



Benchmarking in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) – Tool for training reform

Repere metodologice pentru evaluarea diagnostic - instrument al reformei în training

*Executive director MOLDOVEANU Rodica, Ph.D. Candidate
BCR Erste Bank, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: rodica.moldoveanu@bcr.ro*

Abstract

Adults invariably need to change their job from sector to sector and place to place as their life and training needs change. In this respect the importance of recognizing people's knowledge, skills and competencies as basis for further learning and development can not be overstated. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition process (PLAR). Accepted benchmarks for PLAR support assessment process by providing a list of function, skills and knowledge that need to be used as a complementary set of generic standards of best practices in PLAR.

Keywords: *assessment, benchmark, competencies, PLAR, training, reform*

Rezumat

Adulții sunt nevoiți să își schimbe locul de muncă dintr-un sector economic în altul, în diverse localități, odata cu schimbarea cerințelor privind viața și pregătirea profesională. În acest sens nu poate fi neglijată importanța recunoașterii cunoștințelor, deprinderilor și competențelor individuale ca bază pentru traininguri și programe de dezvoltare ulterioare (PLAR). Complementar, ca standarde generice pentru cele mai bune practici PLAR, este nevoie să fie folosite repere / etaloane acceptate, precum activități, aptitudini, cunoștințe, care să vină în sprijinul procesului de evaluare a competențelor.

Cuvinte-cheie: *evaluare, repere, etaloane, competențe, PLAR, training, reforma*

JEL Classification: D83, J24

Introduction

The huge amount of innovations in technology, communications and trade in the past decade generated certain economic and social turbulence. Individuals, organizations, communities and governments are all struggling to cope with dramatic and apparently continuous change. Not only seasonal and “blue collar” workers, but also “white collar”, managerial and professional occupations have been profoundly affected. Even those who managed to maintain employment during this period have found their jobs rapidly changing and their organizations and communities hanging around them. It has become clear that the key to coping successfully with these changes is the consolidation of everything an individual, organization or community already knows and can do. To a remarkable extent, therefore, everybody, in these circumstances, becomes a “learner-in-transition”. People involved in these learning transitions, cannot afford to “go back” or “start over” in their further education and training efforts. Nor can they afford to waste time, energy and money in learning over again what they already know and can do. These are the “learning-in-transition” realities and challenges facing European and many other countries today. There are also the reasons why, internationally, the principles and practice of PLAR are emerging as relevant, timely and efficient response. These principles begin with the assumption that significant learning takes place in a wide variety of settings, including but not restricted to formal education and training institutions and programs.

If individuals can satisfactorily document and demonstrate what they know and can do, their knowledge, skills and competencies should be recognized and used as basis for further learning and development as well as for planning their further labor market, career or educational directions. This article is intended to make a positive contribution to the development of PLAR concept in Romania and its recognition as a tool for education, training reform and labor force development. It is also intended to highlight the importance of developing in Romania transferable, widely accepted benchmarks for assessment in adult education. In order to sustain the above stated objectives, we present below the main outcomes of the Canadian PLAR Benchmarking Study (Day, 2000) published by the Canadian Labor Force Development Board.

Why Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition?

PLAR is defined as systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment, and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies, and family experiences.

The goals of PLAR have been stated by Challis (2002). They include:

- identification of learning, wherever it takes place;
- selection of that learning which is relevant to a desired outcome and or progression route;
- demonstration of the validity and appropriateness learning;
- matching learning outcomes to those stated within a chosen accreditation or progression framework;
- assessment of evidence against pre-determined criteria to ensure the validity of the claimed learning.

The methods that might be used to assess prior learning include assessment of educational documents, portfolio review, demonstration (e.g. written/oral examinations, projects, assignments, performance observation, skill demonstrations, simulation and product assessment), standardized tests and program review.

In Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and United States there are decades of PLAR practices. In these countries, a variety of processes have been used to apply PLAR to education, workforce development and identification of occupational standards. Wherever the PLAR has been practiced, the involvement of a variety of stakeholders and efforts to move PLAR into the mainstream, has inevitably led to tensions within educational institutions, among various types of educational institutions, business, labor and equity groups in terms of how it is defined and implemented. There are strong advocates of the outcomes-based approach to PLAR and those who advocate for a developmental approach.

The need to develop national benchmarks or standards to guide the practice of assessors in an international context couldn't be overstated. If the full impact of PLAR as tool for change is to be realized, it was imperative that clear, credible, concise benchmarks with cross-sector applicability needed to be created to guide quality practice.

Developing benchmarking – challenge for learning in transition realities

Benchmarking is a continuous, systematic search for, and implementation of best practices which may lead to improved performance. It involves:

- setting standards according to the “best” practice that can be found;
- identifying the “best” organizations and finding out how they meet standards;
- adapting and applying the lessons learned to avoid “re-inventing-the-wheel”;
- generating new ideas to go beyond the standards identified.

The goals of benchmarking are to build on the success of others and to address current best practice. Benchmarking is carried out with the intention of making improvements. Patterson (1996) believes it is a beneficial process as it: focuses on client needs – this is fundamental in adult learning; adapts industry-best practice; helps to set relevant, realistic and achievable goals – an open and transparent PLAR process for individuals and assessors; tests the quality of program delivery – individuals, employers and educational / training institutions must be able to see that the PLAR process is rigorous and credible.

Canadian PLAR benchmarking study - valuable resources for organizations

Human Resources Development Canada have founded in year 2000 a Benchmarking Study with the aim of developing and promoting national benchmarks for those engaged in PLAR assessment (PLAR practitioners) across Canada. The study has been based on USA assessment standards, Canadian standards, UK standards and British Columbia standards. The objective of the study were to gain practitioner consensus on the development of benchmarks for PLAR in Canada, to produce a guide to support the national implementation of national benchmarks for PLAR assessment, to make recommendations for the promotion of the national benchmarks and to investigate the feasibility of developing a system to confirm the competence of PLAR practitioners based on nationally-agreed-upon benchmarks for practice. The consensus was that any newly-emerging benchmarks should be used as a complementary set of generic standards for best practice in PLAR.

The benchmarks have been set as a checklist to include function, skills and knowledge, and have been promoted as a voluntary tool for the continuing professional development of PLAR practitioners.

The Canadian Labor Force Development Board (CLFDB, 1999) published the minimum standards for PLAR. The Benchmarking Study developed benchmarks for the following four CLFDB standards:

- *The assessment must be reliable.* The criteria and standards must be recognized and respected by all the labor market partners. This principle applies to:
 - o occupational and skill standards;
 - o the learning outcomes stated for a specific course or training program;
 - o the credentials required for a specific job or occupational group.
- *The assessment tools and their PLAR application must be recognized and accepted* by the labor market partners
- *Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform this task*

- *The assessing organization must provide a number of ways to carry out an assessment.* Individuals should have the opportunity to choose how their assessment will be done. If necessary, they should get help to make their choice.

The benchmarking study refers to the principles of the British Columbia (BC) PLAR code which cover Area E “*Learner Orientation /Preparation*” and Area F “*Professional Development*”. When implementing the benchmarks emerging from the study it is recommended that organizations consider both CLFDB standards and areas E and F of the BC Code of Practice as an appropriate philosophy and context for PLAR practice. In this way the need to maintain a common standard as well as a holistic approach towards PLAR practice can be fulfilled.

The study had found that the key purpose of the PLAR practitioner in Canada is to “review the progress and/or assess achievements, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their personal development and/or education and training objectives.”

Another important outcome of the study is the agreement about the 2 main roles of the PLAR practitioner. One is to “Prepare the individual for assessment”. This may include the following activities: help the individual to identify relevant learning, agree and review an action plan for demonstrating of prior learning and help the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment. The other role is to “Assess the individual”. This may include the following activities: agree and review the assessment plan, judge evidence and provide feedback and make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.

The performance indicators related to each function and activities of the PLAR practitioner have been developed from the UK Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) standard to ensure that the culture, context and diversity of PLAR practice in Canada has been appropriated captured.

PLAR practitioners in Canada carry out both of these roles. Practitioners should be made aware of the potential conflicts and biases which exist when undertaking both roles but they should also be encouraged to develop competence in both advisory and assessment functions (Blower, 2000).

Advantages of using benchmarks in Prior Learning Assessment for reforming adults education

Numerous advantages of using benchmarks for PLAR have been identified, following the Canadian Study: ensure that PLAR becomes a defensible process; provide sense of reality, equality and fairness; improve accountability and transparency in the PLAR assessment process; identify what is possible, what is feasible and what is acceptable; ensure consistency of approach, particularly for

workplace-based assessment; improve the rigor and fairness of the assessment process; identify resources needed for assessment; protect the rights of the learner; provide a common understanding and communication among stakeholders.

Conclusion

As the labor market is in constant development, and borders gradually disappear due to globalization, employability and mobility become increasingly significant. The professional expertise of individuals from various countries is critical for sustaining economic healing and growth. Developing and refining tools like Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in professional assessors' hands is one of the success factors in identifying and gaining valuable individuals for organizations.

References

- Blower, D. (2000). "Canada: The story of prior learning assessment and recognition". In N. Evans (Ed.), *Experiential Learning Around the World* (pp. 83-102). London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd.
- Challis, M. (2002) *Introducing Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning*. Routledge, London.
- CLFDB, (1999). *Reaching Our Full Potential: Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for Foreign-Trained Canadians*, Ottawa, ON. CLFDB #41, June
- Day, M., (2000), *Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*. Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, Retrieved May, 2009 from http://www.capla.ca/benchmark_en.php
- Patterson, J.G. (1996), *Benchmarking: Basics, Looking for a Better Way*, Crisp Publications, New Brunswick, NJ.