

Every Life Holds Value

From its origins, Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) has been championed as a tool for equity, empowerment, and social change. PLA, in the myriad forms it has taken across the world, refers to processes and frameworks that identify, assess, and formally recognize learning gained through a range of sources, e.g., work, community engagement, personal study, and life experiences. At its heart lies a belief that learning - regardless of where or how it happens - deserves recognition.

In this special issue of PLAIO, we turn our focus to one of the most pressing global challenges of our time: the displacement of people due to war, violence, climate crisis, economic inequalities, political hostilities, and systemic exclusion. What is at stake is not only the provision of food, shelter, or border protection, but the creation of meaningful pathways into education, work, and community life for those who are too often shut out. PLA offers displaced people a pathway to rebuild their professional and personal lives by validating the knowledge and skills they bring, even in the absence of formal documentation. PLA has been a tool for social justice and provides ways to respond to the needs of refugees, migrants, displaced, and stateless people.

Today, millions of people are fleeing from war zones, entering what are assumed to be "peace zones." But even these supposed safe havens are increasingly destabilized - socially, politically, economically, and morally. The boundaries between war and peace are becoming more fragile, blurred by rising populism, cultural polarization, and democratic backsliding. In these volatile contexts, the displaced arrive not only in search of food and shelter, but also in search of dignity, belonging, and opportunity. Whether the displacement is within one's own nation or across borders, or if the movement is to leave unsafe environments or to seek work in order to send funds back home, there are tensions between the knowledge, experiences, and identity brought by the individuals and the expectations, systems/structures, policies, and recognition (or lack of) in the new environment. The challenges are many; there are countless examples around the world today.

Can PLA be part of an answer in this time of crisis? This issue of PLAIO dares to ask that question.

The contributions gathered in *PLAIO #9* affirm that PLA, at its best, is not only about qualifications, employment, or workforce matching. It is about freedom - the freedom to be seen, to be heard, and to participate meaningfully in society. It is about creating the conditions in which those who have been displaced (even within their own countries) are not treated as passive recipients of aid, but as individuals with rich, diverse capacities forged through their life experiences. Our common work is about recognizing their learning - formal, informal, and non-formal - not as a deficit, but as an asset.

As many of the contributions to this issue emphasize, the promise of PLA extends beyond economics. We must reclaim its potential as a democratic and humanistic practice: one rooted in solidarity, inclusion, accessibility, and the hope for more open societies. In doing so, we situate PLA within a broader struggle for social justice - a struggle in which recognition becomes a political act, affirming that every person carries within them the right to learn, to grow, and to contribute in individual ways. Its absence often reinforces marginalization, perpetuating cycles of dependency and exclusion.

We are not naïve. Political instability, shifting norms of citizenship, and instrumentalist pressures narrow the space for inclusive assessment practices. The very perspectives that give PLA its transformative power - social, educational, economic, cultural - are often overshadowed by a global climate of fear and fragmentation. This is one of the paradoxes of our time: even as global migration grows and people's needs become more and more visible, recognition of learning remains uneven, contested, and often denied.

And so, this issue of *PLAIO* calls for critical reflection and renewed action. It brings together voices from across the globe - researchers, practitioners, refugees and policymakers - who are designing, participating in, and defending systems of recognition that aim not only to integrate, but to empower. This issue showcases PLA practices that seek to resist exclusion and foreground participation. It highlights frameworks that reject narrowly instrumental and often bureaucratic solutions and instead embrace the complex humanity of learners-in-transition. It calls for action, such as advocacy for inclusive policy reforms, development of assessment models for undocumented learners, and cross-sector coalitions among education, employment, and humanitarian sectors.

The work explored in this issue is only a drop in the bucket. We know much more work in this area is going on: sometimes at national and international levels, sometimes at institutional and employer levels, and sometimes quietly as individuals seek to help individuals. This issue of *PLAIO* seeks to provide a flavor and spirit of the incredible work that people are doing, and we all need to do.

We invite you to read the contributions in this issue not simply as technical solutions, but as responses to a deeper moral imperative. We hope this issue will inspire you to reimagine PLA not only as a bridge into systems, but as a challenge to those systems - especially when they fail the very people most in need of access, recognition, and voice. We hope you will see that PLA is much more than a method. It announces a message: that every life holds value, that every story carries knowledge, and that every learner deserves a future.

In these pages, you will find authors urging us to rethink how we recognize, assess, and credential knowledge and skills. We hear voices from people who have experienced being a refugee. We hear from countries, systems, and institutions on the policies and practices that they are implementing. We are also encouraged to think about how these shared strategies, actions, and stories are relevant and timely as more humanitarian approaches to recognizing and validating what all people know and can do.

We recognize that this is work-in-progress; that we are dealing with a very fluid situation and that new ideas, policies, and practices need to continue to emerge as the realities of

people's situations change and become clearer to us. This is one issue of PLAIO at one time in our history—a kind of snapshot of what we are doing across the world at this moment. We also recognize that it is inherently limited. We hope it contributes to and encourages continued work in this area. There are so many questions to take up together.

This is PLA as part of a social contract. It is an invitation for all of us to belong and a refusal to render anyone invisible.

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