Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Introduction:

Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is a process that has been successfully utilized in a number of health professional situations to credit prior learning[1]. Research has shown that professionals learn both formally and informally[2]. The PLAR process enables adult learners to create valid, reliable and comprehensive documents based upon their unique strengths and life circumstances.[3] Prior Learning may include the skills and knowledge a person has gained through life and work situations. Such learning may have been acquired through many avenues such as work experience, volunteering, and community involvement. The learning gained may or may not be job/profession specific.

The literature describes learning acquired external to the formal environment as informal or non formal and there are various levels of differentiation.[4] One such description includes: "**Formal learning**: learning typically provided by an education or training institution, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. **Non-formal learning**: learning that is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective. **Informal learning**: learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or "incidental"/ random)"[5]

PLAR requires that interns/students reflect on past experiences and consider how those experiences contribute to dietetic competency development. The process itself contributes to increased self awareness and confidence in students. Individualized programs often result in a more motivated student. Day (2001) comments that "for many adults, the preparation of a portfolio affirms their self worth, enhances their confidence and strengthens their capacity to deal proactively with the many transitions in their lives"[6].

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[1] Poonwassie D, Poonwassie A (2001) Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practice for lifelong learning. Niagara Falls: Thompson Educational.
[2] Cheetham G, Chivers G (2001) How professionals learn-the practice! What empirical research found. Journal of European Industrial Training 25, 5, 248-292.
[3] Day M (2001) Developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. Part 2: practitioners. Nursing Standard .15, 35, 38-45.
[4] Colley,H Hodkinson P & Malcolm J (2002) **Non-formal learning: mapping the conceptual terrain. A Consultation Report,** Leeds: University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Institute. Also available in *the informal education archives*: http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/colley_informal_learning.htm.
[5] [5] Colley,H Hodkinson P & Malcolm J (2002) **Non-formal learning: mapping the conceptual terrain. A Consultation Report,** Leeds: University of Leeds Lifelong Learning Institute. Also available in *the informal education archives*: http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/colley_informal_learning.htm
[6] Day M (2001) Developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. Part 2: practitioners. Nursing Standard .15, 35, p. 44

The program has the opportunity to appropriately place students matching their ability to program requirements. From the professional organization perspective, this process can help to address the projected employment shortages that will be facing our profession by the end of this decade[7]. By shortening the standard program time it is expected that programs will have more flexibility to accept additional interns.

Application to Dietetic Internship/Practicum Programs:
Practical experience is an important part of dietetic education/training and there are many valid ways by which practical experiences may be obtained. Since dietetic internship/practicum programs are based on achievement of comprehensive competencies, it is conceivable that experience obtained prior to internship/practicum (e.g. through work experience as a dietetic technician, weight loss counselor; volunteer activities; life or personal experiences; or through a practical course, such as Marketing) may contribute to skill development and knowledge acquisition in one or more of the competency areas. As a result an internship program may be shortened or adapted for the student.

The following guiding principles, flow chart, and dialogue have been developed to assist Dietetic Internship/Practicum Coordinators in assessing interns' previous experience. Although there are many ways to assess prior experience, DC is focusing on a documentation /portfolio review approach. This approach is student-centered and encourages students to reflect on past experience and how those experiences might contribute to dietetic competency development. The responsibility to demonstrate proof of achieving competence in placed with the intern/practicum student. The program provides the intern/practicum student with the necessary information/process to be followed for the PLAR documentation submission and for developing a formal review and appeal process. The Director of Professional Affairs is available as a resource to the Dietetic Internship/Practicum Coordinator, if needed.

[7] Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) (2002) Knowledge Matters. Ottawa,ON:HRDC.

PLAR Guiding Principles[8]

DC recognizes that:
- Evaluators/attesters come from a variety of professional/occupational backgrounds and possess appropriate* training and experience to assess an experience. (* the expertise to assess)

- Internship/practicum program competency statements provide the framework for evaluation

- Learning occurs in many different contexts and in many ways

- Knowledge and skills are transferable and the onus in on the learner to demonstrate application to dietetic practice

- Evidence of learning can be demonstrated in a variety of ways

- Validated prior learning should result in accelerated achievement of competence

- Knowledge must be equivalent but not identical. The experience should be comparable in breadth, depth, sophistication and complexity.

- PLAR is supported by and recognized as contributing to the development of competence.

Competency Development Profile (CDP)[9]

The CDP is a tool that can assist an applicant in the documentation and verification of their learning. The corresponding evaluation criteria gives the applicant the opportunity to detail that learning actually occurred. Applicants complete one CDP sheet for each competency statement they wish to narrate. The profiles enable applicants and reviewers to make decisions regarding competency attainment.

Competency Statement
A competency statement reflects the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and judgments necessary for minimal level of practice for Dietitians.

Critical Behaviors
Behaviors the applicant should demonstrate to support required competency development. In some instances critical behaviors have been identified (see DC competency document). The internship may identify additional behaviors specific to the area in which the applicant is documenting performance.

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[8] Developed by the PLAR Working Committee, Approved by the DC Professional Standards Advisory Committee
[9] MSVU uses this approach to document competency development within the university internship program

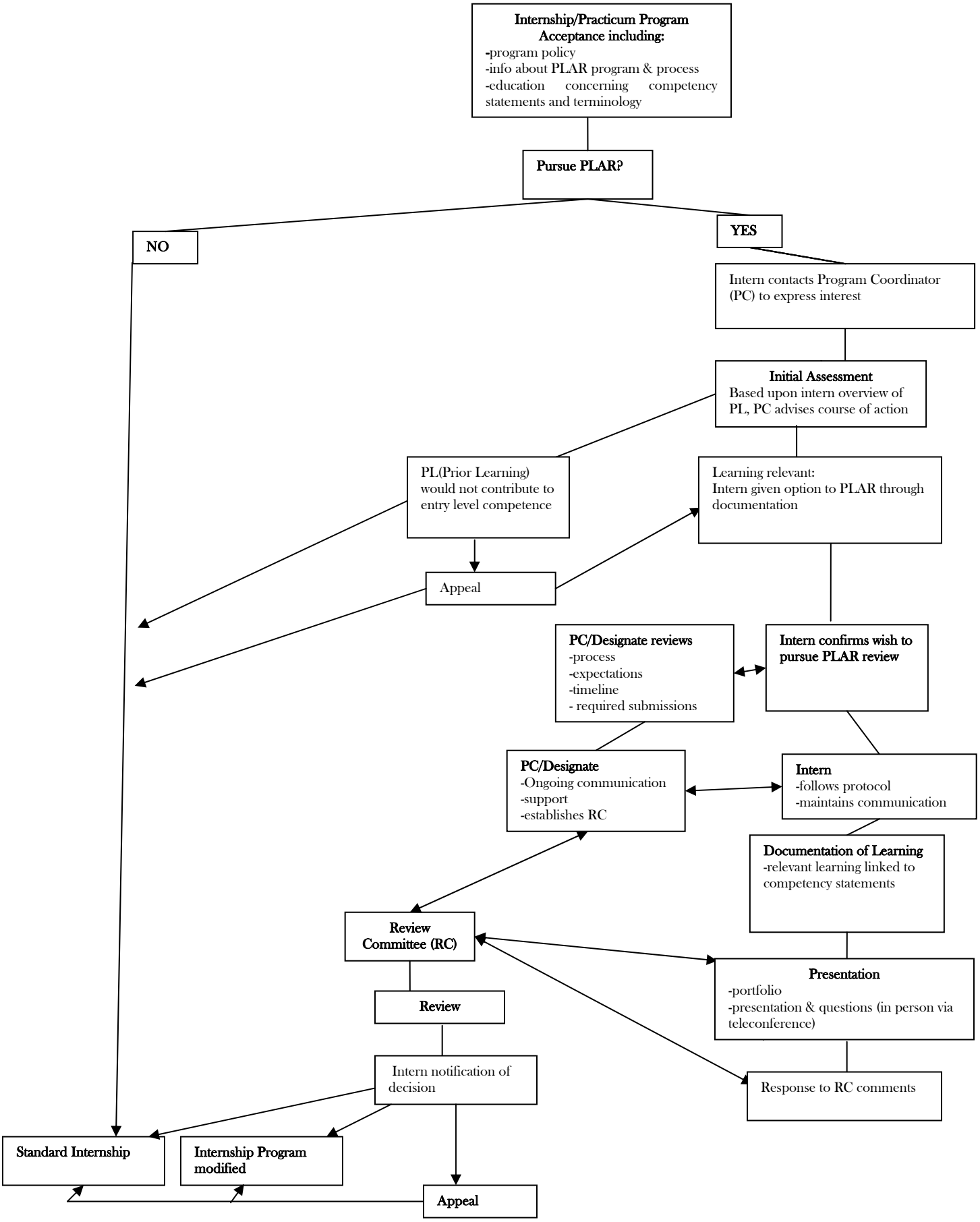
Corresponding Evaluation Criteria

Criteria the applicant would use to verify that learning has occurred and the competency area is being/has developed.

Learning Activities

It is here the applicant would document what they did that they feel would contribute to competency development i.e. chair a meeting, give a presentation, workshop or other oral report, manage or direct, perform job duties etc.

PLAR FLOW CHART



PLAR Flowchart Dialogue

Program Responsibilities:

This process may be used by an intern/student who has already been accepted into an internship/practicum program or by a potential intern/student with extensive work experience who may be accepted as an additional intern/student in an already established program.

- The intern/student's acceptance letter contains a PLAR package that introduces the concept, contains a program policy and procedures and material that educates the intern/student on program competency requirements, how these are evaluated and other terminology required to document learning i.e. transferability of skills.
- A successful PLAR is minimally expected to yield a credit of 4 weeks of experience. If upon initial assessment the PC determines PL (Prior Learning) is not substantive or relevant a formal assessment is NOT recommended.
- Due to the time and resources required for a comprehensive review a fee may be charged to the intern/student. The fee is determined by the program.
- The PC/Designate supervises and provides feedback to the intern/student as he/she is completing the documentation process. This normally takes the portfolio format.

Documentation Requirements:

Applicants must document specific activities that have been completed and demonstrate how these activities result in competency development. Applicants must have activities used for demonstrating prior learning, verified by someone who oversaw or supervised the activity and can attest to completion of the activity by the applicant and to their level of achievement (e.g. completed with guidance or utilize your program performance evaluation rating system). A *general* guideline is that the activity was completed within a previous 3 year timeframe.

- The typical portfolio will include but is not limited to:
    - Resume
    - CDP (Competency Development Profile)- which identifies the DC competency statement, the activities the student engaged in that would lead to competency development, and the evaluation criteria that confirm learning occurred.
    - Completed program evaluations that have been signed off by a dietitian or other individual (applicants who have prior experience that is closely related to criteria used in the internship evaluation may use those forms to record and verify learning)
    - Work samples i.e. written work, presentation summaries,
    - Memberships
    - Qualifications
    - Letters of reference

- A portfolio enables adult learners to give a detailed account of their skills and abilities in relation to the outcomes and criteria being assessed. The portfolio should:

  - Be structured in a clear and logical way
  - Be supported by evidence from others, including colleagues, peers and supervisors
  - Describe the learner's learning and/or work environment and the daily activities in which he/she participates
  - Be easy to read and understand
  - Allow the learner some freedom of expression[10].

Review Mechanism:

- The Dietetic Internship/Practicum Coordinator will assign a Review Committee
- The PC/Designate organizes a Review Committee (RC) and determines when the portfolio is ready to be submitted.
- The RC evaluates the submission to determine if the documentation is sufficient to be given PLAR credit and will influence the duration of the applicant's program.
- The intern attends the meeting (in person or via teleconference) to give a short oral presentation of the portfolio and to address any questions that may have resulted from the review process.
- The RC provides feedback to the intern:
- The portfolio is accepted and credit is awarded
- Clarification/further documentation is required pending credit award
- The portfolio is rejected. The intern can appeal.
- If the submission is successful, the Dietetic Internship/Practicum Coordinator will determine the amount of program time to be credited and convey to the intern/student the competencies credited and the impact of this on revising the program outline. The internship is customized to meet intern's competency needs.

Considerations for Programs in Undertaking PLAR:

- Are you prepared to award and to shorten the interns program (a minimum of 4 weeks credit is suggested).

- Have you established a reasonable fee to cover administrative, consultation, support, leadership and communication cost incurred as a result of the PLAR process.

- Is you program flexible
  - To include (if applicable):

[10] Day M (2001) Developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. Part 2: practitioners. Nursing Standard .15, 35, 38-45.

- ✓ Masters student's
- ✓ Those graduates who have not been involved in formal education setting within the past three years
- ✓ Undergraduates participating in integrated/coordinated programs, graduates entering post degree internships

  - ➢ To consider experience and documented learning occurring in the past three years and willing to consider less recent but relevant learning.

  - ➢ To consider a portfolio as the recommended documentation strategy and open to customizing your own reporting processes that best meet program and intern needs.

- Have you developed guidelines that include a detailed policy and procedure to guide the PLAR and Appeal process. Description of support available: i.e. person to person, written documentation of program with examples, on line help, teleconferences, with main aim of assisting intern in the development of the portfolio.

- Does your documentation review consider the validity, authenticity and currency of the evidence. The intern/student must be able to demonstrate that he or she has developed appropriate knowledge and understanding.[11]

- Does your programs strive to ensure a PLAR program that incorporates the following characteristics as described by Day (2001):
  - ➢ Is defensible
  - ➢ Identifies what is possible, feasible and acceptable
  - ➢ Is consistent in approach
  - ➢ Encourages a rigorous but fair assessment process
  - ➢ Provide adequate direction to members of the RC

[11] Day M (2001) Developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. Part 2: practitioners. Nursing Standard .15, 35, 38-45.

Student Information Sheet

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Introduction

Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) is a process that has been successfully utilized in a number of health professional situations to credit prior learning. [1]

Research has shown that professionals learn both formally and informally or non formally. [2] Dietitians of Canada recognize the need to value intern/student prior learning which has been gained through experiences other than formal post-secondary courses. Dietetic internships/practicum programs are based on achievement of competencies; therefore it is conceivable that experience obtained prior to internship/practicum may have afforded the intern/student the opportunity to develop skill in one or more of the areas of competence. Work experience, volunteering, community involvement contribute to learning that can be demonstrated using a PLAR process.

Interns/students are encouraged to reflect on past experiences and consider how those experiences might contribute to dietetic competency development. Through a formal review process an intern/student may be awarded credit for previous experience resulting in a shortened internship/practicum program. The responsibility to demonstrate proof of achieving competence is placed with the intern/student. Documentation or evidence of learning is critical in the assessment process. There are many ways of assessing prior experience including direct and indirect documentation. Direct documentation includes products, performance, reports, plans etc. created by the learner. Generally direct documentation is the strongest evidence to support PLAR requests. Indirect evidence includes information about the learner's achievements such as written letters from employers, business partners, awards, commendation, performance appraisals and official records. Dietitians of Canada focuses on portfolio review, course review and product assessment as the key documentation used to evaluate prior experiences. To obtain credit for previous learning interns/students must be prepared to document what has been done, identify the competencies that have been met from the DC Competencies document and have their experience attested. Interns/students will be provided guidance and direction on the requirements and process involved to request PLAR.

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[1] Poonwassie D, Poonwassie A (2001) Fundamentals of adult education: Issues and practice for lifelong learning. Niagara Falls: Thompson Educational.

[2] Cheetham G, Chivers G (2001) How professionals learn-the practice! What empirical research found. Journal of European Industrial Training 25, 5, 248-292.

Terminology:

Competence- the quality of being functionally adequate in assuming the role of a specified position (dietitian) with the requisite knowledge, ability, capability, skills, judgment, attitudes and values.

Competency – is a grouping of related knowledge, skills and attitudes that correlate with performance or behaviour. The performance than can be measured against standards.

Competency Statement-

The six competency areas used in DC Accredited Internship/Practicum Programs are:

Professional Practice- is the application of dietetics based knowledge, ethics, and the principles of personal development to all professional activities. The behaviour in this area of competence enhances both the profession of dietetics and the role of the individual dietitian.

Assessment- is the ability to identify all relevant data and recognize the factors pertaining to the problem at hand. This competence also included the ability to use effective data collection techniques of tools; the ability to translate raw data into interpretable data and to formulate a conclusion based on the interpretation and integration of data.

Planning- is the ability to establish goals, measure objectives and formulate and develop a course of action.

Implementation- is the ability to activate and execute the plan, to monitor the achievement of the plan's objectives and to modify the plan if necessary.

Evaluation- is the process of determining the achievement of goals and objectives and the need for further evaluation.

Communication- is the application of theories of communication and counseling. This includes verbal, written and listening skills.

Competent practice- includes:

- Able to prioritize and establish a perspective on situations
- Beginning to feel mastery and ability to cope, may still lack speed and flexibility
- Beginning to see actions in terms of the "bigger picture" or in terms of long range goals
- Able to discern what rules, guidelines or regulations are relevant to the situation.

Comprehensive Competencies- represent the knowledge, skills and behaviours for the minimum level of practice for dietitians.

Enabling/learning activities- are procedures, tasks or events that provide learning experiences and opportunities to achieve a performance objective.

Entry- level practice- refers to a level of proficiency most often associated with, but not necessarily describing individuals entering practice. The Entry-Level dietitian is competent in the application of knowledge and skills considered essential for entry level practice.

Performance objective- a statement of the behaviour that demonstrates achievement of competence.

Portfolio- is a comprehensive collection of information used to substantiate an individual's experiences and accomplishments. This may include resume, samples of work. awards, presentations, memberships, qualifications etc.

Prior Learning- includes the skills and knowledge a person has gained through life and work experience and through formal education and training.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) – a systematic process of self assessment that helps the learner reflect on, identify, and describe all prior learning for the purpose of receiving recognition of the same.

Transferable skills- **skills** refers to the ability to use one's knowledge effectively and readily in execution or performance of duties (ADA-Commission on Dietetic Education-Accreditation Handbook- 2002). **Transferable skills** assumes that a skill mastered in one practice situation can be demonstrated in others without having to be actually repeatedly performed in these other situations (i.e. is transferable).

Reference for PLAR:

Some useful websites to learn more about PLAR, informal and non formal learning:

http://www.acat.gov.ab.ca/acat_information/PLAR_Handbook_May_11_2005.pdf

http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/pla/welcome.htm

http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ael/all/publications/plar/manual_06.pdf

http://socialwork.uvic.ca/docs/practicum/plaworkbook06.pdf

http://www.nursing.ubc.ca/academic_programs/plar/PLAR%20Student%20Guide.pdf

http://psych.athabascau.ca/html/uccd/body.shtml

http://www.capla.ca

http://www.placentre.ns.ca/indexF.php

http://www.plarinmanitoba.ca

http://www.caeto.ca/home.shtml