Social inequality contested: Prior Learning Assessment in the context of displacement

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Abstract

Building upon a growing attention to the intersection of displacement and student-centered higher education pathways, this paper draws upon the extant literature – encompassing grey literature and institutional reports as well as peer-reviewed publications – to analyse how displaced learners across the lifespan are pursuing Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) opportunities across world regions. This emphasis on pathways for those outside of the "traditional" college age range addresses the minoritisation of those learners within education scholarship and the increasing emphasis on degree attainment among those with "some college no degree," who are increasingly in focus given demographic trends. Moreover, adult learners frequently balance added financial pressures and caring responsibilities against those resources that can be dedicated to study; the extant literature demonstrates that financial barriers present a significant challenge to participation in higher education. This analysis addresses the following research questions: how does the current literature address PLA serving displaced learners? Second, how does the grey literature produced by the 217 higher education research centers identified by the third edition of Higher Education: A worldwide inventory address PLA serving displaced learners? The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of institutional innovations and student experience in the recent past and the contemporary moment. The review will encompass a literature search targeting the date range January 1, 2000, to October 1, 2023. Importantly, this search is limited neither by discipline nor institutional type: a plurality of international education practices and programs worldwide are in focus with an eye towards catalysing those innovations across Europe in the years to come. Through those various interventions, the educational trajectories of individual learners holding statuses including refugee and asylee will be supported, as will the future rebuilding of current conflict states.

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Introduction

Building upon a growing attention to the intersection of displacement and student-centered higher education pathways, this paper draws upon the extant literature – encompassing grey literature and institutional reports as well as peer-reviewed publications – to analyze how displaced learners across the lifespan are pursuing Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) opportunities across world regions. By displaced learner I refer to individuals holding refugee or asylee status or a form of temporary humanitarian protection, with that latter category varying across national borders.

This emphasis on pathways for those outside of the "traditional" college age range addresses the minoritization of those learners within education scholarship and the increasing emphasis on degree attainment among those with "some college no degree," who are increasingly in focus given demographic trends. Moreover, adult learners frequently balance added financial pressures and caring responsibilities against those resources that can be dedicated to study; the extant literature demonstrates that financial barriers present a significant challenge to participation in higher education. This analysis addresses the following research questions: **how does PLA serve displaced learners according to the current literature? Second, how does the grey literature produced by the 217 higher education research centers identified by the third edition of *Higher Education: A worldwide inventory* address PLA serving displaced learners?**

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of institutional innovations and student experience in the recent past and the contemporary moment. The review encompasses a literature search targeting the date range January 1, 2000, to October 1, 2023. Importantly, this search is limited neither by discipline nor institutional type: a plurality of international education practices and programs worldwide are in focus with an eye towards catalyzing those innovations across Europe in the years to come. Through those various interventions, the educational trajectories of individual learners holding statuses including refugee and asylee will be supported, as will the future rebuilding of current conflict states.

Why this focus on displaced learners? As argued elsewhere (see Unangst et al., 2022), there are at least four rationales undergirding higher education for displaced groups. These include, the student equity argument, which draws from a critical lens to reform educational processes that have historically excluded groups on the basis of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, among other (essentialist) identity markers (e.g., Brett, 2014; Korntheuer et al., 2018); the humanitarian argument, which draws from elements of the United Nations human rights architecture to underscore obligations to uphold agreed-upon protections among member states (e.g., Bhabha, 2002; Willems & Vernimmen, 2018); the diplomatic (or security) argument emphasizing that tertiary attainment among displaced groups supports the future rebuilding of conflict states; and the internationalization at home argument, which calls for attention to international/intercultural communities in any given national context (e.g. Hudzik, 2011; Leask, 2015); and finally the economic argument, which points to short- and long-term advantages to the host or receiving country accrued by moderately or highly skilled displaced groups as well as economic benefit through remittances (e.g., Bahar, 2018; Lenette et al., 2019; World Bank, 2019; Wright & Plasterer, 2012).

Literature Review

Refugee Education

Though a nascent literature has begun to address how displaced learners access and experience higher education, the comparatively "small body of work on educational provision for students of displaced background obscures a gap in coordination of relevant policy and services" (Unangst et al., 2022, p. 96). However, individual Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed a range of initiatives (e.g., Berg et al., 2023). These initiatives are

> differentiated based on resources, legal protections available to displaced people, and the (de)centralization of higher education systems and span teaching, research, and service functions. Given that displacement will continue to proliferate in the midst of continued economic, security, and climate challenges, there is an ever-increasing need to investigate and develop systems to support displaced individuals with a range of lived experiences. Cultivating HEIs that are supportive of the diverse population of displaced learners requires engagement with iterative policy and program development—incorporating a participatory approach and ongoing feedback from the broader community of policy actors, rather than policy "targets," as discussed by Turner and Figueroa (2019)—to address this vital human rights issue. (Unangst, et al., 2023)

Prior Learning Assessment

Prior Learning Assessment is a process by which students pursuing a credential may earn credit for earlier learning outside of a classroom. As Browning (2018) puts it, the two key areas for PLA include

> non-formal learning refers to learning gained through participation in non-credit courses, workplace-based training, seminars or workshops but does not lead to attainment of a formal qualification or credential. Informal learning refers to learning gained through life experience, workplace-based tasks, voluntary activities, self-study, hobbies, family responsibilities, etc. (p. 5)

PLA has been used across national contexts since at least the 1970s. It is generally framed as a student-centered practice furthering the post-secondary access and attainment, and also an opportunity to liaise with industry partners to support the further training of (potentially) highly skilled workers lacking a college or university credential. Barriers to PLA include a lack of consistent, easy-to-understand policy; varied regulations around whether loans/aid may be used to cover fees associated with PLA (e.g., Plumlee and Klein-Collins, 2017); and the resources required to evaluate PLA submissions.

How specifically PLA is conducted has varied over time and across institutions. In their policy brief *The Current State of Prior Learning Policies,* García and Leibrandt assert that mechanisms for recognizing prior learning may include standardized examination, faculty-developed challenge exam (for which learners may earn credit for a specific course by passing a comprehensive examination developed by faculty), portfolio-based and other individualized assessment, and/or evaluation of non-college programs (which might be based on recommendations by organizations such as, in the US, the American Council on Education, which evaluates training offered by employers/military, or alternately

based on HEI-specific review in partnership with workforce development agencies or other training providers linking to external training/credentials and existing degree programs).

Vital questions around PLA's structure and implementation persist and also vary across regional, national, and institutional settings. Moreover, these questions are tied to the differentiation of higher education systems, access and equity, and the relative hierarchies of HEIs (e.g. Unangst, 2017). As Mandell (2000) among others has pointed out, consideration of prior learning is necessarily linked to questions around academia's epistemic extractionism and gatekeeping. Mandell posits:

> PLA has been critical to the conversations about access and inclusion and significant to the changing role and configuration of colleges and universities, which are themselves embedded in a particular world of work, credentials, and socio-economic reality. But perhaps most important, PLA has also been about our assumptions regarding knowledge itself. That is, at least part of PLA's power has come from the most basic questions it has forced us to ask, and with which we now have the opportunity to seriously grapple. For example, what is learning? What is a skill? What is valuable knowledge? Who has what knowledge? Who cm1 we trust to make these judgments? What are the strengths or limitations of what any person knows? How do we determine when something is learned? Where does this learning come from? (Mandell, 2000, p. 48)

In the European setting, the European Commission's proposal of Individual Learning Accounts offered clear indication for PLA, with next steps being "proposals will be negotiated with Member States. These accounts would allow for individuals to capture the training or skills development they had pursued relevant to their career goals, with these smaller, individual learning opportunities then reflected for higher education institutions to evaluate should the learner decide to pursue more formalized degree opportunities. Once adopted by the Council, the Commission will support Member States, social partners and relevant partners in implementing these Council Recommendations" (European Commission, 2021). Concurrently, The Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR) led the EU-funded project "Recognition of Prior Learning in Practice" with ten formal partners and 11 associated higher education institutions (HEIs) across five countries from April 2019 to April 2021 (Swedish Council for Higher Education, 2021). In 2022, the launch event for a new European Recognition of Prior Learning Network was hosted by the Austrian Quality Assurance Agency (AQ Austria), this being a component of the Austrian 3-IN-AT-PLUS project funded by Erasmus+ Bologna call from March 2022 to December 2024 (European University Association, 2022).

Methods

The purpose of this scoping review was to identify the literature available on PLA and displacement across literature from the last 23 years captured by the large social science database Web of Science, thereby identifying key concepts, data sources, and pointing towards gaps in the research. As a complement and acknowledging that research on workplace/informal learning is often published in the grey literature, a paired source of evidence was also utilized: a review of how 217 research centers identified in an authoritative global scan by Rumbley et al. (2014) have considered this same topic.

The search in Web of Science included keywords, titles, and abstracts of studies from the database. The search terms/keywords were "Prior Learning Assessment" AND [refugee* OR asylee*] with date

range 2000 through 2023. Further work might draw upon these same search criteria in an examination of other scholarly databases: this is acknowledged as a limitation of the present paper.

For each research center, Rumbley et al. (2014) identified the relevant website (where such a site existed), and I began my search using those websites, reverting to a Google search if a website was unavailable. Several centers seem to have merged or closed; at the University of Sydney, for instance, the following text was made available: "at the end of 2015, the Institute for Teaching and Learning, and Sydney eLearning merged to form a new Educational Innovation (EI) Team located in the DVC (Education) Portfolio." Other websites are not visible from the author's internet connection in the US (connection blocked). I then searched for terms "prior learning" and "refugee" on each of these pages before reviewing the list of research publications (as available). The following results were collected from that scan.

Findings

Web of Science (WoS) Literature Review

The search of the WoS produced 96 results broken into academic fields as indicated in Table 1 (below).

Web of Science Categories	**Record Count**	**% of 96 search results**
Public Environmental Occupational Health	18	18.750
Demography	14	14.583
Law	7	7.292
Psychiatry	7	7.292
Education Educational Research	6	6.250
Social Work	6	6.250
Ethnic Studies	5	5.208
Geography	5	5.208
Social Issues	5	5.208
Social Sciences Interdisciplinary	5	5.208
Family Studies	4	4.167
Psychology Clinical	4	4.167
Sociology	4	4.167
Anthropology	3	3.125
History	3	3.125
Infectious Diseases	3	3.125
Health Care Sciences Services	2	2.083
Humanities Multidisciplinary	2	2.083
Immunology	2	2.083
Medicine Legal	2	2.083

Microbiology	2	2.083
Multidisciplinary Sciences	2	2.083
Otorhinolaryngology	2	2.083
Pediatrics	2	2.083
Political Science	2	2.083
Art	1	1.042
Dentistry Oral Surgery Medicine	1	1.042
Education Scientific Disciplines	1	1.042
Genetics Heredity	1	1.042
Health Policy Services	1	1.042
International Relations	1	1.042
Literature	1	1.042
Medicine General Internal	1	1.042
Medicine Research Experimental	1	1.042
Oncology	1	1.042
Pharmacology Pharmacy	1	1.042
Psychology Multidisciplinary	1	1.042
Psychology Social	1	1.042
Public Administration	1	1.042
Religion	1	1.042
Urban Studies	1	1.042
Women's Studies	1	1.042

Table 1: Results of Web of Science literature review; assembled by author

Following a scan of all titles and abstracts, a very small pool of articles with some connection to PLA was identified. In total five articles with some relevance were culled from this search, a strikingly low result. The titles of the journals included: *American Journal of Health System – Pharmacy, the International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, Social Sciences, Refuge, and the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. Upon closer examination of the full text, reference to PLA was indirect across the papers in question. These included calls for increased collaboration across local, county, and state lines in support of refugee women seeking employment and education in tandem (Namak et al., 2022), as well as a consideration of ways to support "liminal status students [to] pursue their education… finding spaces to be their authentic selves" (Syeed, et al., 2022, p. 6) and also challenging "the supposed divide between campus and community" through acknowledgment of their various learning experience (which PLA might well facilitate) (ibid, p. 4). Writing about refugees in the US, Yu et al. find that their study participants "revealed a tendency and disposition to help others which carried through from their country of origin into their new lives in the United States" (p. 1657); indeed unpaid work with community organizations is used by own university as an example of learning that may form the basis of a credit-earning experience. If displaced learners, broadly, were able to include

their experiences before, during, and following resettlement in support of their own community, this could indeed be transformational for individuals, communities, and institutions (including the very HEIs granting credit, which relatively infrequently offer degree programs focused on migration in several national contexts including Germany (see Unangst & Martínez Alemán, 2021).

Higher Education Research Centers

Few of the 217 higher education research centers identified by the third edition of *Higher Education: A worldwide inventory* assembled by Rumbley et al. (2014) are conducting research around displacement, and I was unable to identify any that are specially addressing prior learning assessment in conjunction with displacement. It may be that there are connections between these topics at the given centers, but that they have not (yet) been clarified on the centers' public facing websites – I acknowledge this as an important limitation of the present work. This "null finding" in itself is notable: if indeed displacement is a pressing issue worldwide (e.g., Unangst et al., 2023), scarce attention in the higher education sphere is problematic. Broadly, there is some (limited) focus on each of these topics separately, and in the paragraphs that follow I will highlight some of those examples of work that, if extended, I argue might productively examine aspects of PLA in the context of displacement.

In addition, I highlight one publication in particular, produced by the OECD, which clearly addresses this intersection. *Recognition of Prior Learning for Ukrainian Refugee Students* (2023) builds from an OECD survey challenges and pressures on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices, with that survey finding that "'Equivalency issues with Ukrainian qualifications' was the second most frequently reported barrier to the enrolment of Ukrainian students in [European] higher education systems (after language)" (p. 1).

PLA

The center based at Austria's Universität Krems that was formerly titled the Centre for Educational Management and Higher Education Development – now the Department of Higher Education Research – has completed several research projects related to PLA. These include an EU funded project on Work Based Learning (WBL) as well as a published work focused on university validation and recognition of non-formal and informally developed competencies. The open access book summarizing this project is available online via the Waxmann publishing house. Chapters include "How to create a mobile European LLL culture by the complementary use of European instruments such as VNFIL, RPL, micro credentials and the EQF;" "The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice in Munster Technological University (MTU) – collaboration with employers"; and "Prospects and challenges: work-integrated learning as a key component of validation in higher education."

Croatia's Institute for the Development of Education also displays significant involvement with PLA, notably through a 2011-2013 project titled "University Recognition of Prior Learning Centres – Bridging Higher Education with Vocational Education and Training." Partner institutions included Jagiellonian University, Edinburgh Napier University Centre for Credit Rating, and Paris Est Creteil University; the project description is as follows:

> Importance of the achievement of the Lifelong Learning (LLL) objectives in Europe have been highlighted in various policy papers. This has been reflected in the national efforts across European Union to adapt or create their national qualification frameworks and prepare its

practical exploitation. However the use of new opportunities linked to national qualification frameworks such as formal recognition of informal and work based learning requires cultural change but also practical tools and knowledge. This project provides a unique opportunity for coached transfer of an established process of Recognition of Prior Learning into countries currently implementing their qualifications frameworks. (Institute for the Development of Education, 2023)

Displaced Learners

The 2022 OECD working paper *Holistic refugee and newcomer education in Europe: Mapping, upscaling and institutionalizing promising practices from Germany, Greece and the Netherlands* by Koehler et al. addresses educational interventions across the primary, secondary, and post-secondary level that were developed in conjunction with universities in those countries and elsewhere (Leeds Beckett University, for example, is an external evaluator for one of the programs in Greece). This publication points not only to interesting innovations with clear important for university access but also points to the role of current university faculty, staff, and possibly students in supporting the development of promising practices across primary and secondary levels.

UNESCO's 2022 book titled *From radio to artificial intelligence: Review of innovative technology in literacy and education for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons* addresses the technological contexts in which displaced learners find themselves worldwide and profiles promising tools and programs. This work is valuable for not only the number of country contexts addressed but the variety of tech interventions and innovations – it is an important piece of work for those supporting displaced learners in higher education globally.

Discussion

It is clear in the European context as elsewhere that many colleges and universities have well-developed structures for evaluating prior learning, with these structures serving adult and other minoritized learners. Lund University, for instance, offers a stand-alone website outlining relevant procedures and offering manuals, process charts, and decision templates for institutional faculty and staff, also referring to a dedicated staff person serving as primary point of contact (Savino, 2023). Tallinn University of Technology does the same, and additionally offers an applicant self-assessment form to learners pursuing PLA, which the university also refers to as Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) (2024). Vilnius University notes that learners may apply PLA for up to fifty percent of their overall degree credits (2024). Thus, various institutions have moved far beyond "one size fits all" PLA, offering a range of approaches to evaluate learner experiences and expertise. These programs support student success across the lifespan (e.g., Chappell, 2012; Klein-Collins et al., 2020; Travers, 2013).

In parallel, strong support structures are now in place for displaced learners across the European tertiary sector though research and practice continue to demonstrate that policy and programmatic iteration are needed (e.g., Abamosa, 2023; Croke, 2023; Grüttner et al., 2024). However, the 217 higher education research centers in focus here are not pursuing that research with an emphasis on lifelong learners and PLA; that is to say, displaced learners are omitted from the discourse on access and equity with respect to prior and experiential learning across these research agendas (according to data currently available on public facing websites).

One clear question that the research centers might productively engage is: whether/how PLA is being implemented differently for displaced learners as compared with other minoritized learners in a given national setting (and indeed across national settings). If this is the case – as seems highly likely given the website content of myriad college/university PLA initiatives – then a distinct challenge to access and equity presents itself. Qualitative and quantitative research is therefore urgently needed at the institutional and policy levels. One opportunity for innovation in this space relates to creative outreach strategies aimed at multilingual displaced people who might pursue PLA if they were aware of it (e.g., Flanagan, 2023). This might well take place in collaboration with civil society actors engaged with or providing service to displaced learners on a regular basis.

In 2024, this query of PLA serving displaced learners has found scarce results across the extant literature and research activity of higher education research centers worldwide. To contest that gap, institutions and researchers are called to (re)consider defining access and equity in light of permanent, dynamic displacement with an eye towards a vitally supportive structure already in place across Europe as elsewhere: Prior Learning Assessment. As Conrad (2022) has put it, referring to the recognition of prior learning (RPL):

> For while RPL provides a logistical framework for assessing prior knowledge, it does not answer the fundamental epistemological questions of knowledge that remains: Whose knowledge is valued, whose is not valued? Whose experiential learning is included, whose is excluded? The acknowledgment of valued knowledge is key to equity and inclusion. (Online only edition).

By extension, data on PLA – both learner reported and institutionally reported – is in a real sense humanitarian data. Understanding education as a human right and PLA as established good practice underscores its utility in supporting displaced learners pursing, concurrently, humanitarian protection and higher education.

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