



# Quality Management System

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## Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Standards and Guidelines

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## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Overview

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) or the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has increasingly been the focus of skills development policy in a number of countries in recent years. This has been done as a way to offer a more flexible, inclusive and efficient route into skills training, higher education, or better jobs for people whose skills and knowledge have not been formally recognised. It has, however, often proved a challenging concept to implement in practice, calling for a strong supportive regulatory environment, clear communication of its benefits to stakeholders, a strong collaborative approach, flexible delivery, and a robust quality assurance system. For PLAR to work effectively, there also has to be strong support for learners and students and guarantees of reliability, transparency and consistency during its application and implementation.

International experiences show that stimulating learner demand, managing time and resource constraints, keeping costs under control, ensuring consistency, and establishing parity of esteem with other forms of assessment have all caused challenges in implementing PLAR. All of these issues need to be taken into account when introducing PLAR and the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica (NQFJ) is a prerequisite of a full, National and Regional PLAR system. CARICOM as the Regional body, has developed the CARICOM Qualifications Framework (CQF) providing a referencing mechanism and with the use of the NQFJ, will support the mobility of individuals across borders.

There are several reasons to support this move. There is a large informal sector of individuals including skilled workers for whom PLAR could be a much-needed facility to return to the formal education and training system, from which they may have been excluded. PLAR is seen as a way to bring excluded or disenfranchised groups back into learning and to improve their job prospects, motivation and self-esteem. It can also be seen as a way to boost learner confidence by helping them to recognise their own existing levels of competency, and to promote their interest in education and training by avoiding the need to spend time on unnecessary training. Students who transfer from one institution to another may also use the PLAR process to gain credits for learning already acquired. As such, the CQF and NQF-J have key roles to play in achieving the goal of certifying the labour force, gaining qualifications at higher levels thereby impacting and facilitating lifelong learning towards an improved Jamaican education system (Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission, 2017)

### 1.2 Purpose of PLAR Standards and Guidelines

The PLAR Standard and Guidelines for Higher Education Institutions have been developed with the following objectives in mind:

- To guide institutions on how to prepare, plan, and implement Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)
- Inform prospective PLAR candidates on what they can expect from PLAR and how they can actively participate in the PLAR process.

### **ISO 9001:2015 Reference: 7.5.1, 8.2.1**

#### 1.3 Scope of Standards and Guidelines

The Standards and Guidelines outlined in this document are applicable to all Higher Education Institutions that offer national qualifications in Jamaica. It covers the following key steps involved in PLAR:

- Establishes the Core Values and Guiding Principles for PLAR development in Institutions
- Outlines the process involved in PLAR assessment
- Details key standards and indicators for PLAR Policy Implementation
- Provides practical guidelines for assessment

#### 1.4 The Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to the Qualifications Framework

There is no universally agreed definition of the term 'RPL', but it is a relatively simple concept: that learning takes place in a wide variety of contexts other than through formal settings; that such learning is often not formally recognised in terms of qualifications or learning credit; and that there should therefore be mechanisms to assess and recognise it. Such recognition may allow the individual being assessed to progress to further training and higher education, compete for jobs or gain recognized certification. Aside from this general understanding, there is little consensus on the practical details of RPL and it has taken divergent forms in different national and regional contexts. The Caribbean has a unique opportunity to develop and customize a strategy that is fit-for-purpose.

A true system of RPL requires some kind of framework against which to map individuals' skills, with agreed standards and a shared system of recognised credit for learning; without such a framework, it is difficult to articulate skill levels in any meaningful way that can allow employers and training providers to assess an individual's suitability for employment or further training. An established framework of credit, qualifications and/or occupational standards is a key precondition to the successful introduction of RPL.

#### 1.5 What is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)?

PLAR is the process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of the learning you have acquired through formal and informal study. The process

recognises and gives credit for knowledge, skills, and competencies that have been acquired experientially, that is, through work experience, unrecognized education or training, self-study, volunteer activities, and hobbies. The type of learning known as prior learning, may occur:

- On the job
- In volunteer activities
- Through a hobby or interest
- In military service
- Through travel
- On training courses
- Through independent study
- Through family and life experiences

PLAR is a process that can be used to assess what you know, what you can do, and it can be used to obtain some form of recognition for what you know and the skills you have.

Modern-day society values a balance of both credentials and experience. The ever-changing job market, the lack of employment security, the speed of technology development all require adults to re-skill and re-train more frequently than ever before. Employers and post-secondary institutions must meet the needs of employees and learners who require skills upgrading and/or are returning to college or university with a wealth of prior learning experiences.

#### 1.6 Benefits of PLAR

There are several benefits to implementing PLAR as follows, it:

- **Eliminates duplication of learning**

Learners should not have to re-do courses they have already successfully taken. For most adults, this shortens the route to certification. At the same time, individuals are not forced to re-take courses or acquire information that they already have.

- **Increases self-esteem and self-confidence**

PLAR advances and enriches an adult's learning through the promotion of self-esteem, self-discovery, and the mobilization of resources toward self-actualization.

- **Validates learning through work and life experiences**

Too often in society, the only learning that is valued is that which is gained through formal learning experiences. The PLAR process allows individuals to recognize and validate prior learning achieved through work and life experiences.

- **Identifies areas requiring further study**

Individuals are not always aware of what skills they do and do not possess. By helping individuals pin point their areas of strengths and weaknesses, the PLAR process allows

individuals to self-determine what further work will be needed in order to challenge successfully for credit.

- **Facilitates an understanding of personal strengths and likes**

Through the PLAR process, individuals undergo self-reflection and identification of interests and abilities. They set goals and determine their wants and needs in a wide range of areas of their lives. This helps them clarify where they want to go and how to get there.

- **Encourages learners to pursue education**

PLAR can give a learner a base from which to pursue further education. Individuals can develop goals from their prior learning, knowledge, and skills. Lifelong learning is validated and offered as a possible goal.

- **Potentially reduces the cost of education**

The individual may benefit financially as the individual should only pay for the learning that is required in college or university. Not all learners may save money however, since most institutions charge assessment fees for the PLAR process or award “advanced standing” only.

- **Increases access to further education**

Adult learners who might not return for further or higher education may be attracted to pursue credentials through PLAR. The process shows individuals that they possess the necessary qualifications to complete college or university programs.

- **Potentially shortens the time to complete the course/ programme**

When individuals are assessed for their prior learning they can receive credits for courses, parts of programs, or a number of credits. Assessment may allow learners the opportunity to demonstrate skills and knowledge through a portfolio, challenge exams, skill demonstrations, projects, interviews, or simulations.

- **Assists in transferring the value of learning gained**

Individuals who have acquired certain competencies through prior learning experiences may complete the requirements of a programme or a course quicker than others having already been trained in completing particular tasks.

- **Assists in career development**

Individuals who undergo PLAR can expect to identify their career goals, career objectives and avenues to job advancement. When individuals clearly understand their skills, knowledge and abilities, they identify routes to gaining credentials and also a

better understanding of the requirements of different job categories. PLAR can prepare individuals to challenge employers for job promotions and/or career development opportunities (Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission, 2017).

## 2.0 Core Values and Guiding Principles

### 2.1 Core Values

PLAR standards and guidelines are grounded in core values including but not limited to:

- Equity
- Inclusion
- Access
- Flexibility
- Openness
- Learner Centred
- Quality
- Collaboration
- Competency

### 2.2 Guiding Principles

The following are key principles of PLAR/RPL:

- **Learner-centered approach:** PLAR/RPL should promote positive aspects of learners' experience, rather than deficiencies. It should promote learner reflection and active participation in assessment.
- **Collaboration:** PLAR should be promoted between learning providers and employers.
- **Accessibility:** PLAR should address barriers to engagement, such as low levels of literacy or prior engagement in education, and include provision of initial and continuing advice and guidance to learners.
- **Flexibility:** PLAR programmes should be delivered in a variety of different settings, and at different schedules.
- **Reliability, transparency and consistency:** This is essential to ensure users (employers, training providers and workers) can be confident of the validity of PLAR outcomes.
- **Clarity of roles for provider and learner:** This should be ensured through appropriate training for assessors and providers.
- **Quality:** PLAR services should be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms.
- **Emphasis on competency and knowledge:** Assessors and learners should focus on identifying what has been learnt through an experience, rather than just identifying an experience.

- **Parity of esteem:** Formal learning should not be given greater significance than learning gained through other contexts. This should follow from a focus on knowledge and competency rather than the learning route followed.

### 3.0 PLAR Policy

PLAR providers must develop institutional policies to guide the implementation of PLAR. All Tertiary Education Institutions in Jamaica are expected to implement PLAR standards and guidelines that embody the core values described in this document as far as possible.

### 4.0 Standards

#### 4.1 Standard One: Equity, Accessibility and Transparency

**Standard Statement: Implementation process is defined in relation to accessibility, recognition of learning, equity, efficiency and transparency.**

JTEC recommends the following standards for implementation:

- 4.1.1 The institution should implement an access mechanism that attends to the unique needs of individuals seeking PLAR. It must be accessible and relevant to people as individuals. It must focus on the unique needs and abilities of the individual.
- 4.1.2 Assessment recognition must be of learning (knowledge, skills, and judgment acquired through study or experience).
- 4.1.3 The PLAR process must be fair and equitable. It must be barrier and bias free.
- 4.1.4 The PLAR process must be efficient. It must make the best use of resources for the individual.
- 4.1.5 The PLAR process must be effective. It must provide the opportunity for recognition of prior learning.
- 4.1.6 The PLAR process must be transparent. The individual must know the criteria and standards used to assess his or her skills and knowledge.
- 4.1.7 The assessment must be reliable. The criteria and standards must be recognized and respected by stakeholders. This principle applies to occupational and skill standards, the learning outcomes stated for a specific course or training

program, and the credentials required for a specific job or occupational group (i.e. it must be against criteria that is recognized and respected by all the labour market partners).

- 4.1.8 The assessment tools and their PLAR application must be valid. They must be recognized and accepted by all the labour market partners.
- 4.1.9 Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform this task.
- 4.1.10 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. They should receive help in making their choice.
- 4.1.11 Recognition awarded through PLAR should be considered equal to recognition awarded in the traditional manner.
- 4.1.12 Recognition awarded through PLAR should be transferable between institutions.
- 4.1.13 PLAR must be an option or opportunity, not a mandatory process.
- 4.1.14 PLAR should facilitate an appeal process (see flowchart on page 16).

## 4.2 Standard Two: Assessment and Credit Awards

**Standard Statement: PLAR credits are awarded by institution according to set criteria including qualification level in the NQFJ Handbook.**

- 4.2.1 Credit should be awarded only for learning from experience and not just experience.
- 4.2.2 College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
- 4.2.3 Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical applications.
- 4.2.4 The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
- 4.2.5 Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

- 4.2.6 PLAR applicants should be assessed against quality assured unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework of Jamaica.

#### 4.3 Standard Three: Administration

**Standard Statement: The policies, procedures and personnel are in place at each institution to ensure PLAR programme is fit for purpose.**

- 4.3.1 Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- 4.3.2 Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently displayed.
- 4.3.3 Fees charged for assessment should be based on the service performed in the process and not determined by the number of credits awarded.
- 4.3.4 Fees charges should be kept at the minimum for persons with special needs and beneficiaries of social safety net programmes.
- 4.3.5 All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
- 4.3.6 Each institution should designate personnel responsible for PLAR with specific roles to ensure the process results in the required programme outcomes.
- 4.3.7 Assessment programmes should have an approved schedule for monitoring, revision and evaluation as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment process. Assessment programmes should be reviewed at least once every five years.

## 5.0 Procedures

### 5.1 Overview

The process of recognition and accreditation of prior learning through non-formal study and experience is not new and has been practised in many parts of the world for a long time. Each country or region and institution has to customize the approach to PLAR based on the particular needs and circumstances. In some instances, the emphasis is on assessing and certifying individuals from the informal education and training system who did not have an opportunity to gain formal certification of their knowledge and skills within a particular industry. In others, the emphasis is on encouraging life-long learning and to earn credits toward re-entering the formal education and training system.

Individuals must demonstrate prior learning based on specific learning outcomes (using various assessment strategies) and are awarded credits which are used to articulate into higher education and training systems within the qualification framework. All standards, principles and conditions must be adhered to in conducting PLAR.

## 5.2 The Basic Steps

The following are the steps in the process:

1. **Pre-entry:** The learner/student shows interest and investigates PLAR at the college or educational institution.
2. The institution distributes information on PLAR.
3. A **pre-assessment is conducted** and the candidate is walked through the standards/learning outcomes, to determine the types of evidence that will be required to meet the performance standards
4. The **institution** advises the learner.
5. The learner establishes goals and an **Assessment Plan** is developed.
6. The learner meets with the college/institution's advisor on an on-going basis.
7. Learner may or may not enrol in **portfolio development** course (dependent on the institution's process).
8. The learner prepares, gathers information. The learner prepares for assessment and/or interview by collecting and organizing documentation and preparing for assessment.
9. The Institution **supports the learner** through the availability of guidelines. They may also provide print materials and workshops, etc.
10. **Assessment:** The learner submits portfolio, writes a challenge test/examination, demonstrates, performs the practical skill, etc.
11. A **Judgment** is made and moderation conducted.
12. **Credit is Acknowledged:** Feedback is given and credit awarded and posted to the learner's record where appropriate.

## 6.0 PLAR Guidelines

### 6.1 Assessment Best Practices

Below are examples of assessment best practices:

- **Assess Qualifications/Educational Documents** for transfer of credits.
- **Portfolio:** Allow learners to submit documentation/verification of prior learning, where possible provide portfolio development courses to support production of portfolios so that they can be easily assessed for credit.
- **Challenge Examinations:** Challenge examinations encourage learners to demonstrate through oral/written tests, projects, assignments and interviews that they have the equivalent learning to what is offered in a particular course.
- **Skill demonstrations:** This may include practical examinations, skill demonstrations, product assessments and simulations.

### 6.1 Institutional PLAR Policy Guidelines

Institutional PLAR Policy should comprise the following components:

- PLAR Services offered
- Entry Requirements
- PLAR Attendance and Delivery Modes
- Internal Quality Assurance process and provisions
- Body responsible for quality assurance

### 6.2 Roles and Responsibilities of Key Players

#### (a) The Jamaica Tertiary Education Commission

- Registers PLAR Providers
- Provides support and guidance to PLAR providers on implementation
- Monitors PLAR Providers
- Develops standards and guidelines for implementing PLAR
- Conducts research on various aspects of PLAR to support development and implementation by institutions.
- Maintains a database of institutions offering PLAR
- Provides information to persons seeking to benefit from flexible pathways to learning
- Facilitates networking and mutual learning of best practices for PLAR among institutions
- Makes policy recommendations for sustainable funding of PLAR

- Ensures Quality assurance and assessment processes are established and effective.

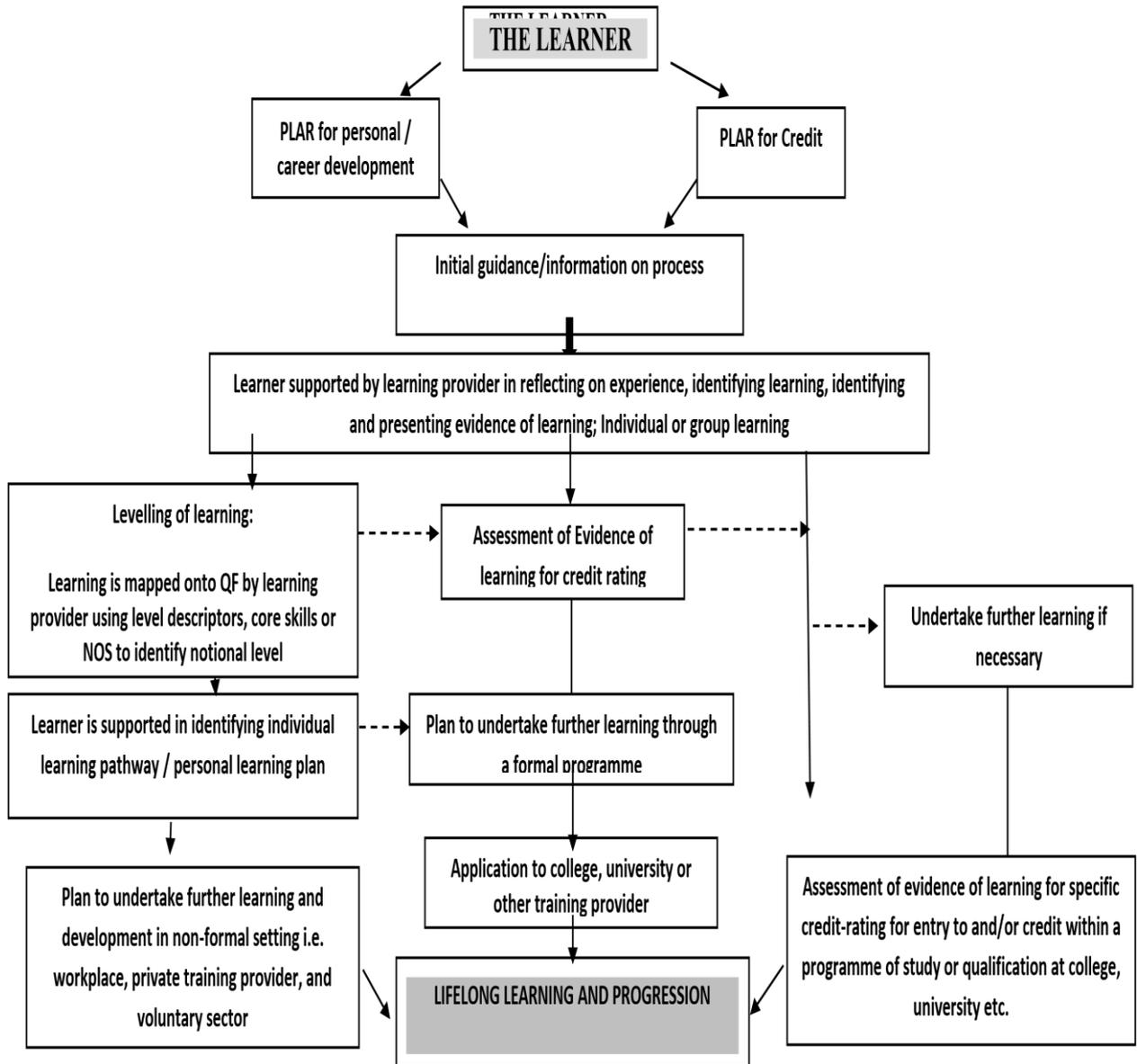
**(b) Employers**

- Develop workplace guidelines for PLAR implementation
- Align Human Resource Policies to accommodate PLAR as it relates to workforce planning, job matching and promotion.
- Align Human Resource Development and in service training to standards of the National Qualification Framework of Jamaica.
- Require training suppliers to be accredited and have qualifications recognised under the NQF-J where they are qualifying.
- Provide feedback on graduate competence gaps.
- Contribute to occupational standards development for PLAR.

**(c) Institutions**

- Implement PLAR Standards, and Guidelines through policy development
- Comply with quality assurance and audit requirements
- Ensure Institutional Registration and Programme Accreditation
- Ensure compliance with NQFJ Standards for assessing and placement of qualifications
- Ensure sound administrative processes for applications receipt, assessment integrity, transparency and security, providing feedback to learners as well as the provision of appeal process.

### Flow Chart for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL/PLAR)



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