basis of educational equivalence alone. Step #1 is a portfolio assessment verifying the applicant has NP experiences to be considered. Step #2 is case assessments. Step #3 is a clinical exam. Existing out-of-province NPs who don't meet the standard Alberta legislated requirements would be considered through this standard equivalence assessment process. Written licensing exam requirement is not a current requirement but could be approved by Council in future.
SK – SRNA	Yes	No information reported
MB – CRNM	Yes	Process in final stages of development and will be available to applicants in early 2006. Process applies to those registered on the practising register in Manitoba. PLAR is an option for those who have not graduated from a master's of nursing program (NP major) at the University of Manitoba or another program approved as being substantially equivalent.
ON – CNO	No	Had a PLAR process in 1998 for two years when NP role (extended class registration) first introduced and regulated but ended with intro of extended class registration exam. Have nothing currently. All applicants are required by regulation to write the exam once their program equivalency has been established. CNO has recently initiated enquiries re. development of a PLAR process.
QC – OIIQ		No information reported
NB – NANB	No	PLAR rules for nurses in NP-like roles sunset Jan. 1, 2005. A competency assessment process is on the books but has not been used due to lack of need. Accept assessment and recognition from other jurisdictions.
NS – CRNNS		No information reported
PE – ANPEI	No	A competency assessment process is included in draft NP Regulations expected to be passed in March-April 2006.
NL – ARNNL	Yes	Competency assessment process is specified in legislation. No sunset clause. It was originally intended to accommodate nurses in rural settings working in NP-like roles. Route #1 involves evaluation of educational equivalency. Route #2 is akin to a portfolio involving examination of documentary evidence followed by a written exam and OSCI (administered by Centre for Nursing Studies). Gaps are addressed by referral to courses at one of two approved schools.

Jurisdiction	PLAR	Process, Features and Comments
NT/NU – RNANT/NU	Pending	Consultant is currently looking into an NP PLAR process for experienced CHNs to challenge NP registration criteria. Issues include volume, financing, timelines, PLAR provider/administrator. Currently work closely in partnership with Aurora College.
YK – YRNA	No	PLAR process currently being explored. Likely to accept endorsement from other jurisdictions.

## Appendix C

### Sample Course Assessment Portfolio Outline\*

Cover Page  
 Cover Letter  
 Table of Contents

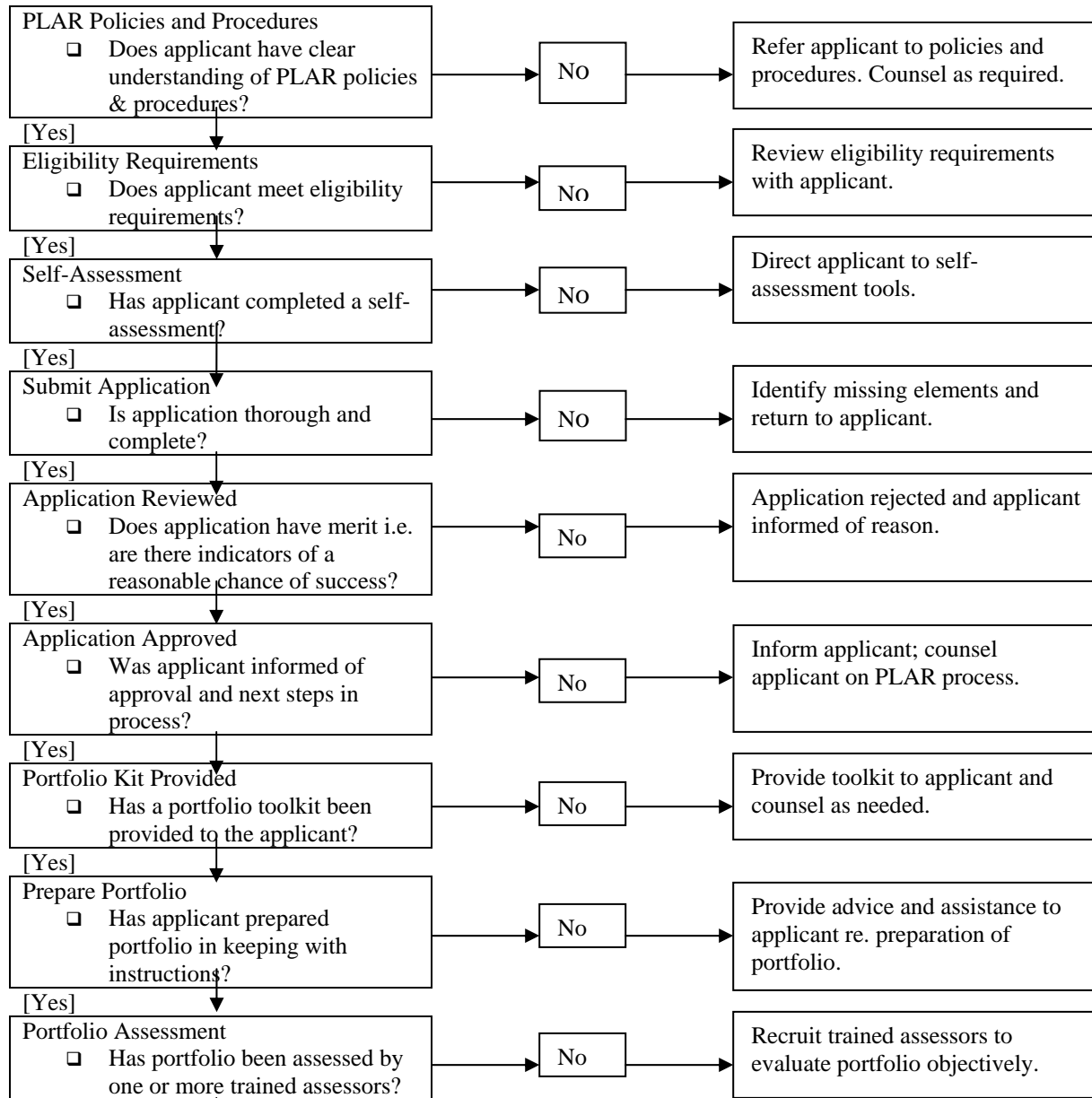
1. Introduction
2. Learning relevant to course #xxxx  
     Overview of learning related to course  
     Documentation of learning matched to course learning outcomes
3. Verification of documents and case studies  
     Documents substantiating learning related to course learning outcomes  
     Case studies
4. References
5. Signed authorization forms  
     Consent for use of portfolios in research  
     Verification of portfolio assessment

**\*Adapted from COUPN Portfolio Requirements and Guidelines, January, 2005**

#### Ten (10) Steps for an Effective PLAR Process

Step 1.	Applicant reviews PLAR policies and procedures
Step 2.	Applicant ensures eligibility requirements for PLAR are met
Step 3.	Applicant completes PLAR self-assessment
Step 4.	Applicant submits application request (pre-screener) for PLAR
Step 5.	PLAR administrator reviews application against established criteria
Step 6.	PLAR administrator approves application
Step 7.	PLAR administrator provides PLAR portfolio kit
Step 8.	Applicant prepares PLAR portfolio (access to PLAR advisor)
Step 9.	PLAR assessors evaluate PLAR portfolio against required competencies
Step 10.	PLAR assessors inform Applicant of assessment results

## Appendix D – NP PLAR Process Flow Chart



Assessment Outcomes	Regulatory PLAR		Educational PLAR	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Meets all competencies</b>	Eligible to write exam(s)	Identify extent of missing competencies	Course credit(s) awarded	Identify extent of missing competencies
<b>Meets Most Competencies</b>	Gaps identified; opportunity to address gaps and re-apply	Refer to NP educational program or further work experience	Course credit(s) awarded	No course credit(s) awarded