

Factors That Influence Completion of a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Process

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The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) process at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), in British Columbia, enables students to earn academic credit for learning acquired through life and work experience. One of the four TRU PLAR pathways allows students to demonstrate their broader learning for elective credit by producing a competency-based portfolio. However, a notable proportion of students who begin this pathway do not complete it. In this presentation, we shared lessons learned from a mixed-methods research project examining the factors that shape PLAR persistence and influence completion outcomes.

Our presentation aligned with two central themes of this conference: expanding recognition opportunities for all learners and strengthening the role of open recognition in open learning environments. A core objective of our research is to inform TRU PLAR policies and procedures to better support students in translating their informal and non-formal learning into academic credit. While some PLAR participants are traditional on-campus students, the majority are enrolled through TRU Open Learning (OL), the university's open-admission division providing flexible online and distance education provincially, nationally, and internationally. OL is grounded in four foundational pillars---accessibility, flexibility, choice, and credibility. At TRU PLAR embodies a commitment to open, equitable, and flexible learning pathways.

In two rounds of research (2018 and 2023) we explored a single guiding question: What factors influence student persistence and completion within an open admission competency-based PLAR process? The 2018 findings offered valuable insight into the challenges, barriers, motivation, and goals that shaped learners' experiences. These insights directly informed several strategic improvements, including enhanced learner resources, shifts in student support, pilot testing of new approaches, development of a 3-credit PLAR course, and targeted team training. Collectively, these efforts contributed to a significant increase in completion rates, from 14% in 2018 to 36% in 2023. The 2023 findings will continue to build on earlier findings to further improve persistence. From this work several key lessons have emerged.

- Learners often lack confidence in the value of their lifelong and experiential learning; clearer communication and intentional reassurance are essential for helping them see how their experiences can translate into credit.

- The PLAR process can be confusing, indicating the need for simplified explanations, clearer pathways, and more user-friendly guidance materials.
- Students require consistent guidance and support throughout the entire PLAR journey—not just at the start. Strengthened advising and structured check-ins significantly improve persistence.
- Uncertainty around credit outcomes creates anxiety, reinforcing the importance of transparency around evaluation criteria and realistic expectations.
- Completing PLAR builds personal and professional self-confidence, enhancing learners' self-awareness and self-esteem as they recognize the legitimacy of their own knowledge.
- Successful PLAR experiences foster pride and agency, empowering learners to leverage their past experiences more intentionally as they continue their education.

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