Saskatchewan Learning

Saskatchewan Learning Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Enhancement Funding Initiative

FINAL REPORT

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Acknowledgements

This publication reports on the Saskatchewan Learning* Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Enhancement Funding Initiative undertaken and sponsored by:

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* Originally, this project was named the Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training (PSEST) PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative which received funding from PSEST in 2000 – 01 and 2001 – 02. Effective, April 1, 2002, PSEST was amalgamated into a new department called Saskatchewan Learning. Therefore, this project has been renamed the Saskatchewan Learning PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative, and all subsequent references in this report will be to Saskatchewan Learning.

Table of Contents

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following is a summary of lessons learned and best practices gleaned from the reports of the eleven Pilot Projects participating in the Saskatchewan Learning Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Enhancement Funding Initiative. The lessons learned and best practices are included to provide you with an understanding of some of the challenges encountered within a wide array of initiatives. The common themes arising from the responses of the Pilot Project Respondents are summarized in the table below.

LESSONS LEARNED	BEST PRACTICES

PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING

LESSONS LEARNED	BEST PRACTICES
Inexperience can result in broad or vague goals and unrealistic timelines	Gain expert advice early on to gain insight for developing a realistic action plan, with flexibility to respond to unexpected events
Tracking progress can be challenging if milestones are not mapped out ahead of time	Build a plan of action including multiple steps (milestones); understand that glitches can occur along the way – undertake a pilot to identify any necessary modifications prior to broad distribution
Unexpected delays can result from time-consuming endeavours to build internal understanding and expertise	Plan up-front time for awareness building and professional development; pull in external, relevant expertise to expedite the process
Disillusionment and resistance can result if people feel their expectations were not met and their individual priorities not considered	Clearly articulate roles and expectations during the planning process, while allowing for feedback

SEAMLESS INTEGRATION

LESSONS LEARNED	BEST PRACTICES
If participants do not perceive value in PLAR, they may not involve themselves in activities, especially if they see involvement as optional	Incorporating PLAR into a program calendar and course outlines normalizes processes for participants
Courses may appear disjointed and fragmented if each one is developed individually	Explore options for complementing and building on previous courses when developing PLAR processes (e.g., prerequisites and their companion courses)
Not all curricula are developed with clearly defined learning outcomes; to incorporate PLAR assessments into courses can require extra steps	Develop curricula with clearly articulated learning outcomes based on reflection of the desired development of students – integrating values, philosophy, etc. in addition to skills

STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

Lack of input into process can result in resistance or possibly opposition	Consult early and often to gain broad support and increase stakeholder buy-in
Lack of awareness of PLAR (processes, challenges and benefits) can result in initial reluctance and resistance	Educate as you consult; use language appropriate for the audience to disseminate information and build awareness and support
External partners may be sceptical or cynical of PLAR processes	Involve external partners in the process and keep them posted on developments
Scheduling and other factors can affect the level of achievement of initiatives	Consulting with relevant stakeholders gives advance notice of potential external factors that could have negatively affected the optimal realization of an initiative

MAXIMIZING INVESTMENT

Funding is limited which can reduce access to human and material resources	Funding can assist with hard costs of initiatives, which may not be available in institutional budgets; in-kind contributions help make the most of existing resources
Developing original materials can be time-consuming; however relevant materials and resources can be difficult to access	Build on existing materials and adapt them to fit institutional contexts helps maximize initial investments; access to existing models and tools will enable greater results without 'reinventing the wheel'

WELCOME CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

Change is difficult and undertaking new, innovative initiatives can cause challenges. Adults with experience in their field may be reluctant to take on new learning	Lifelong learning is at the center of PLAR. Anyone undertaking a new or innovative initiative will experience a learning curve and will become an "adult learner"
Individuals may be hesitant to take on new initiatives that could involve risks. When outcomes may not result according to plan, people may feel that they have "failed"; there is a narrow definition of success	Initiatives may be implemented exactly as planned or not, and still be considered successful. Indeed, valuable insight can be gained through reflection and identification of significant learning, especially from challenging experiences

RECOGNIZING EXPERTISE

Champions take on new initiatives in addition to their current priorities	Recognize the contribution of champions
We are often unaware of local materials and resources	Sharing materials for others to build upon and learn from. A central location will increase awareness of and access to resources
Information streams are sometimes unclear and limited professional development for advisors and assessors can cause inefficiencies	Recognize importance of skilful advising and assessing; clear referral pathways and credible assessment

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Undertaking PLAR activities in addition to existing responsibilities can present challenges, especially if those involved are experiencing a steep learning curve	Develop and/or offer professional development opportunities to provide opportunities to exchange, explore and expand on PLAR concepts, principles and strategies [1]
Many curricula are developed to include content based learning objectives which are often difficult to challenge	The development of curricula would ideally be undertaken by content experts with training in development of clear learning outcomes that identify performance indicators of the required knowledge, skills and abilities
Feelings of isolation and lack of support can impact a project and slow down or paralyse progress	Create support network with others in the field of practice
If only one individual within an organization possesses the understanding and expertise and that individual leaves, their professional memory is lost to the organization	Establish a pool of expertise from which an institution can draw, increasing sustainability of programs and processes through succession planning

SOUND ASSESSMENT

Negative perception of the PLAR Assessment process can affect opportunities for learners upon completion of the assessment	Establish transparent, rigorous, reliable and valid assessment processes, considering principles for sound assessment (e.g., inter-rater reliability, etc.)
Ambiguous learning goals and objectives can complicate the challenge process and inhibit successful implementation	Clearly defined learning outcomes can facilitate the challenge process for the assessor as well as the candidate; the candidate is aware

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[1] Also see Angie Wong (2000). *University Level Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Building Capacity for Institutional Response.* University of Saskatchewan; Saskatoon.

	of expectations
Students may not be able to successfully challenge the PLAR if the assessment tool does not appropriately assess knowledge, skills and attitudes	Ensure that the assessment processes (challenge methods) are relevant and flexible to adequately assess candidate knowledge, skills and attitudes, while maintaining educational standards

Understanding lessons learned and best practices provides a reference for future undertakings. It is anticipated that the learnings of these initiatives will inform subsequent advancements in the PLAR field. The body of the Saskatchewan Learning PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative: Final Report presents additional detail on these lessons learned and best practices, as well as an overview of the Pilot Projects, followed by a discussion of considerations and conclusions. The contributions of the Respondents to this Final Report are invaluable.

2 INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2000 Saskatchewan Learning launched a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Enhancement Funding Initiative. This initiative provided funding to eleven Pilot Projects undertaken in various sectors of the post-secondary learning system (Universities, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST), Regional Colleges, Aboriginal Educational Institutions and a Private Vocational School). The funding was designed to support capacity building initiatives within the Saskatchewan post-secondary learning sector. The following criteria were used as a basis for approval of the Pilot Projects:
   1) demonstration of institutional readiness to "action" PLAR;
   2) a project work plan or description; and
   3) project outcomes enhanced long-term capacity building for PLAR in the institution/province.

Pilot Projects were initiated by approaching individuals within post-secondary institutions who had existing experience with or understanding of PLAR. These contacts were asked to identify others who could also be interested in pursuing Pilot Projects. Several of the PLAR champions involved in these eleven Pilot Projects were building on their previous experience in earlier pilot projects. Indeed, some programs at the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan had participated in the Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project (1998-99)[2]. Building upon these earlier pilot projects enables the advancement of understanding and capacity in the field of PLAR.

The eleven Pilot Projects undertaken throughout the province comprise a range of activities geared toward building capacity in PLAR. The activities undertaken include creating PLAR assessment tools, developing a database for PLAR-Ready courses, designing and delivering portfolio development processes, and undertaking portfolio assessments. Additional information on the Pilot Projects can be found in the Saskatchewan Learning Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Enhancement Funding Initiative: Progress Report[3] (hereafter referred to as the 'Progress Report'). Since the completion of the Progress Report many processes, materials and tools developed as part of the Pilot Projects have been successfully implemented. Other processes, materials, and tools are still undergoing discussion and refinement.

To support capacity building initiatives in the field of PLAR, Saskatchewan Learning disbursed $30,000 dollars in the 2000 fiscal year and $30,000 in the 2001 fiscal year for the Pilot Projects. Each Pilot Project was provided $5,000 dollars to support the development of the PLAR Enhancement Initiatives, with the exception of one. This Pilot Project received an additional $5,000 to offset the costs for the technological requirements of the development of an online database of PLAR-Ready courses. The background to these initiatives is detailed in the Progress Report.

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[2] See Wong (2000) for further information on the Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project
[3] Saskatchewan Learning Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Funding Enhancement Initiative: a progress report March 2002.

As outlined in the Progress Report:

> "When PSEST [now Saskatchewan Learning] allocated funding for the PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative, an opportunity to partner with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board [SLFDB] PLAR Services Project emerged. Since the PLAR Services Project (October 2000 – March 2002) aimed to build provincial long-term capacity for PLAR services, it was agreed that a formalized link would be timely and beneficial for the advancement of PLAR in the post-secondary learning system. Subsequently, PSEST provided funding and preliminary coordination services, while the PLAR Services Project provided ongoing resource support to pilot Coordinators and led the preparation of the Progress Report and […] Executive Summary." (Progress Report, 2002, p.4)

Whereas the Progress Report provided an overview of the background of the initiative and description of each Pilot Project, this report presents a brief overview of the Pilot Projects and an integrated synopsis of the responses to the final report questionnaire (see Appendix I) distributed in May 2002. The findings outlined in this report represent the lessons learned and best practices from an institutional perspective. Insights from the Progress Report are also included, when they provide additional illumination.

2.1 PILOT PROJECT OVERVIEWS
The main objectives and accomplishments of the Pilot Projects are presented below.

Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research Inc., Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (GDI-SUNTEP) incorporated presentation portfolios as an assessment tool for third-year students enrolled in Education Professional Studies (EPS) 215 & 225. Portfolio development and presentation were integrated as components that promote reflection and articulation of professional practice.

Northlands College developed an occupational profile for northern clerical workers and explored options for work-based clerical training through identification of gaps in learning. Gaps will be identified through interviews, job profiling and TOWES (Test of Workplace Essential Skills).

Regency College undertook a pilot to explore the option of introducing PLAR processes and practices to the hospitality/tourism management program delivered at the college.

The Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), Department of Indian Social Work developed a PLAR assessment tool for the practicum course and completed a trial assessment of a learner portfolio. The Department is reviewing the process and exploring courses in which PLAR may provide benefit for social work students and faculty.

The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT), Research, Planning and Development Department undertook the design and development of a PLAR needs assessment tool to determine PLAR readiness in the Home Health/Long Term Care Aide

program. The tool was administered to 20 students who participated in the training program.

The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) designed and developed a database to inventory the details of PLAR-Ready courses available at SIAST programs. The database was constructed and piloted in a test environment, and orientation sessions were delivered at SIAST campuses, where participants emphasized the potential benefits for advising, documentation and statistics. Full implementation is anticipated in Spring 2003.

Southeast Regional College, Engaging the Labour Market piloted a service at the local level to create awareness of the opportunities and benefits of PLAR. Portfolio development workshops were also delivered to local communities, enabling rural residents to recognize and articulate their knowledge, skills and abilities.

The University of Regina (U of R), Counselling Services piloted portfolio development activities for university students. This included piloting services to inform students about learning and career portfolios, assisting students with portfolio development, revising the document "Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina," producing the pilot handbook "Building Your Portfolio: A Step-By-Step Guide," and supporting U of R services with development of appropriate services and resources. Counselling Services plans to continue offering group and individual assistance with portfolio development.

The University of Regina (U of R), Faculty of Administration aimed to develop a process for evaluating prior learning through learner portfolio assessment. Professional development and awareness building activities were undertaken as part of the pilot project. A link to the Executive MBA program is currently being further explored.

The University of Saskatchewan (U of S) College of Agriculture designed and developed a self-assessment tool to enhance students' ability to identify essential employability skills. PLAR principles, processes and tools were employed for the development of this tool, which will comprise a component of an exit portfolio for Co-op students. The completion of the framework for these portfolios is anticipated for the Spring/Summer 2003.

The University of Saskatchewan (U of S), College of Nursing set out to incorporate PLAR processes for the physical assessment course in the Post-Registration Program for nurses. Also included in the Pilot Project were professional development activities for faculty. At the time of writing this report, two students had successfully challenged the course through a PLAR process.

2.2   SUMMARY AND PREAMBLE
These eleven pilot projects reflect diverse goals, activities and outcomes within the field of PLAR. As pointed out in the Progress Report "differences among projects relates to the background and culture of the institutions, as well as the focus of the programs and their Coordinators" (p. 10). Valuable insight can be gleaned from these varied

experiences and create a foundation upon which increased capacity can be built in the future.

The following Section – Reflecting on the Projects – presents a discussion of the various challenges encountered, lessons learned, and best practices. Communicating these findings enables parties interested in undertaking PLAR initiatives to benefit from and build upon the experiences of these eleven Pilot Projects.

3   REFLECTING ON THE PROJECTS

Much of the value from undertaking Pilot Projects is the increased understanding of the challenges that one may encounter and the strategies available to address these challenges. There are also valuable lessons to be gained from examining the best practices found within the Pilot Projects. By reflecting upon these Pilot Projects, we can gain useful guidance for future endeavours in order to avoid or minimize some of the challenges encountered while building on the strengths identified. The lessons learned and best practices illustrated below (Section 2.1) incorporate the insights gleaned from the various experiences in the Pilot Projects, in an attempt to create a more profound understanding of the complexities inherent within these initiatives.

3.1   LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES – ILLUSTRATED

One of the key outcomes of Pilot Projects is the increased understanding of planning, developing, and implementing PLAR initiatives. The lessons learned and best practices that arise through reflection on the eleven Pilot Projects provide valuable foundations for future undertakings in the area of PLAR within the context of post-secondary learning system. Many of the lessons learned and best practices reported in the responses to the questionnaire for the Final Report mirror those included in the Progress Report and in Wong (2000).

3.1.1   Planning and Goal Setting

A key step when undertaking a new initiative is the planning and goal setting process. The up-front investment can be daunting, but effective planning can facilitate the overall implementation of a project.

Having clear, achievable goals is critical for a smooth completion of any initiative. Some Pilot Project Coordinators felt that their goals were initially written too broadly, perhaps due to their lack of familiarity with the operational considerations of PLAR. Prior to embarking on their project, the tasks appeared simple, however, once they commenced work, they realized the tasks were more complex than anticipated. For several Pilot Projects, the goals and action plan were revised to reflect deliverables that were more realistic within the constraints of available time and resources. Revisions were made as the faculty / instructors / staff developed greater understanding of the application of PLAR as they began implementing initiatives. Indeed, time needs to be built into the action plan to account for professional development and awareness building activities. In a few instances, Pilot Project Coordinators gained the input of knowledgeable experts with experience in the field.

Within the planning process, another important consideration is to incorporate milestones into the work plan. By incorporating multiple milestones, participants are able to receive ongoing feedback regarding their progress. Some Pilot Project Coordinators reported that although they did not originally plan to track service delivery, they realized that this could provide valuable feedback for further development. Establishing indicators to measure progress may require additional resources (financial and human), but can

provide valuable data to make ongoing planning more efficient (e.g., conduct cost/benefit analysis). The database of PLAR-Ready courses that SIAST developed as one of the Pilot Projects provides accurate and current information for documentation and statistical analysis. This will facilitate planning by providing access to data for effective decision-making.

Respondents identified two strategies for effective planning. First, because awareness of actual time requirements increases as you complete each stage of the process, it is important to build flexibility into your work plan. When planning new and innovative projects, the timelines set out for completion of tasks should be considered informed estimates. Unforeseen glitches can result in slight setbacks, but they will not derail progress if you are able to adapt to face the new challenges. The second strategy identified is to pilot new initiatives prior to broader distribution. In this way, wrinkles can be ironed out while the project is still manageable.

Another critical element of the planning process is to clearly articulate the anticipated roles and expectations of involved parties during the planning process. When individuals feel excluded from the planning process, they may offer resistance to the initiative. Including various parties' perspectives during the planning stage can increase support of initiatives, as well as identifying potential challenges the project can encounter. By identifying these challenges, expectations can be better managed than if the anticipated outcomes are presented as certainties. When people anticipate a certain result, but that outcome is unachievable due to unforeseen circumstances, disillusionment can result. It is important to be clear, inclusive and flexible in the planning stage.

3.1.2   Seamless Integration

To integrate PLAR processes seamlessly into a course or program is a critical factor for optimizing the benefits of PLAR. PLAR processes that are in alignment with the core values and philosophical underpinnings of a program can enhance the learning for students. Many Pilot Project Coordinators felt that while it is necessary to understand external approaches to PLAR, they needed to adapt these approaches to fit within their specific learning context. In this way, a distinction between the rigor, standards and integrity of the regular program was indiscernible to faculty / instructors / staff and learners from those in a PLAR process.

One of the challenges in accomplishing this seamless integration is that it may be necessary to develop learning outcomes for courses prior to conducting a PLAR assessment. In the course of undertaking the Pilot Projects, Coordinators became aware that courses would normally require developmental work prior to being PLAR ready. Undertaking the PLAR assessments also identified learning goals and objectives that would require reworking, thus providing a feedback loop into the curriculum development of courses and programs. The processes created and incorporated into the Pilot Projects, in many programs, have been or plan to be integrated into other courses where a fit is perceived.

One example of seamless integration would be to incorporate PLAR principles in course curricula. Presenting the PLAR processes explicitly in a course outline (such as was done by GDI-SUNTEP) including samples of evidence that students would need to include during the process, creates a connection between the course requirements and the portfolio process. In this manner, the PLAR processes (in this case specifically portfolio processes) are normalized as opposed to being perceived as extra work. As an integrated component, the activities built on "work that was already being done or completed in the school placements, so that the preparation was largely organizational rather than an activity that required a lot of materials to be generated" (GDI-SUNTEP – Final Report). By integrating portfolio processes from the start of courses, students develop comfort with the process so that upon completion of a course they are adept at articulating their learning.

Another example of integrating PLAR into the normal functioning of an institution is the database of PLAR-Ready courses at SIAST. The database creates a seamless connection between student counsellors or advisors and PLAR opportunities. If a student would like to challenge a course, they will be able to obtain information on which courses are PLAR-Ready, which challenge methods are available and what the corresponding fees will be. Then, when a course is challenged, this information is fed into the database. The creation of a database of PLAR-Ready courses across the SIAST system (four campuses) increases the capacity to deliver PLAR services through the province.

Another challenge when implementing PLAR processes is to ensure that courses that build on one another are indeed complementary; PLAR processes can help identify where the learning from one course is disjointed from the next. Through development of clear learning outcomes, and by exploring options for building on previous learning, prerequisites will have clear links to the subsequent courses.

3.1.3 *Stakeholder Involvement*

Stakeholder involvement plays an important role in increasing buy-in and support of new initiatives. As previously stated in Section 2.1.1, people are more likely to support initiatives if they feel that they had input to the process and that their input was considered.

One of the key steps in stakeholder involvement is awareness building, as participants need to understand the concept for which they will provide feedback. This requires that information be presented in accessible terminology and in an appropriate format. If the stakeholders are kept informed during the consultation process, the input they provide can be enhanced. Understanding the potential interests of the target audience also enables development and delivery of relevant awareness building activities including effective materials.

For the development of a holistic process, multiple stakeholder involvement is beneficial. The Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies Pilot Project Coordinator stated that in a First Nations environment, the involvement of elders and community leaders can provide valuable guidance for a project. The support of the elders and community

leaders may be essential for the successful implementation of a project, as these individuals usually play key roles in the process and in target communities. Those involved in the Pilot Project at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College also identified the inclusion of all stakeholders in the planning, design, development and implementation of any project is essential. In addition, if you encounter some initial opposition, you may be encouraged to respond to criticism which enables you to improve the project overall. As stated in the Progress Report "sometimes by raising difficult questions, the critic can help develop thoughtful strategies that avoid problems in the long run" (p. 48). By involving multiple stakeholders early in the process, we can gain support and buy-in, as well as increased insight.

Involving external stakeholders in the overall process also provides valuable input to the process, as well as offering recognition of the contribution they make. For example, the GDI-SUNTEP Pilot Project emphasized the importance of involving the participating classroom teachers in the process. In this way, all stakeholders, "teachers, students, faculty advisors and EPS instructors are able to work together to strengthen the PD cycle and associated skills over the course of the Pre-internship and in preparation for the Internship." The involvement of the participating teachers also demonstrates the "recognition of the importance of the co-operating teachers' role in students' readiness for internship." By involving the external partners early in the process, they will gain a deeper understanding of the process and the benefits to themselves and learners. In addition, if you are anticipating people to provide feedback in a certain format, it is beneficial to orient them to the relevant tools and clarify expectations ahead of time.

3.1.4   Maximizing Investment

Because funding for initiatives is limited, efficient use of available funds is essential. Limited funding can affect the availability of human as well as material resources to undertake new projects. Reducing redundancy and increasing the potential benefits of any individual development are some strategies to increase efficiency and maximize investments.

Many Pilot Projects identified limited human resources as a key challenge they face when attempting to implement new initiatives. The University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing Pilot Project Coordinator identified the workload of faculty as something they considered when undertaking the Pilot Project, as the work of revising the specified course to make the course PLAR-ready was in addition to regular workload for the faculty involved. The Pilot Project Coordinator reported that "implementation of PLAR is expensive and time consuming for the Colleges involved and for Student and Enrolment Services Division. If implementation of PLAR is to be done, there needs to be funding for the time and services offered." Support in the form of "time release, assistance with expressing learning outcomes and how to measure the learning, and identification of appropriate strategies for students to document learning for a particular course" will greatly enhance the process.

Extensive in-kind contributions were made within all institutions undertaking the Pilot Projects. Faculty / instructors / staff were involved in activities such as material

development, delivering workshops, documentation, attending and presenting at conferences, professional development, advising and assessing learners, research, etc. Reported in-kind contributions ranged from two to six times the monies received. The financial support was primarily used for hard costs for which monies did not currently exist in the budget. The in-kind contributions often consisted of person hours, although some Pilot Projects also included matching funds. The Pilot Projects were achievable based on the commitment of the champions and participants. Nevertheless, the system is not sustainable without recognition and compensation for the contributions made.

One strategy to increase the return on investment is by exchanging ideas and resources, and collaborating whenever possible. Materials and expertise may be limited or difficult to access; building on existing resources and identifying local expertise can increase efficiencies. Most Pilot Projects built on existing materials that they came upon, adapting them to suit their context. Several Pilot Projects built on material and training provided to them from the SLFDB – PLAR Services Project. Others searched for relevant resources, both human and material. Some examples of the resources identified by the Pilot Project Coordinators include:

a) Gabriel Dumont Institute: Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program (GDI-SUNTEP) built on the expertise provided by the Saskatchewan Learning PLAR Analyst. They also attended professional development workshops, such as the SLFDB-PLAR mini-session focused on PLAR Applications for an Aboriginal Model of Holistic Learning, led by Diane Hill of the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Ontario. They also used materials developed by the Phi Delta Kappa Centre for Professional Development as a foundation.
b) Northlands College built the clerical job profile based on Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) Essential Skills.
c) The University of Saskatchewan, College of Agriculture developed materials (to assist students with development of a learning inventory) based on material developed by the University of Guelph and Dalhousie University.

The Pilot Project Coordinators emphasized the importance of access to information and resources on PLAR for undertaking initiatives effectively with limited funding. A centralized information infrastructure and an effective means for exchanging ideas were identified as key priorities at the PLAR Forum held in April 2002 and echoed at the SLFDB Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Forum (October 2002). To facilitate the dissemination of tools and models developed in Saskatchewan, examples of materials developed are included at the end of this report (See Appendices II-VI).

3.1.5 Welcome Challenges and Learning
PLAR processes relate to identifying learning that occurs within a range of experiences and reflecting on this learning. As stated by a Pilot Project Respondent in the Progress Report, PLAR focuses "on the positive, looking with a 'strengths perspective'. Students are not to feel bad about weaknesses, but to see them as gaps in knowledge (Initial Advisor)" (Progress Report, p. 19). By focusing on strengths, all experiences have inherent value; even when a project does not achieve its initial intent, valuable learning

can still result. By reflecting on the challenges encountered and strategies that may (or may not) have worked to overcome these challenges, we can gain insight for future undertakings.

This principle also relates to the development of PLAR tools and processes, as they may evolve and undergo several revisions over time, as new information is required. Although key components may remain constant, tools and materials developed may require modifications as awareness increases. Furthermore, as understanding increased, so too did the recognition of additional applications of PLAR processes. For example, the GDI-SUNTEP Pilot Project Coordinator reported that:

> "We feel that the project objectives were met and that this initial experience with presentation portfolios was excellent. Over the course of the semester the way we understood presentation portfolios developed and evolved, as we have learned more, we can see other possibilities. This has been a good learning experience for us all."

The process of reflecting on the learning is also identified as a key element of PLAR practice, for use as a developmental and/or assessment tool. Within various Pilot Projects, students were provided with opportunities to develop proficiency in reflecting on and articulating learning as a formative process. Resources used to assist students in compiling and analyzing their ability to achieve identified learning outcomes include reflective journals, learning inventories, and portfolios. Following involvement in this formative process, the learners were better equipped to succeed in the assessment phase. The participants in the portfolio process were not only able to clearly articulate their learning, but they were able to articulate it using appropriate technical terminology while naturally integrating philosophical and value statements.

Several Pilot Project Coordinators identified their increased knowledge and understanding of PLAR as a valuable outcome of participating in these initiatives. The champions of these Pilot Projects became learners within this process. As the U of S, College of Agriculture Respondent "identified one of the key accomplishments of being involved in the process was enhancing her ability to articulate elements/concepts of PLAR. Following the development and implementation of this project, the Coordinator is better able to articulate learning (knowledge and skills) and to reconceptualize PLAR processes and tools (develop a matrix of PLAR). Another accomplishment identified by the Coordinator is the increased confidence and skills to take on PLAR" (Progress Report, p. 32).

Several respondents pointed out that a best practice is to model PLAR principles for others to emulate. This modelling would be undertaken in addition to incorporating PLAR principles into processes, materials and assessment tools. For several champions, a philosophical shift occurred as they developed more profound understanding of PLAR – moving from a traditional approach to teaching and testing to a more holistic understanding of learning and assessment. This shift may be difficult to express, but more readily modelled. The Pilot Project Coordinator at the University of Saskatchewan,

College of Agriculture underscored the inherent value in modelling desired behaviour, because through modelling, faculty members can pass on desired skills, knowledge and attitudes that they wish to instil in their students.

3.1.6   *Recognizing Expertise*

Recognition plays a central role in PLAR, as individuals' prior learning is systematically assessed and recognized. Nevertheless, recognition of the accomplishments of the numerous contributors and experts in the field of PLAR is perhaps less prominent than it deserves to be. Acknowledgement of local expertise is an integral component to the development of an efficient and effective PLAR system. Furthermore, it is imperative to show appreciation of the commitment and achievements of the numerous participants in the process, lest their motivation diminish. Motivation is more likely to thrive in a positive, supportive environment; recognizing the expertise of the various stakeholders in the process helps create such an environment.

The primary responsibility for developing the PLAR Enhancement Initiatives was borne by the Pilot Project Coordinators, although some had the support of their colleagues or a work team. Because the Pilot Projects were undertaken in addition to their regular teaching, administrative, and/or research duties, recognition of their contribution and commitment is essential. Wong (2000) identifies "one of the biggest challenges to universities is to engage faculty and staff, whose time is already stretched severely, in PLAR-related instructional development activities. Faculty need to have appropriate tools and resources to support PLAR, and to receive assurance that they will [be] compensated or recognized for their time and effort." These sentiments were echoed among the Respondents who participated in these Pilot Projects.

Once a PLAR initiative is underway, the role of a proficient PLAR advisor and/or assessor is invaluable. The Respondent on behalf of the University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing emphasized that:

> "The role of the PLAR advisor is very important. The background and experiences of the person (candidate) need to be carefully considered when counselling students as to whether they should proceed with their application for PLAR."

Skilful advisors can maximize efficiencies in the referral process. Candidates may believe that their experience is sufficient for a PLAR challenge, however, the role of the advisor is to work with the candidate to determine whether the learning from their experience is adequate to successfully undergo a PLAR challenge. This slight distinction between the experience and the learning arising from the experience rests at the core of PLAR. An adept advisor can assist the candidate to perceive this distinction and ensure the candidate's learning will likely fulfil the requirements of the course or program learning outcomes prior to proceeding through a PLAR assessment.

3.1.7 Community of Practice

Establishing a community of practice is an invaluable response to the challenges that stakeholders may encounter. Creating networks, participating in working groups, and delivering professional development sessions contribute to the formation of a community of practice by enabling interchange of ideas and resources across the learning system. An additional benefit of this process is the cross-fertilization of ideas that can lead to creating a common vision of PLAR.

Communities of practice can strengthen institutional capacity through their involvement in the development of clear and consistent policies and criteria. Heads of institutions, departments or programs can provide valuable leadership, by supporting champions in their undertakings and encouraging open discussion of the multiple perspectives of PLAR processes and procedures. Given their position, Heads are able to encourage a culture that fosters creation of a community of practice.

In an effort to build communities of practice several Pilot Project Coordinators participated on committees relating to PLAR. These committees were involved in advancing PLAR in the institution through activities including the development of policies and procedures for PLAR processes and course challenges. One respondent pointed out how her role on the committee was critical for ongoing developments in PLAR, as there was often a need to gain support and acceptance at an institutional level (e.g., Registrar's office) prior to proceeding at the program/department level.

The foundations of communities of practice are established by ongoing awareness building and professional development. Acceptance of new initiatives can not be forced upon an institution, but can be engendered. "Given the anxiety expressed by many University of Saskatchewan faculty as to whether PLAR maintains academic integrity, the University and Colleges / Departments need to move slowly in implementing PLAR. It is important to first provide the wide university community with information about PLAR, what it is and what it involves." Delivering organized professional development opportunities to faculty can assist faculty / instructors / staff become comfortable with PLAR. In this regard, a key element of many of the Pilot Projects was the provision of professional development activities for faculty / instructors / staff.

An interesting realization arose in the responses of some Pilot Project Coordinators, who stated that the faculty / instructors / staff involved in new initiatives are often recently hired. Although recent hires may have some room in their schedules to take on new initiatives, they also have various competing priorities. For example, at the University level, assistant professors are undertaking steps to obtain tenure, which can place immense pressure on them to publish original research and excel in instruction. This leaves limited time and resources to commit to an initiative which will not necessarily forward their quest for tenure. Unless these multiple priorities are adequately addressed, progress on initiatives may be hampered or stalled completely. To address the challenges, new initiatives could be formally recognized, but regardless, these factors must be considered in the planning phase and appropriate strategies developed.

3.1.8   Sound Assessment

One of the challenges faced when implementing PLAR processes is to ensure the rigor and academic integrity of the assessment, while undertaking a process that is fair to the candidates.   The use of credible assessment practices was a strategy identified in the Pilot Projects to reassure stakeholders that the process is fair while maintaining integrity.

As already mentioned in the section on Seamless Integration, some courses are developed with learning goals and objectives that are vague, and could be interpreted in various ways. These goals and objectives need to be translated into learning outcomes that are less ambiguous, so that the expectations of the challenge process are clear. Several Pilot Project Coordinators outlined the relationship between clear learning outcomes and the validity and reliability of results. Consistent assessment is difficult to achieve when each individual involved in the process interprets the learning objectives differently. Furthermore, transparent challenge processes, with clearly articulated learning outcomes greatly enhances the chance of a candidate successfully challenging a course or program. Or, if candidates are unable to successfully challenge the process, they can readily identify the areas for improvement.

Given the importance of the academic integrity of a PLAR assessment, Pilot Project Respondents stressed the importance of ensuring that the assessment will be seen as credible and rigorous. One strategy noted by a Respondent is to remove any potential perception of bias in the assessment. The University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing identified the potential impact on the credibility of results if assessors are from the same city / learning institution as the candidates. To limit perception of bias, it was suggested that assessors from different locations be called on to conduct the assessment. Inter-rater reliability also needs to be examined as a component of the assessment process, to determine the consistency of results. For the Pilot Project at the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, to ensure that all of the candidates received the same orientation to the tool, a script was developed for the assessor to follow while undertaking the assessment.

Because many students are not familiar with PLAR processes, providing candidates with orientation to the process is an important step. Students may have the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are required to fulfil the learning outcomes, but may not be able to clearly articulate them. Working with a student to identify their skills and goals can assist the learner in beginning to conceptualize their learning in a new way. Indeed, a key element of PLAR is to build from where people are at: undertake a needs assessment, identify goals, and identify steps to achieve the goals. Working through this process with students is a key strategy to assist the candidate in achieving a successful result; in addition, this ensures the candidate is appropriately guided along referral pathways.

Well-thought out tools are another recommendation for effectively undertaking PLAR. Tools developed for assessment or developmental purposes need to be clear, relevant, and user-friendly. Some Pilot Projects developed standard protocols for portfolio assessment, based on the learning outcomes of a course. GDI-SUNTEP developed rubrics that

included criteria and descriptors for the students to fill out. Following portfolio presentations by a cohort group, the Pilot Project Coordinator indicated that additional descriptors would enable students to complete the self-evaluation more effectively.

3.2 SYNOPSIS

The lessons learned and best practices presented in the previous section represent the key elements identified by the Respondents to the Final Report Questionnaire. Additional information on factors to consider when undertaking a PLAR initiative can be found in the Progress Report (Section 4). The Progress Report identified twelve factors for success, challenges, resources and strategies. These include:

- Demands on time
- Time for learning
- Access to information and training
- Financial resources
- Planning and preparation
- Communication
- Building awareness
- Resistance to change
- Flexibility
- Champions and internal support
- Industry and employer buy-in
- Acknowledgement of Staff

Many of the lessons learned and best practices presented in this Final Report reiterate the above-mentioned factors, however from a different perspective. The lessons learned and best practices included in this report reflect a framework for addressing challenges that a champion could consider when taking on a PLAR initiative. This framework is based on concrete strategies, while encouraging an exploration of organizational culture, values, and principles.

4 CONSIDERATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although there are myriad benefits to be gained from using PLAR principles and processes, up front deliberations of the potential challenges is recommended. Advantages can be accompanied by risks or disadvantages. These factors should be contemplated prior to embarking on an initiative. As we learn from previous experience, we can transfer this prior learning to our current situation. In this way, we may be able to avoid previously experienced challenges and pitfalls.

This section of the report presents factors that should be considered when undertaking a PLAR initiative, as well as presenting some key conclusions resulting from the eleven Pilot Projects.

4.1 CONSIDERATIONS

Reflecting on the Pilot Projects enables conceptualization of the variety of ways in which PLAR can be implemented in the post-secondary learning system. There are numerous potential benefits of PLAR for programs, instructors and learners, however "it is evident that ongoing exploration of PLAR concepts and processes are required to further examine the implementation of PLAR within the context of post-secondary institutions" (Progress Report, p. 47). With any new or innovative initiatives there are inherent risks as well as benefits.

Willingness to take on risks is a key characteristic of the Pilot Project Coordinators. Prior to commencing their involvement in the Pilot Projects, many of the Coordinators did not have previous experience with PLAR; they encountered a steep learning curve. In many cases, it was faith in the potential benefits of PLAR that compelled them to carry the Pilot Projects forward. Even those with experience in PLAR could not be assured that their Pilot Project would unfold as planned. For those without previous PLAR experience, embarking on this journey implied tremendous uncertainty for the Pilot Project Coordinators, as they navigated unfamiliar terrain. In spite of the potential risks, the Pilot Projects were championed, with numerous valuable results.

Managing risks can be achieved through the contemplation of the myriad potential outcomes of the initiative. Although many individuals would prefer to work in isolation and avoid any possible criticism, gaining input can increase awareness of potential pitfalls, in addition to garnering support. "By raising difficult questions, the critic can help develop thoughtful strategies that avoid problems in the long run" (Progress Report, p. 47)

Another significant outcome of the Pilot Projects is the realization that demand, readiness and a champion are necessary, although not always sufficient, conditions to move forward with an initiative. While these factors must converge for progress to occur, there must also be access to resources to support initiatives. Available human and financial resources are essential for building capacity in a field of practice. Pilot Project Coordinators who have successfully implemented their initiatives underscore the importance of ongoing support, especially in the form of human and financial resources.

In many instances, tremendous in-kind contributions were made; they realize that although this can accomplish great results in the short-term, it is non-sustainable.

Indeed, through the course of the Pilot Projects, the Coordinators identified the need to access information and resources as key for undertaking such initiatives. Many Pilot Project Coordinators adapted existing materials to suit the context of their program / organization. They also called on external expertise, when available, to expedite the learning and development process. "It is extremely beneficial to have people with a well-developed understanding of PLAR and of the specific context. GDI-SUNTEP identified Diane Hill as a good resource because she understands the challenges of working in a small organization within a large institution, as well as working within Aboriginal communities" (Progress Report, p. 15).

Establishing appropriate support systems was mentioned in the Progress Report, at the PLAR Forum (April 2002), the SLFDB-RPL Forum (October 2002) and in the Final Report Responses. Due to the diversity of the initiatives, however, there must be flexibility in the types and level of support offered to the Pilot Projects. "The PLAR Analyst observed that the level and type of support 'varied from project to project, ranging form minimal to significant support. The support provided to the Coordinators included work planning, access to resource materials, delivery of professional development workshops and solicitation of ideas" (Progress Report, p. 40). The level of support required also varied among the Pilot Projects, depending on the degree of readiness of the Pilot Project Coordinators and their colleagues.

Another consideration when undertaking new initiatives is that learning will take place for all parties involved. Pilot Project Coordinators said that by designing, developing and implementing these initiatives they increased their proficiency and knowledge of PLAR processes and principles. In addition to potentially making a large personal investment in the initiative, they were also stepping out on a limb professionally. Any new initiatives must maintain the integrity of the program.

Many of the activities highlighted in the Pilot Projects exemplify adult learning principles. Through the implementation of PLAR principles such as by developing learning portfolios, an outcome of "the pilot project was to assist students in becoming more involved in the assessment process and to develop ownership of their professional development" (Progress Report, p. 13). The focus of the learning and assessment processes moved away from a traditional teacher-centered model, to one that was more student-centered.

A Respondent for the Progress Report stated "What is required is basically a paradigm shift from a teacher-centered approach to education. Our teacher-centered approach has relied on and created a construct that learning takes place and is in the hands of authority. There is a concept that learning happens external to you, rather than being integral to the power of the individual. We are talking about a shift from that to understand that learning takes place in many ways. It democratizes the learning environment and is no longer elitist. Getting away from the elitist process is a movement from learning happens

to me, to learning happens within me. Once the paradigm shift happens, they click on and whoosh! Then the question becomes how can I allow this person to show what they have learned." (Progress Report, p. 35)

Thus, through involvement in the Pilot Projects, the champions became both learners and proponents. While having access to support and resources is essential, the champions need to feel comfortable entering the unknown. The Pilot Project Coordinators believed that the potential benefits of their initiatives outweighed any potential risks. The valuable and varied accomplishments of the Pilot Projects demonstrate that their convictions were justified.

4.2   CONCLUSIONS

This Final Report presents an overview of the Lessons Learned and Best Practices from the eleven Pilot Projects participating in the Saskatchewan Learning PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative. A Progress Report was prepared by the SLFDB-PLAR Services Project that presented more detailed overviews of the individual Pilot Projects. This Final Report provides an overview of the key learnings arising from the Pilot Projects in an effort to advance the practice of PLAR in the province of Saskatchewan. By reflecting upon the challenges encountered by previous projects and building on the best practices identified, champions can avoid some potential pitfalls, and streamline future projects.

Although this Report primarily focuses on lessons learned and best practices, it is important to acknowledge the benefits of PLAR in the post-secondary learning system. Wong (2000) succinctly outlines some of the advantages of PLAR from a university perspective:

> "The concept and processes of PLAR presented to university faculty and staff incorporate many familiar issues in an unfamiliar form. Issues such as the characteristics of the student body and their implications for admission policies, course content and structure, modes of teaching and learning, program delivery modes and timelines, assessment procedures and the nature of evidence of learning have all been points of discussion and debate among faculty and staff. PLAR has the potential of simultaneously addressing a range of these issues under one 'umbrella'."
> (Wong, 2000, p.16)

Although this expresses the concept and processes of PLAR within a university context, one may also assume that similar discussions are also underway at the level of the colleges, technical institutes, and private vocational schools.

One option to make achieving these benefits more efficient is to build on the previous experience of initiatives. Future champions, like the ones undertaking the eleven Pilot Projects, will need to welcome learning and challenges. The lessons learned can contribute to establishing decision-making and planning frameworks for future endeavours. The best practices identified in this Final Report are intended to provide a

foundation upon which future endeavours can build. With the information provided in this report, future champions may feel more secure in taking on the challenges of innovative initiatives.

5   PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Saskatchewan Learning gratefully acknowledges the dedicated efforts of the Pilot Project Coordinators / Team Members in undertaking and supporting their respective PLAR Enhancement Initiatives. The field of PLAR will greatly benefit from the valued leadership that has been demonstrated in these pilot projects.

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      Labour Force Development Board, PLAR Services Project; Saskatchewan.
      http://www.slfdb.com/plar/whatsnew/PLARreport.pdf

PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition) at the University of Saskatchewan:
      Challenge for Credit Policy. Available at:
      http://www.usask.ca/university_council/acad_prog/reports/04-21-02.shtml

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology PLAR Policy. Available at:
http://www.siast.sk.ca/policies/316.pdf

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology PLAR Web site. Available
      at:
http://www.siast.sk.ca/siast/admissions/plar.htm

Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board: Recognition of Prior Learning
Please see the following PLAR resources available at:
      http://www.slfdb.com/recognition_of_prior_learning/

- Discussion on the Provincial RPL Framework: Oct 18 Meeting Notes
- Saskatchewan Learning Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
  Enhancement Funding Initiative: A Progress Report
- PLAR Project Final Report
- Portfolio Learning: The NSCC Story
- National Best Practices Workshop (October 2002 - Charlottetown)
- Diane Hill Presentation: 2001 SLFDB Conference (Hill, Diane (2001) Prior
  Learning Assessment and Recognition: Applications for an Aboriginal Model of
  Holistic Learning)

Saskatchewan Universities PLAR Project.
      Available at: http://www.extension.usask.ca/PLAR/home.html

Wong, Angie, Ph. D. (2000). *University-Level Prior Learning Assessment and
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PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative
Final Report Questionnaire

Below are the four questions that Pilot Project Coordinators were asked to respond to for this report:

1. Were the goals of the pilot project achieved? Please explain.

2. If a "PLAR-related tool" was developed:

    a) Please enclose a sample of the PLAR-related tool (s).
    b) Evaluate the PLAR-related tool's effectiveness.
    c) Explain next steps for the PLAR-related tool's development or future applications.

3. Provide a breakdown (estimate) of the expenditures related to the pilot project with regard to the $5,000 allocated by the Department. (Categories include: designated personnel, professional development, travel, accommodations/meals and office supplies/telephone/photocopying/mail.) It is _optional_ to attach receipts
You may also include a breakdown and total amount of the in-kind contributions to the pilot project as well.

4. Additional Comments

8   **APPENDIX II**

Northlands College:
Sample Skills Profile
Portfolio Development Workshop Materials

Northlands College undertook the development of an occupational profile for northern clerical workers and also designed/delivered an introductory portfolio development workshop for their faculty/staff. The occupational profile instrument and PowerPoint presentation for the portfolio development workshop have been included in the Appendix.

Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies: Overview of Materials Developed

The tools developed for the project included a multi-page questionnaire and a script.

The questionnaire was comprised of a basic checklist format that used the existing (2001) learning outcomes from each course of the HHA/LTCA program as the basis of the assessment tool. The assessment tool asked participants to identify whether they possessed the required learning outcomes prior to participating in the course and if they did, how they could demonstrate their knowledge/skill.

In addition to the questionnaire, a script was also developed to guide the assessor in conducting the interview. The script explained the purpose of the project, described what was meant by PLAR, the process of the interview (how the questionnaire would be used) and how the interview information would be stored. The script further contained space for a participant ID number (if the student consented to the interview).

Saskatchewan Institute of
Applied Science and Technology:
Sample Inventory of PLAR-Ready Courses

The SIAST PLAR office needed a dynamic, up-to-date database that could use automated forms and data entry. As a result, the goal of this pilot project led to the compilation of a database of all PLAR-Ready courses offered by SIAST programs. Attached in the Appendix are a selection of "screen shots" taken from the database in its current state.

Note: All data presented in the Appendix is intended for test purposes only and is not a true representation of the actual PLAR status of any SIAST course.

11 **APPENDIX V**

Southeast Regional College:
[Sample Portfolio Development Materials](#)

This Pilot Project provided services in the rural community for portfolio development. In the appendix are examples of materials and tools that can be used in portfolio development workshops, as well as outlining sample certificates that were used.

Materials used by Southeast Regional College in the portfolio development sessions are based on the materials and support provided by the SLFDB-PLAR Services Project. The SLFDB-PLAR Services Project also undertook development of a "PLAR Toolkit" to provide sample materials for advising, assessing, portfolio development and PLAR orientation. Additional materials are available from the "PLAR Toolkit" (available in electronic and hard copy), which can be adapted for use by institutions / organizations.

For additional information on the resources available, please contact the SLFDB at:

Phone: (306) 352-5999
Toll Free: 1-800-394-3899

University of Regina, Counselling Services:
Sample Portfolio Development Materials

University of Regina Counselling Services has developed various materials for promoting portfolio development to post-secondary students. Examples of a workshop flyer, the promotional bookmark and Building Your Portfolio Handout are included in the appendix.

An eye-catching poster titled "Building your Portfolio" was created to increase awareness of the portfolio and its applications for students in all areas of study. The document, "Exploring Your Options at the University of Regina" was developed to provide a brief overview of the potential knowledge, skills and opportunities for each faculty and program offered at the U of R. Also developed was a pilot handbook "Building Your Portfolio: A Step-By-Step Guide." Revisions of this handbook are underway, and the updated version will be available May 2003.

Copies of these materials are available by mail or pick up at:

Counselling Services
251 Riddell Centre
University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan
Canada S4S 0A2
Ph: 306-585-4491
Fax: 306-585-5172
Web site: http://www.uregina.ca/counselling

University of Saskatchewan, College of Nursing
Overview of Materials Developed

An information package has been developed which refers students to the University Challenge for Credit Policy for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition, outlines what PLAR is (and is not), and identifies who is eligible for PLAR, and the course that is available for challenge in the Post-Registration BSN Program. The process to be followed in pursuing the course for challenge in the program is outlined. As well, a course description, the required textbooks for those registered in the course, overall course learning outcomes, and learning outcomes for each unit in the course are provided.