

NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF A PRIOR
LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND
RECOGNITION PROCESS
FOR THE
NURSING EDUCATION PROGRAM
OF SASKATCHEWAN

Executive Summary

MARCH, 2003



The Calibre Group of Companies
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PULSE RESEARCH LIMITED
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Acknowledgements

The Nursing Education Program of Saskatchewan (NEPS) would like to extend its gratitude and acknowledge the invaluable contributions made by representatives of the following partner organizations, which comprised a Steering Committee formed to provide guidance throughout the NEPS-PLAR Needs Assessment project:

- Canadian Union of Public Employees
- Dumont Technical Institute
- Home Care/Special Care Aid Program, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology
- Parkland Regional College
- Practical Nursing Program, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology
- Registered Psychiatric Nurses Association of Saskatchewan
- Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations
- Saskatchewan Association of Licensed Practical Nurses
- Saskatchewan Employees International Union
- Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union
- Saskatchewan Health
- Saskatchewan Indian Federated College
- Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies
- Saskatchewan Learning
- Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association
- Saskatchewan Union of Nurses

The NEPS also would like to recognize and thank all of the program's students and faculty who assisted with or participated in the Needs Assessment project.

Disclaimer

The following report on the outcomes of the NEPS-PLAR Needs Assessment, particularly information provided on the results of the NEPS student survey and focus group session, do not necessarily represent the views of the NEPS administrators and faculty, or the initiative's sponsors, and Steering Committee members.

This report is not intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various forms of learning recognition and their historic usage in post-secondary and other institutions, but to examine the potential and impact of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in the Nursing Education Program of Saskatchewan. Individuals that require further knowledge of terminology and learning recognition strategies are directed to the Saskatchewan Learning RPL Web page, which provides an overview of RPL initiatives, documents and resources in Saskatchewan, with contact information and/or web links at <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/P/rpl/index.html>.

Additional Copies

Electronic copies of the final report may be obtained from the following Internet sites:

University of Saskatchewan: <http://www.usask.ca/nursing/>

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology:
<http://www.siastr.sk.ca/siastr/admissions/plar.htm>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2002, Saskatchewan Learning approached the Nursing Education Program of Saskatchewan (NEPS) to consider undertaking an assessment of the need for a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process in the nursing program. The NEPS is a collaborative academic venture between the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan (U of S) and the Nursing Division, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) Kelsey and Wascana Campuses.

In response, the College of Nursing, University of Saskatchewan and the Nursing Division, SIAST put forth a joint research proposal, which has been funded through JobStart/Future Skills Sector Partnerships Program, Saskatchewan Learning, to investigate the potential use of PLAR as one possible strategy that may facilitate the progression of students through the NEPS.

In post-secondary education, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a systematic process of assessing, recognizing, and awarding credit for learning (knowledge, skills, values, etc.) that meets the course intents of an accredited course or program, but which has been gained outside of formal education through a variety of means, such as work, non-credit courses, industry training, volunteer activities, life experiences, and so on.

Currently, there is not a process in place within the program that would allow NEPS students to receive credit for prior learning obtained through non-formal means. In late 2002, the NEPS engaged The Calibre Group of Companies to undertake an assessment of the need for a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process in the NEPS.

The needs assessment included three stages of research that were guided by project managers from the NEPS and a Steering Committee comprised of representatives from a wide range of stakeholders associated with nursing education and practice in Saskatchewan.

The first stage of research involved a review of literature and personal contacts to identify how PLAR is utilized in other nursing baccalaureate/diploma programs, or related health-care programs, and its level of success. The second stage of research focused on examining the need for developing a PLAR process in the NEPS. This research involved the development and execution of a student survey to identify the level of demand NEPS students, with previous health-care or other related prior learning, may have for utilizing PLAR in the program once admitted to the NEPS; and, to assess whether these students perceive they have a significant level of relevant prior learning to merit developing a PLAR process. The final stage of research consisted of a focus group session that included student representation from specific occupational groups identified in the student survey (Home Care Special Care Aides, Licensed Practical Nurses, Emergency Medical Technicians). The objective of the focus group session was to more fully understand these students' perceived level of prior learning and to gain further insight into the students' opinions regarding the utilization of a PLAR process in the NEPS.

As well, the survey and focus group activities, with their associated methodologies and research instruments, were submitted to and approved by SIAST, the College of Nursing Research Committee, and the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Ethics Committee.

Literature Review

The PLAR Needs Assessment was designed to provide the NEPS with an understanding of how PLAR may be used in a nursing program; to assess the level of perceived learning students with health care experience feel they bring to the NEPS; and to identify their level of interest in utilizing a PLAR process.

The findings of the literature review provided information regarding some best practices and critical issues regarding the utilization of PLAR in nursing programs, which can be used by the NEPS to examine the feasibility of establishing a PLAR process for the nursing baccalaureate program in Saskatchewan.

The results indicate that post-secondary institutions are in varying stages on a 'learning curve' with respect to developing and implementing a successful PLAR process. Some nursing programs are just developing PLAR processes. Others are finding it necessary to revise and improve upon their existing PLAR policies, procedures, and assessment methods, in order to balance the needs of learners and faculty/the institution, and to stimulate demand for PLAR from the student body. These institutions are now beginning to refine original PLAR guidelines, assessment tools, and criteria which were found to be too vague or too cumbersome to provide students with the tools needed to effectively and efficiently undergo a PLAR assessment. Faculty and assessors are beginning to offer alternative flexible forms of assessment to learners, such as: portfolio assessment; skill demonstrations; or workplace assessments that more effectively enable the learner provide evidence of their prior learning.

The design of a PLAR process in any institution must take into consideration the many factors that could impact student demand for these services, such as: high financial and human resource costs; arduous administrative requirements; inadequate communication to students of assessment guidelines and requirements resulting in wasted time and repetitious work; a lack of awareness and understanding of the PLAR process and the potential benefits; or, the risk that course credits obtained through PLAR will not be recognized by other formal post-secondary institutions and will be non-transferable.

They must also consider factors that could impede the successful delivery of PLAR services, such as an inability to secure adequate funding to meet the significant costs of PLAR (as mentioned earlier, some institutions have had to scale back or stop PLAR activities due to a lack of funding); the need for proper remuneration of faculty for providing these services, and a fair allocation of PLAR duties in addition to existing workloads; or the need to conduct faculty orientation and consultation sessions to achieve a greater commitment to and understanding of the PLAR process.

The literature review and case studies revealed several best practices to consider adopting when implementing or revising a PLAR process, including: the determination of actual costs for the development and delivery of PLAR advising and assessment services; securing a project champion and the necessary resources for PLAR developmental and implementation activities; preparation of PLAR course blueprints that describe courses in terms of intended course outcomes, and the criteria for specific skills and knowledge to be demonstrated; providing adequate orientation or training courses to the faculty and the students regarding the assessment process; offering flexible methods of assessment and perhaps modularizing courses to assist in facilitating "top-up" training; streamlining assessment process to minimize time, cost, and paperwork for PLAR candidates; and developing informational and promotional

materials (hard copy and/or electronic) for students and faculty directed at the education and awareness of the PLAR process, policies, and procedures.

Student Survey

The findings of the student survey indicate there is majority support in the student body (three-quarters of the students surveyed) for utilizing PLAR to obtain credit for learning acquired outside of formal post-secondary training that meets the course intents of the NEPS. The full report of survey results is available in Appendix One.

Students indicated they had prior learning that could meet the majority of all of the course intents primarily for first and second year courses in the NEPS. Students indicated their prior learning has been obtained primarily through either formal post-secondary education or work experience.

Well over half of the students surveyed have some previous work experience in the health care industry. It was discovered that there is a large pool of students who have experience as Home Care/Special Care Aides. Although not formally educated, these individuals indicated they have a significant amount of prior learning. Additional occupational cohorts that also feel they meet the majority or all of the NEPS course intents are Licensed Practical Nurses and Emergency Medical Technicians.

For those students that indicated they had prior learning, the majority felt this learning was recent (within the last five years), and that they could provide evidence of the learning.

Focus Group

The findings from the student focus group session presented valuable insight into the students' perceptions and opinions regarding the level of prior learning individuals with health care experience may bring to the NEPS, and the level and type of participation students may be willing to provide for a PLAR process. The focus group concentrated on obtaining feedback from those occupational cohorts that had been identified in the student survey as having a significant level of prior learning, which included Home Care/Special Care Aides, Licensed Practical Nurses, and Emergency Medical Technicians.

The students who participated in the focus group session feel there are clear discrepancies between the knowledge some students bring to the NEPS and what they are awarded credit for. They believe their prior work, academic, or volunteer/life experiences have prepared them well for the many of the clinical aspects and some human skills aspects of the first two years of the NEPS. Students who practice as Licensed Practical Nurses feel there are a broader range of courses that they have the required knowledge and skills for, but for which they have not received recognition or credit. For students with prior learning, some components of the NEPS are repetitive and are not adding to the student's knowledge of nursing. Furthermore, some students do not feel they are receiving value for the money or time they are putting toward their education.

The students indicated they would appreciate the opportunity to utilize flexible forms of assessment that would enable them to obtain credit for learning that they feel meets the course intents of specific NEPS courses, but for which they have not been able to have recognized through traditional credit granting processes. However, they did place some conditions on the use of PLAR. For instance, the assessment process would need to be flexible and tailored to

the unique needs and learning background of the student. There would need to be specific and clear guidelines provided to the student regarding the course intents to be met. The assessor would have to conduct a fairly comprehensive preliminary assessment with the PLAR candidates to ensure they did not spend time, effort, and money demonstrating learning that was inadequate to be awarded credit for the course. Finally, the level of effort and cost of the assessment services would have to be a fraction of that for a normal course, in order for students to realize sufficient benefit to utilize PLAR services over traditional course attendance.

The need for a prior learning assessment and recognition process that can be applied on a case-by-case basis was demonstrated in the diversity of backgrounds presented during the focus group session. For instance, even within an occupational category, students possess various levels of experience, training, and knowledge. One student reported having 10 years of experience as a resident care aide. This student had the opportunity to work with a progressive institution that allowed her to attend numerous seminars, which enriched her knowledge and skill base, above what home care/special care aides in other institutions may learn or experience. The other students with experience as Home Care/Special Care Aides agreed that while they have all obtained good knowledge and practice of basic care principles in their jobs, their learning was not as extensive as this individual.

Recommendations

The findings of the literature review, student survey, focus group session, and steering committee feedback provided valuable direction for the recommendations and next steps the NEPS should take with regard to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.

The following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. The NEPS should continue with activities around the implementation and monitoring of a pilot course (NURS 115.3 Core Concepts of Care) for PLAR, in the fall session of 2003/04.**

The results of the student survey indicate there is majority support in the student body (three-quarters of the students surveyed) for utilizing PLAR to obtain credit for learning acquired outside of formal post-secondary training, which meets the course intents of the NEPS.

The student feedback from the focus group session confirmed the appropriateness of the plans the NEPS have been making for offering a pilot PLAR process for NURS 115.3 in 2003-2004 Regular Session. Students participants in the focus group believe their prior work, volunteer/life experiences, and academic formation has prepared them well for the many of the clinical aspects and for some human skills aspects of the first two years of the NEPS. NURS 115.3 was one of the first classes the students felt should be readied for PLAR. The students indicated that those learners with previous experience working in the health-care system working (i.e., LPNs, HC/SCAs, EMTs, etc.) were already competent regarding the basic concepts of care, and felt they should have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge, especially in the practical portion of NURS 115.3.

- 2. The NEPS should seek funding for and implement a cost/benefit analysis of undertaking a PLAR process in the nursing program.**

Faculty orientation, development, assessment, and remuneration
Student orientation, workload/time, fees, PLAR student liaison
Institutional support implications
Transferability of PLAR credits to other institutions

Both the literature review and direct contacts emphasized a number of critical issues that may hinder any proposed PLAR initiatives. These issues revolve around insufficient funding and human resources to deliver PLAR and support students through the process; low subscription rates by students and prospective students due to arduous time and cost requirements; as well as the risk that a PLAR credit gained at one institution may not be recognized by another due to non-standardized reporting requirements.

The unanimous advice is to ensure that all costs and resource requirements are identified in the planning stages leading to a PLAR process, and that sufficient funding is in place to meet the significant costs of developing *and* implementing PLAR (as mentioned earlier, some institutions have had to scale back or stop PLAR activities due to a lack of initial or continued funding).

As a result, it is recommended the NEPS undergo a cost/benefit analysis to determine whether it is feasible to develop and deliver a PLAR process that meets the needs of both the institution and the students.

3. **Provided the cost/benefit analysis indicates it is feasible to proceed further with PLAR, the NEPS should seek funding for PLAR development and implementation of selected NEPS courses as identified in the project.**
4. **The NEPS should conduct an ongoing review of transfer credit for formal learning from accredited post-secondary institutions.**

In recognition that student learning, which meets the learning outcomes of a NEPS course, can be previously acquired from another accredited post-secondary institution(s), and that other types of educational programs are continuously evolving, the NEPS will need to continue their review of transfer of credit possibilities on an ongoing basis.

5. **The NEPS should demonstrate continued commitment to processes that acknowledge prior learning of NEPS students.**
 - a. **Exploring NEPS curriculum activities supportive of PLAR, bridging, and other RPL options.**
 - b. **Exploring other health-related initiatives that are currently undertaking PLAR strategies to enhance career laddering.**
 - c. **Supporting interdisciplinary educational programming that allows for RPL possibilities within the health disciplines.**

Secondary research and ongoing communication with health-care sector partners has revealed there are several initiatives currently being undertaken or in the planning stages to examine the potential for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) strategies (Saskatchewan Learning includes three major forms of learning recognition in its definition of RPL: Credit Transfer, Qualification Recognition, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition).

The NEPS should continue to engage in curriculum review activities/programming and participate on interdisciplinary committees in order to: share knowledge and best practices gained from research, avoid duplication of research efforts, or to learn about other options of recognizing learning to facilitate the faster progression of students through the NEPS.

Next Steps

The NEPS recognizes the need for the ongoing review of related health care programs and initiatives for RPL options and alternative approaches to credit granting. As part of its ongoing curriculum process, the NEPS is already addressing recommendations number one and four. For recommendation number one, the NEPS is in the process of launching a pilot PLAR course for NURS 115.3 Core Concepts of Care in the academic year 2003/04.

Additional actions the NEPS will be taking in the future as a result of the needs assessment findings and recommendations include:

- 1. The development of a communication strategy regarding the release of the needs assessment report.**
 - a. Publish electronic copy of report on SIAST and U of S websites.**
 - b. The Steering Committee members will be responsible for disseminating the final report to its respective constituents/members.**
- 2. The submission of a request for funding to explore possible strategies regarding recognition of prior learning in the NEPS.**
- 3. The implementation of recommendation number five to demonstrate continued commitment to processes that acknowledge prior learning of NEPS students.**
 - a. Exploring NEPS curriculum activities supportive of PLAR, bridging, and other RPL options.**
 - b. Exploring other health-related initiatives that are currently undertaking PLAR strategies to enhance career laddering.**
 - c. Supporting interdisciplinary educational programming that allows for RPL possibilities within the health disciplines.**