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# Prior Learning Assessment of Immigrants Competences—a Systematic Review

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## Abstract

As immigration increases around the globe, the assessment and recognition of prior learning experiences become inevitable to incorporate foreign-trained professionals. However, even though Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is claimed to be a source of social inclusion, it encourages a dividing practice—potentially building more barriers than bridges. This systematic review analyzes the practice of PLAR in the case of recent immigrants using 39 articles published between 1990 and 2020. The research reviewed was primarily conducted in Canada and Sweden, followed by other European countries. The systematic review synthesizes the context in which PLAR is used, the difficulties encountered during the process, and the impact of the process. By doing so, it pinpoints a new baseline for future innovative research. The analysis focuses on three identified difficulties: (1) language influence, (2) labour market demands, and (3) systemic limitations. The findings raise the question whether PLAR is an appropriate tool for the assessment of immigrants' prior learning, as the plurality in knowledge and education is not valued during the process. Therefore, overall systemic change is needed to enable social inclusion.

**Keywords** PLAR · Prior learning assessment and recognition · Immigrants

## Introduction

Interest in validating qualifications and experience has become omnipresent in adult education in recent decades (Harris et al., 2014). Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a concept that has spread worldwide to implement validation and adapt education to the needs of modern societies. This article uses the hyphen

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PLAR to refer to all kind of organized activities that make prior learning visible and give recognition to such learning.

As immigration increases worldwide, it has become essential to include foreign-educated professionals in the assessment and recognition of prior learning experiences. Using PLAR in the case of immigrants is a rather thinly explored area of research, but validation is seen as essential for equality and inclusion in education and training, creating a more flexible labour market and promoting integration and social cohesion (Diedrich, 2013b; Moss, 2014). Nevertheless, there are a number of challenges regarding the comparability of data from different countries and tracking the potential outcomes of PLAR measures. Critical research has highlighted that the PLAR process is ambivalent, bringing validation and recognition to some, but manifesting exclusion and deskilling for others (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Diedrich, 2014; Guo & Shan, 2013).

This systematic review aims to synthesize the current state of literature on PLAR of recent adult immigrants' competences. The term *recent adult immigrants* is used in this article to address the situation of people who have immigrated in adulthood either by choice or due to forced migration. A reflection on previous research on the topic is necessary to engage in a productive discussion about its underlying structures, challenges, and the future use of PLAR for immigrants.

The article begins with a thematic introduction and clarification of the terminology used, from which the research questions are derived. Subsequently, the methodology of the systematic literature research as well as evaluation is presented, before the results of this are outlined. The findings are then discussed and their limitations are described. The systematic review ends with recommendations for future research.

## Literature Review

### Defining PLAR

PLAR as a policy, practice, and research area has developed globally over the past decades (Harris et al., 2014). The Canadian Association for Prior Learning defines PLAR as “processes that allow individuals to identify, document, have assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning. The learning may be formal, informal, non-formal, or experiential. The context of the learning is not key to the process as the focus is on the learning. PLAR processes can be undertaken for several purposes, including self-knowledge, credit or advanced standing at an academic institution, for employment, licensure, career planning or recruitment” (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2021). PLAR has a range of labels and acronyms such as RPL—recognition of prior learning, PLA—prior learning assessment, APL—assessment of prior learning, APEL—the assessment/accreditation of prior and experiential learning and a variety of other terms (Conrad, 2011). There is a great variation in concepts, practices, and contexts between these approaches, yet all unite under the idea of valuing an individuals' learning that has taken place anywhere and at any time in the past to ensure the visibility of said skill and knowledge. It should be emphasized that it is not the individual's prior learning as such that is recognized,

but rather the result of it, e.g. the formal and/or actual qualifications, competencies, knowledge, and skill (Andersson, 2020). There are a variety of methods, of which portfolios are the most commonly used today; other methods include, for example interviews, formal tests, and experiential assessments (Albert et al., 2013).

PLAR is often connected to the process of the transfer or mobility of knowledge (Andersson, 2020). It can be helpful and necessary for mobility between countries, workplaces, or from informal to formal learning contexts. Recognition results could be admission to education or work, credits in degree programmes, or formal/non-formal documentation of competence. In this article, the term *competence* is used to refer to a broader understanding of competence that includes theoretical and practical aspects of knowledge and skill and the ability to transfer these into practice. In this understanding, competence is the result of prior learning (Andersson, 2020). Depending on the objective, the requirements for the assessment method could be more or less strict—from proof of equivalence to similarity compared to the new context (Andersson, 2020).

PLAR is still a small but growing and professionalizing field of research (Harris et al., 2014). A thematic overview of central themes of PLAR research was given by Harris et al. (2014) who highlighted that PLAR research offers insights into policy and practice development in the field. Much of the PLAR research uses qualitative and descriptive approaches and focuses on quality assurance and implementation of the practice. There is a lack of quantitative, longitudinal studies, especially in an international context (Harris et al., 2014). The impact of PLAR research usually goes beyond the specific topic of PLAR, as it often highlights broader issues in educational research or other fields, such as migration studies (Andersson, 2020). One central theme in PLAR research is the *prior learning assessment for immigrants* which this systematic review aims to support.

## PLAR in the Case of Recent Adult Immigrants

Migration numbers are increasing around the globe (International Organization for Migration, 2020) and immigrants play an essential role in the contemporary west's prosperity. Ten to nearly 30% of the population in the wealthiest liberal economies are foreign born (e.g. Italy: 10.4%, France: 12.8%, Netherlands: 13.4%, USA: 13.6%, UK: 13.7%, Norway: 15.6%, Germany: 16.1%, Austria: 19.3, Sweden: 19.5%, Canada: 21.0%, Australia: 29.9%) (OECD Data, 2022). Yet there are gaps in representation and participation of immigrants in all aspects of society due to underlying racial prejudice and deficits in societal integration. However, the recognition of prior learning experiences becomes inevitable for the upward mobility of recent adult immigrants. After all, the extent to which societies are geared towards integrating people economically and socially has implications for the host society as well as for immigrants and their descendants (Kogan, 2007).

PLAR aims to help in this regard and facilitate the transfer of knowledge, competences, and qualifications between different countries (Wong, 2014). It is a matter of enabling mobility (Andersson, 2014). The approach is intended to create an understanding of the new learning and working environment of immigrants, to help identify

learning needs, and to facilitate access to education and progression in working life (Andersson, 2014; van Kleef & Werquin, 2012; Werquin, 2014). As a result, PLAR has become a tool that is increasingly used to support the entry of new immigrants into the labour market. (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich, 2013b; Werquin, 2014).

However, while the validation process can be easily carried out at the national level because there is a common understanding of the nature of PLAR and the national context of people's knowledge, various risks arise when validating international qualifications, skills, and prior learning (Andersson, 2014; Andersson & Guo, 2009). Definitions of "skills" already lead to ambiguities, as they are determined by a wide range of economic and social factors (Boucher, 2019). According to Boucher, there is "a clear disjuncture between the approaches to 'skill' definition adopted by domestic governments and those adopted in many academic studies that attempt to benchmark 'skill' globally" (Boucher, 2019, p. 10). Regarding the Canadian Labour Market, Shibao Guo highlights that a racialized skills regime has emerged that supports individuals who conform to the host country's norms and workplace cultures (Guo, 2015). This also affects recognition and studies show that recognition is often not given at a level that matches the background of the candidates (Andersson, 2014). Adding to this "non-recognition of international credentials has been identified as the largest barrier to successful integration into the workforce" (A. Brown & Moss, 2018, p. 10). Furthermore, it is mainly skills and qualifications that are needed in the respective labour market that are recognized (Werquin, 2014). This shifts the use of PLAR as a tool to encourage skill-based selection: Rather than focusing on neutral assessment, the process implies a statement about who is desirable as a citizen and who is not. Thus, PLAR "can act as a power mechanism that actually degrades competence by excluding part of candidates' prior experience" (Andersson, 2014, p. 343). In an overview of PLAR for immigrants in regulated professions, Moss states that "the discussion within most research articles and scholarly literature points to issues of inequity, devaluing, inaccessibility and unfairness" (Moss, 2014, p. 398). A broader look at the literature indicates that these issues occur generally in the case of PLAR for immigrants and do not only relate to regulated professions (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich, 2013a; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). The aforementioned effects contradict the initial aim of PLAR and a reflection on previous research is needed. The following research questions guided this systematic review to synthesize what is known about the PLAR process in the case of recent adult immigrants:

- In which contexts is prior learning of recent adult immigrants assessed and recognized?
- Which difficulties arise when assessing and recognizing prior learning of recent adult immigrants?
- What effects and impacts does PLAR in the case of recent adult immigrants have?

## Method

To answer the research questions, a systematic review was conducted. In a systematic review, existing research to a certain topic is critically and systematically analyzed using a fixed method (Gough et al., 2017). The process begins by clarifying the questions to discuss, after which reviewers search databases using an explicit search string, attempting to find all relevant research. The findings are then sorted according to explicit criteria, to see which articles will be included or excluded. The remaining articles are coded and the categorized text passages are synthesized. The presented systematic review includes 39 articles.

### Search Strategy and Selection Procedure

Guided by the established review questions, a search strategy was developed through a systematic thematic analysis. This allows to define the important terms for the search string. Scoping searches helped beyond that to find the terms used in databases. Once the terms are set, the composed search string must be adjusted depending on the databases used, because each database has a slightly different format, e.g. for the use of wildcards. For this systematic review, four databases were searched: Education Source, Scopus, ERIC, and PsychInfo. These are the search terms applied for the database Education Source:

((refugee\* OR migra\* OR immigra\* OR foreign-born\* OR foreign-train\*) AND (portfolio\* OR eportfolio\* OR e-portfolio\* OR prior learning OR prior knowledge OR ((recogni\* OR validat\*) AND (competenc\* OR skill\*))))

In each database, the initial inclusion criteria were articles written in English, published in a timeframe from 1990 to 2020. In addition, there were a few subjects excluded in each database, e.g. the subject of medicine.

By setting the language inclusion criteria to English, this systematic review is vulnerable to bias. There may be articles written in other languages, but because of the languages spoken by the researchers, these could not be included.

In total, 1231 articles were found in March 2020: Education Source ( $n = 302$ ), Scopus ( $n = 302$ ), ERIC ( $n = 247$ ), and PsychInfo ( $n = 381$ ). The references were extracted and documented using Citavi. After removing duplicates, the titles and abstracts of all remaining articles ( $n = 1103$ ) were screened through determined inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria were developed before the screening started, using the systematic thematic analysis done at the beginning of this systematic review. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were then tested by a sample of the articles. Uncertainties were discussed with another researcher. In Table 1 you can see the final list of inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The first screening was finished at the end of March 2020. Ten percent of all articles were screened a second time by a different researcher. The remaining articles ( $n = 137$ ) were obtained in full-text throughout March and April. The screening of the full-text articles lasted from April to July. Afterwards, 29

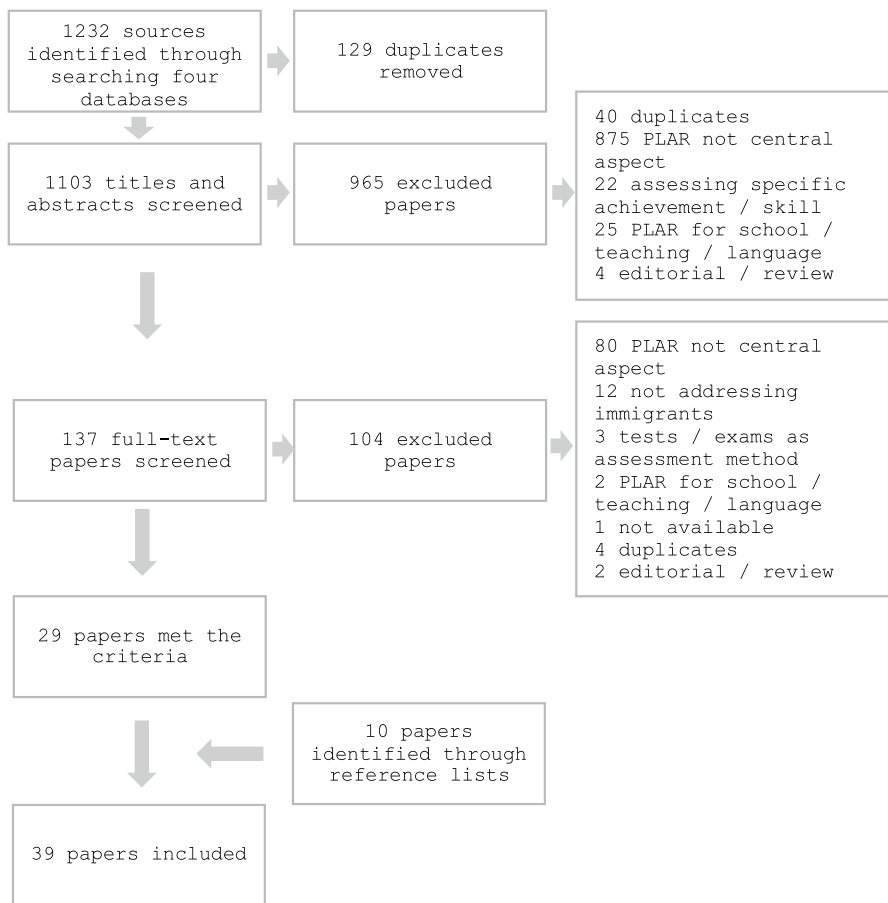
**Table 1** Inclusion and exclusion criteria

#	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1	Timeframe	1990 until 2020	Pre 1990
2	Language	English	Not English
3	People addressed	People who have immigrated to a country within the last few years, e.g. refugees (asylum seekers, recognized refugees, undocumented refugees) immigrants (skilled migrants, student migrants), foreign-trained, foreign-born	People not belonging to the inclusion criteria
4	Topic	Prior Learning Assessment or equivalent concept is explicitly mentioned and is an important aspect of the article—e.g. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning), CCC (Crediting Current Competence), APEL (Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning, RCC (Recognition of Current Competence), Competency-based assessments, Assessment of Prior Learning (APL), Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)	Prior Learning Assessment or equivalent concept is not explicitly mentioned or is not an important aspect of the article
4.1	PLAR—timeframe	Timeframe of prior learning is open or not mentioned	Testing the learning / performance of a specific time frame (of a course, during an internship, of a specific topic)
4.2	PLAR—method	Time to document prior learning is not limited (Portfolio, Self-assessment, Interview) or not mentioned	Assessment methods that are limited in time (tests / exams), formal comparison of curricula
4.3	PLAR—context	Prior Learning Assessment for higher education or employment	Prior Learning Assessment for school (not HE), teaching, language learning
5	Quality assurance	Peer reviewed	Not formally peer reviewed (i.e. conference papers, theses and reports)
6	Availability	Available full-text	Not available full-text
7	Occurrence	Once included	Duplicate
8	Type of article / study	- Original study - Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods research - Others than the ones excluded	- Review - Editorial - Pilot study - Report

articles remained to include in the data extraction process. Ten additional eligible articles were identified through a review of the reference lists of the included articles, leaving a total of 39 articles included. Another researcher examined these articles to confirm their eligibility. Figure 1 shows the Prisma flow chart adjusted for this systematic review.

### Data Extraction Process

For the data extraction process, the software MAXQDA was used. The process is based on codes and follows the idea of a structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2020): Thematic categories that describe certain arguments, topics, or figures of thoughts were formed based on the research questions posed above. The categories were initially formed deductive. In the next step, the articles were coded with the developed main categories, while new categories



**Fig. 1** Prisma flow diagram

**Table 2** Categories formed

Main category	Sub category	Sub category
PLAR concept used		
Research focus		
Study characteristics		
Findings		
	Assessment context	
	Type/method	
	Obstacles	
		Systemic limitations
		Language
		Labour market needs
	Effects	
		Self-reflection
		Discrimination
	Recommendations	

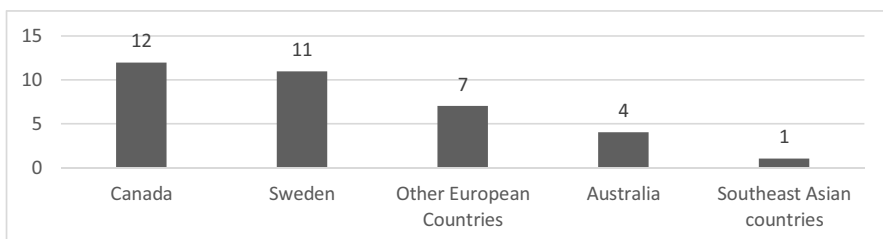
were identified inductively, i.e. directly on the material. All categories formed were then ordered and systematized. Table 2 shows the developed main and sub-categories.

The last step is the evaluation of the categorized text passages. Here, two researchers worked together to compose the results. These are documented below, starting with the characteristics of the articles under review.

## Results

The included articles were set in 14 different countries or regions. Most of the studies were conducted in Canada, closely followed from Sweden. In addition, studies have been conducted and articles written in other European countries and some articles were written about various countries.

Looking at the chart (Fig. 2), there seems to be a global imbalance related to the place where articles were written. While in fact in Canada and Sweden there were research projects funded to study the assessment and recognition of

**Fig. 2** Countries of articles

**Table 3** PLAR concepts used

Name of PLAR concepts	Number of articles explicitly mentioning concept
Recognition of prior learning (RPL)	9
Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)	8
Validation of prior learning	4
Recognition of credentials	4
Validation of non-formal and informal learning	3
Other names	11

immigrants, the imbalance here might also be due to the search strategy used, since only English publications were included and the focus lay on four primarily western-focused databases.

In the countries of the articles, different names are used for the concept of PLAR, as mentioned in the literature review. This shows that the procedure is not standardized across national borders. It also indicates that the articles under review have very different starting points and backgrounds. As mentioned in the literature review, the topic of PLAR has not been heavily researched, especially in the context of immigrants.

For the systematic review, the terms relatable to PLAR were listed, even if they did not explicitly mention PLAR. All terms used in the articles have in common that people's competencies are assessed and evaluated in order to integrate them into the local system. Table 3 lists the names used for the concept of PLAR in the articles under review.

In almost all articles ( $N=32$ ), a qualitative methodology was used. Four articles used a quantitative approach, and two articles used mixed methods. To collect the data, various methods were used in the articles. In some cases, several methods were applied for one article. For example, in 32 articles, interviews were the basis, whereby an additional document analysis was used in 17 of them. All methods used in the articles can be seen in the table below. Table 4 gives an overview of the data collection methods used in the articles.

**Table 4** Data collection methods used

Data collection methods	Number of articles using method
Interview	32
Document analysis	17
Observation	12
Survey/questionnaires	6
Focus groups	3

### Question 1: In which contexts is prior learning of recent adult immigrants assessed and recognized?

People addressed in the articles have immigrated to a country within the last few years, e.g. refugees (asylum seekers, recognized refugees, undocumented refugees), immigrants (skilled migrants, student migrants), foreign-trained, foreign-born. Five articles focus on refugees and two articles on migrant or refugee women. The research focus varies in each article, yet there are some articles which cover roughly the same theoretical area: sixteen articles address systematic issues related to the assessment of immigrants' prior learning and discuss classification, power relations, and exclusion of immigrants from the labour market. Fifteen articles discuss implications and outcomes of the PLAR process. One article documents the process of organizing a national validation centre in Sweden and one article describes the development of an online PLAR tool. One article links prior learning assessment to concepts of learning: informal learning and transformative learning. One article focuses on immigrants' initial contact with organizations providing training or employment, and one article discusses refugees' access to and experiences of higher education. Seven articles deal with projects implementing prior learning assessment methods and their process. Six of them are about the V/I project: Validating prior learning of recent immigrants for the labour market in Sweden. These articles examine the processes, implementations, difficulties, and the role of different people involved in the process, e.g. the interpreter.

The context in which immigrants are assessed varies in the articles. It is notable that only two articles discuss PLAR in the context of higher education. Five other articles relate to higher education, but also discuss PLAR in relation to the immigrants' impending entry into the labour market. The remaining 32 articles only discuss PLAR in relation to the labour market. Of these, 5 are articles about specific occupations: 3 about immigrant nurses and 2 about social workers. The other articles covered multiple professions and career options. Thus, there is no particular area that stands out as the main feature. Table 5 lists the assessment contexts.

**Table 5** Assessment context

Assessment context	Number of articles with this assessment context
Higher education	2
Labour market	32
Higher education and labour market	5

## Question 2: Which difficulties arise when assessing and recognizing prior learning of recent adult immigrants?

### Language Proficiency

A link between language skills and difficulties in the PLAR process is mentioned in seven papers. One article is based on a comparative study at the European level, another on a qualitative study on foreign educated social workers in Canada, and five others on validation projects in Sweden. There, many projects have been carried out across the country to establish and sustain a process for validating prior foreign learning (Diedrich, 2013a). They thus aimed to make settlement assistance more efficient for “newly-arrived immigrants with non-Nordic backgrounds” (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b, p. 279). To achieve this goal, assessments were to be carried out as early as possible, even if the people being assessed still had little knowledge of the Swedish language (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). To ensure that the level of language proficiency was not a barrier, active efforts were made to separate language proficiency from existing competencies (Diedrich, 2013a; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). However, it became clear that language is a major factor why complications in the assessment process can arise (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). A key component of competence is the ability to state and describe what one knows (Andersson et al., 2004). Without appropriate linguistic means, it is difficult to obtain a fair assessment of competence (Andersson et al., 2004; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017). This also makes it challenging to disentangle the validation of competences from language (Andersson et al., 2004).

To circumvent this problem, interpreters have been used in the validation projects (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). However, this also brings difficulties (Andersson et al., 2004; Diedrich, 2013a). The translator and the person being evaluated should work together, with one person having a specific competence and the other person speaking the language in which the evaluation is taking place (Andersson et al., 2004; Diedrich, 2013a). Problems can arise if translators are not able to translate technical terms of a specific profession into the desired language (Andersson et al., 2004; Diedrich, 2013a). A second problem that arises from the use of translators is the lack of neutrality (Diedrich, 2013a). When information is translated, it is not only transmitted but also changed depending on the person translating (Diedrich, 2013a). This also changes the evaluation of the competences of the person being assessed. For Diedrich, this highlights a problem with the PLAR process that is not unique to translation: “validation is not the objective and neutral assessment, or the documentation, of prior foreign learning that its proponents make it out to be” (Diedrich, 2013a, p. 243).

The findings show that the level of language proficiency is important for successful validation and that the expectation of language proficiency can be problematic and exclusionary and lead to marginalization (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Andersson & Osman, 2008; M. Brown et al., 2014). In several projects, this was not seen at the beginning and instead the possibility of interpreting was pointed out as a sufficient aid (Diedrich, 2013a; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). According to Andersson, this should be seen as problematic, as language is thus judged informally, which can lead

to arbitrariness (Andersson et al., 2004). Instead, it is important to formulate clear language critiques in order to avoid hidden discrimination (Andersson et al., 2004). Another starting point for dealing with language barriers could be to recognize that immigrants are novices in professional practice in terms of their language skills, even though they may be experts in terms of their professional knowledge (Andersson et al., 2004; Andersson & Fejes, 2010).

### Influences of the Labour Market on PLAR

Eight of the articles reviewed focus on the motivation of the PLAR process. All of these articles discuss the link between PLAR and the labour market and describe how it often shapes the PLAR process. In Sweden, validation is particularly interesting for the Employment Service as it is a potential solution for groups of unemployed people who have difficulties accessing the labour market: people with low formal education, those in need of rehabilitation, and immigrants (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). In this context, however, it happens that the focus of the process is steered away from the competencies of the individual and toward the needs of the labour market (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Diedrich, 2013b; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b; Diedrich & Styhre, 2013). Thus, the PLAR process primarily enrolls individuals whose skills are in short supply in the labour market (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Diedrich, 2013b; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). In this regard, there is a sorting mechanism at the structural level, i.e. certain occupations are selected and included in the PLAR possibilities (Andersson & Fejes, 2010). This selection is not primarily based on what occupational skills immigrants have, but on the requirements of certain occupations in the labour market (Andersson & Fejes, 2010). Immigrants with skills that are not useful for potential job offers—people with skills and competencies who are at the middle and lower ends of the value-added spectrum, for example or who do not yet have work experience and a job offer—are treated unfavourably and are excluded (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Bencivenga, 2017; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b; Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). Which skills are desirable or undesirable may differ from country to country (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015). One analysis also implies that validation practices tend to reinforce immigrants' weak position in the labour market when they undergo exhaustive continuous evaluations or are placed in unfavourable categories. Consequently, an exclusionary practice manifests itself in that countries only recognize what they deem useful in the context of their labour market, and validation can be seen as a recruitment process (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). This affects the PLAR process and makes it difficult to fully assess immigrants' learned skills (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Bencivenga, 2017).

### Systemic Limitations

Sixteen of the 39 articles included address systemic problems in the process of assessing prior learning and its recognition. This process is characterized by a pervasive gap in understanding, both on the part of the person being assessed and on the part of those deciding on the immigrant's prior learning. For individuals being

assessed, the gap is evident in their understanding of the process itself and informed, and self-determined participation is not possible due to their lack of understanding of the new socio-material context of the host country (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017). This leads to “participants experiencing that they need to work harder than their local counterparts to obtain credibility and/or positioning within the organizational context” (M. Brown et al., 2014, p. 64). Thus, the PLAR process becomes an experience for immigrants that is extraordinarily difficult to navigate (M. Brown et al., 2014; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Krahn et al., 2000; Singh & Sochan, 2010).

A gap in understanding also exists for the assessors. In relation to validation projects in Sweden, it has been found that the process of organizing validation is not always “grounded in a common understanding of what the validation was supposed to be or what it would do and could achieve in the future” (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b, p. 8). This supports the assertion that there is a very broad understanding of PLAR. The gap in understanding the immigrant’s learning and the context of that learning experience is covered by the process of classification used to transform foreign learning into national categories. As central gatekeepers, they decide whether a certain knowledge or skill is recognized or not, and thus who is accepted into or excluded from a profession. Decisive for the assessment are predefined standards of the host country (Diedrich & Styhre, 2013). From these, categories are formed into which individuals are placed on the basis of their professional background with the help of classification mechanisms (Diedrich, 2014). Categorizations are thus a first prerequisite for PLAR of adult immigrants and can serve as a fundamental step towards assimilation of foreign learning content and skills (Diedrich, 2014). In the course of this process, the multiple social contexts and complexity of personal experiences that are crucial to an individual’s overall understanding of competence are often ignored (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). Instead, they are replaced by the standards and criteria of the host country, as it is not individual skills or knowledge that is sought, but rather the extent to which local notions of professionalism and expertise are met (Diedrich, 2017). Neutral assessment and recognition of immigrants’ prior knowledge becomes impossible, as the neutrality of the process itself is lost due to the translation of competences between different socio-material contexts and the interests and agenda of the implementing professional body (Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Diedrich, 2014). As a result, the assessment process for immigrants becomes an educational comparison in which immigrants have to show that their prior learning matches the educational system of the host country (Papadopoulos, 2017). To neutrally assess professional knowledge acquired outside the host country’s education system thus represents a systemic limit of the PLAR process (Diedrich, 2013b; Wagner & Childs, 2006). Instead, an assumption of deficit arises from underlying racisms (Wagner & Childs, 2006), as PLAR “often exposes, in practice, individuals to alternative forms of discrimination or exclusion” (Diedrich & Styhre, 2013, p. 780).

This reveals a structural power imbalance that is omnipresent throughout the entire PLAR process: the assessors can decide according to their predefined criteria—the people being assessed cannot comprehend the full extent of that decision and have to accept the outcome. A reinforcement of the power imbalance

and another systemic limitation of the process are revealed by the long-time span over which the PLAR process is drawn out (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Clayton, 2005; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018). Participants often wait several years for their assessment, the outcome of which is uncertain (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Clayton, 2005; Diedrich, 2013b; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018).

### **Question 3: What are effects and impacts of PLAR in the case of recent adult immigrants?**

When PLAR concepts are integrated, a sub-goal may be to motivate participants and give them a sense of pride in their past achievements (; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b). Clayton (2005) points out that women in particular may find it difficult to acknowledge their non-formal competences, especially if they have not participated in a formal career guidance process. Some of the articles considered explored this possible encouraging effect on participating migrants in the PLAR process and highlight the positive outcome (Albert et al., 2013; A. Brown & Moss, 2018; Clayton, 2005; Laudenbach & Lis, 2019). For example, Laudenbach and Lis (2019) point to participants' increased confidence in their qualifications and skills after a positive experience of the PLAR process (Laudenbach & Lis, 2019). And A. Brown and Moss (2018) see a "significant potential for transformative learning as a by-product of the process of recognition of acquired competencies" (A. Brown & Moss, 2018, p. 145).

However, even if these processes and exchanges motivate participants and bring them a feeling of pride in their achievements, the value of PLAR for integrating immigrants into the labour market and society remains questionable (Diedrich & Styhre, 2013). Immigrants who experience difficulties in their PLAR process are likely to experience negative emotions: "disappointment, sadness, hurt, and stress are mixed with feelings of frustration, bitterness, resentment, and anger" (Grant & Nadin, 2007, p. 156). The examined articles suggest that there are other important implications that need to be critically considered. For instance, according to Diedrich et al. (2011a, b), PLAR becomes a tool tailored to the host country, giving only limited insight into the person's actual competence and rather describing the extent to which the person conforms to the predefined norm. The racialization and materialization of knowledge based on ethnicity and national origins are visible in the PLAR process as it targets immigrants with a stronger connection to the host country system and labour market—those who meet local standards and expectations (Souto-Otero & Villalba-Garcia, 2015).

These systemic limitations and discriminatory practices are made invisible in the PLAR process by highlighting the individual's proclaimed lack of knowledge (Diedrich et al., 2011a, b; Diedrich & Styhre, 2013). This results in a normalization of the devaluation of foreign competences, reinforcing barriers into the labour market and society. A central example of this is the classification of immigrants' occupations as indeterminate occupation when immigrants cannot verify their experience through documents in the PLAR process (Diedrich, 2014). However, for immigrants who have a different educational background, the lack of

proof of practical experience is common. By using the categories indeterminate occupation or unskilled, the expert panel formally negates prior learning, creating a system of exclusion (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b) and reinforcing existing power relations. These impacts of PLAR are manifested in its use as a governing tool, which is highlighted in a number of articles (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Diedrich, 2014; Diedrich et al., 2011a, b; Guo & Shan, 2013). This governance effect consequently includes those immigrants who fit the predefined norm and excludes those who do not, even if they have worked for years in the upper labour segments in their home countries (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Bauder, 2003). PLAR thereby installs a “normalizing understanding into the minds of immigrants, employers and professional associations of what constitutes an immigrant professional and who will be accepted as a professional in a new context” (Andersson & Guo, 2009, p. 435). The migrant’s position as a qualified and competent individual is thus severely limited (Diedrich, 2014).

Several articles conclude that PLAR lacks recognition and has rather become an instrument of non-recognition (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Bauder, 2003). And when immigrants’ prior experiences are recognized, they are often disparaged because of the systemic limitations described above (Andersson & Osman, 2008). It can then amount to validation meaning little more than that the person had to start all their higher education again (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). This non-recognition and devaluation of foreign training and certificates are seen by institutional administrators as a major obstacle to labour market integration (Bauder, 2003). It constitutes a massive devaluation of institutional cultural capital (Bauder, 2003).

Because of this barrier, immigrants tend to hold jobs that are far below their qualifications and experience a loss of social status (Bauder, 2003; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Girard & Smith, 2012). Other immigrants turn to the host country’s education system to acquire locally recognized qualifications (Bajt & Pajnik, 2015; Bauder, 2003; A. Brown & Moss, 2018; Girard & Smith, 2012). This supports the idea that acquiring new, locally recognized qualifications could be more efficient and faster for immigrant professionals than participating in PLAR in the first place (Bauder, 2003; Hannah, 1999; Laudenbach & Lis, 2019). However, Clayton (Clayton, 2005) writes that many participants give up during their requalification for “lack of information, of money and of support and through declining confidence as years of unemployment or under-employment mount up” (Clayton, 2005, p. 236).

According to Bauder (2003), the devaluation of immigrant learning experiences is not only a waste of human capital, but also has traumatic emotional effects on immigrants (Bauder, 2003; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). It is frustrating for immigrants to see their skills not valued (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019). To counteract these difficulties, a more holistic interpretation of competence that equally takes into account the cognitive, social, and functional dimensions could foster a new approach that reduces discriminatory practices within PLAR (Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017).

## Discussion

The findings of this systematic review confirm those of previous research. A majority of articles focusses on PLAR in the context of labour market integration, followed by articles that connect PLAR to higher education.

The difficulties of PLAR for recent immigrants are the dominant topics of the findings. In this context, three issues have emerged: (1) Language proficiency is a rudimentary obstacle for PLAR of recent immigrants, as carrying out PLAR when language use is not confident is very difficult and constrains informed participation by the immigrant professional. Language proficiency is therefore a frequently discussed topic in the context of PLAR for immigrants (Moss, 2014). (2) The needs of the labour market change the intention of PLAR and influence the practical implementation of the process, e.g. by including occupations for which workforce is needed but not others. (3) Inherent systematic limitations of PLAR as a tool raise questions about the neutrality of the process itself and the fundamental perception of knowledge. All three points raise the question of power. Which individuals or which institutions have the power to shape the PLAR process?

Generally, the individual approach dominates in PLAR practice today, which means that it is usually the individual who has to initiate the process to ensure that their particular learning or skill is assessed and recognized as a required competence. However, to act competently as an individual in the PLAR process requires a deep understanding of the socio-material context of the countries' educational and labour market environments. Immigrants, especially if they have only recently immigrated, lack this understanding and are therefore unable to become active in the PLAR process. Therefore, they have to passively follow the PLAR process, which is predetermined by the implementing institutions. It should be noted that there is an institutional interest that urges a systematic assessment and recognition of immigrants' prior learning. After all, attracting qualified specialists can be useful to a country, as gaps in the labor market can be closed by them. Thus, immigrants are treated as economic goods and are selected according to their usefulness for the labour market. In this process, race and racism remain discriminatory factors in determining the value of racialized immigrants' knowledge and skills (Guo, 2015). Thus, immigrants' skills often go unseen and unrecognized (Andersson & Osman, 2008; Diedrich, 2013b). PLAR for immigrants therefore normalizes misconceptions and misinterpretations (Andersson & Osman, 2008) and becomes a practice of non-recognition and devaluation rather than a contribution to social justice (Andersson & Guo, 2009)

Due to the difficulty for immigrants to become active in the PLAR process, they remain powerless throughout this course, in contrast to the implementers of PLAR, who maintain power and dominance at an institutional level. PLAR is thus another tool that takes part in the global system of white supremacy, reinforcing the central role of the norm dominant societies (Brady, 2017). Guo investigated this and concludes: "national and ethnic origins of human capital can affect racialised immigrants' economic performance, specifically in the form of downward career and

social mobility. [...] It seems evident from this study that skill is not only gendered and classed; it is also racialised” (Guo, 2015, p. 247).

PLAR is thus used as an instrument of domination that contributes to the reproduction of difference in order to strengthen the normative. Brady highlights: “Difference management goes hand in hand with the systems of oppression” (Brady, 2017). It can be stated that the idea of PLAR may have been linked to social justice, but placed in the context of power mechanisms, race, and national wealth, PLAR can be viewed as a tool to suit the existing system of power and ultimately maintain hegemony (Moss, 2014). Guo therefore refers to PLAR as an “assimilation tool for moulding racialised minorities into Canadian norms and workplace cultures” (Guo, 2015). In this process, skin colour, not qualifications, forms the foundation for discrimination (Guo, 2015). When it comes to official recognition, the PLAR instruments like portfolios and interviews are adapted to the specific needs of the host country and thereby are not used neutrally. The application of PLAR strategies to satisfy a specific demand and to meet set standards of the new host country interrupts the full exploration of a person’s skills and knowledge. In terms of human capital, the devaluation and non-recognition of skills is a loss for both the host country and the country of origin (Reitz, 2001).

## Limitations

During the conduct of the systematic review, efforts were made to adhere as closely as possible to the methodological procedure. Nevertheless, there were limitations that need to be considered for the evaluation of the review. Four major educational databases were searched, all of which include articles with internationally published studies. However, by applying the criterion of articles written in English, research published in other languages was not included in this review. Furthermore, research documented in grey literature, book chapters, monographs, or journals that are not indexed in the four databases was excluded. Another limitation is that the review only includes articles published within the period 1990–2020. All included articles are peer reviewed, to ensure that a baseline of quality is met. While the articles were read and coded, discrepancies were discussed, but still human error cannot be completely excluded as information may have been overlooked or misinterpreted. It should be noted that a majority of the research was conducted in the same institutional setting (e.g. Sweden) and written by the same authors. In addition, the research focuses on negative impacts, those who successfully completed PLAR are not further mentioned or discussed; therefore, positive impacts cannot be identified from this corpus of articles. The research gap that can be stated for PLAR research in general also occurs in the case of PLAR for recent immigrants: There is a lack of quantitative research (only four articles included) and a lack of longitudinal research, as most articles refer to a specific project and time period.

## Recommendations and Implications for Practice, Policy, and Future Research

The findings suggest that more research is needed (1) on long-term impacts and outcomes of PLAR practices for individuals and society, (2) on new approaches to PLAR for immigrants that consider systemic constraints, and (3) on PLAR in the context of hierarchies of knowledge production and systemic racism.

Current interpretation on the long-term outcomes of PLAR is mostly based on incomparable parameters, inconstant data and does not sufficiently consider the diversity of national differences. PLAR research therefore needs standardized longitudinal data to provide a valid overview of the outcomes and long-term impacts of PLAR on individuals and society. In addition, PLAR research should establish a supervisory authority that provides safety and support for immigrants participating in the process.

PLAR is an important practice to enable immigrants to engage in their professional field, but the current adaptation of PLAR remains limited due to the outdated hegemonic pride of expert bodies. A comprehensive shift is needed to develop PLAR into a transformative practice that promotes equality by enabling engagement in equivalent positions rather than counting differences. In doing so, a new paradigm needs to emerge that supports individuals to engage in their field rather than blocking interaction in advance. In addition, the concepts of skills and competencies used in PLAR need to be re-evaluated and adapted.

However, even with these adjustments, PLAR continues to be influenced by race and global hierarchies in knowledge production. Therefore, the authors agree with Guo, who writes:

“To overcome the detrimental effects of a racialised regime of skill, it is imperative to adopt anti-racist education strategies as a critical integrative approach in challenging racial discriminations and power differentials in the new politics of skill as coloured and racialised” (Guo, 2015, p. 247).

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## Declarations

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**Consent to Participate** Not applicable

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