

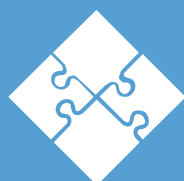
**ACHIEVING OUR POTENTIAL: AN ACTION PLAN FOR PRIOR LEARNING  
ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR) IN CANADA**

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PLA CENTRE, HALIFAX

2008

**ACHIEVING OUR POTENTIAL:  
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**PLA**  
centre

The report *Achieving our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada* was produced by the PLA Centre with a core team of researchers and writers:

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This work was funded by a contribution from the Canadian Council on Learning. However, the opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors. The Canadian Council on Learning bears no responsibility for its content.

The Executive Summary is available in French. The full report is available in English only. It can be obtained through the PLA Centre website ([www.placentre.ns.ca](http://www.placentre.ns.ca)) and the Canadian Council on Learning website ([www.ccl-cca.ca](http://www.ccl-cca.ca)).

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Cite this publication in the following format:

*Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada*, PLA Centre, Halifax, 2008.

Published in October 2008  
Halifax, Nova Scotia



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank **Paul Cappon**, President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning, for his confidence in asking the PLA Centre to undertake this daunting task, and his senior colleagues, **Douglas Hodgkinson**, **John Biss** and **Robert Patry**, for their generous and encouraging support and advice throughout this adventure.

We were fortunate to be able to assemble an indefatigable, knowledgeable and talented core team that included **Rick Williams** of Praxis Research and Consulting; **Joy Van Kleef** of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning; and **Phil Davison**, a PLA Centre Associate. Each team member contributed generously to overall project planning and analysis as well as to his or her particular area of work.

**Rick Williams** authored the chapter on *Socio-Economic Trends and Education Challenges*, providing a comprehensive analysis of the demographic and labour supply challenges affecting the demand for PLAR in Canada. Rick also provided invaluable leadership in developing the Canadian and international content for *Situational Analysis: Development of PLAR Policies, Programs and Practices*, supplementing his research with data supplied by **Joy Van Kleef**.

**Joy Van Kleef** is the author of two instrumental background documents: *Recognition of Prior Learning Activities in Canada (12 Jurisdictions)* (Appendix A), and *Eight International Case Studies in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (Appendix C). These documents are fundamental components of the overall report and integral to the success of the project.

We were also fortunate to have the assistance of **Dianne Conrad** (Athabasca University) who developed the initial research for the New Zealand Report.

**Phil Davison** gave able advice and assistance — most particularly by providing background research and formulating the sensitive and accurate descriptions of adults in transition that constitute the 10 learner profiles in *The Demand for PLAR* chapter.

**Paul Bélanger** and **Magali Robitaille**, from the Centre interdisciplinaire de recherche/développement sur l'éducation permanente (CIRDEP) at the University of Quebec at Montreal, provided us with an important and separate report on the status of PLAR in Quebec *Development of Policies and Practices Related to the Recognition of Prior Knowledge and Skills in Quebec* (Appendix B).

We are also grateful to the **Board of Directors**<sup>1</sup> and to our colleagues at the PLA Centre, **Bernadette Mrazek**, **Teresa Francis**, **Nancy Anningson** and **Janet Johnson**, whose energy, commitment and patience kept the PLA Centre's many other development and program initiatives underway while we transformed a corner of the premises into a mini PLAR "think tank."

The project team had a number of invaluable opportunities to consult with colleagues in the field as a group — in Canada and internationally — and to seek feedback and advice as ideas developed. For example, in mid-September 2007, two team members attended a EuroguideVal conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, to learn about current European developments in the field of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL).<sup>2</sup>

In Canada, a series of four events allowed us to test and revise our assumptions, findings and progress. The first was the 18th annual spring PLA Conference, hosted by the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in May 2007, where we outlined our initial assumptions and objectives. The second was at a plenary session at the November 2007 Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) Fall Focus Workshop in Toronto, where we presented *Frameworks for the Recognition of Prior and Portfolio Learning: Works in Progress*<sup>3</sup> — a further development of our ideas and hunches. We are especially grateful to **Diane Hill** and **Paul Zakos** of FNTI, and to **Bonnie Kennedy** and the CAPLA Board for their interest and encouragement.

In February 2008, with the support of the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL), project members organized a consultation in Ottawa on the theme "Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing Adult Learning in Canada."<sup>4</sup> With provocative opening commentaries from **Paul Cappon** and the Conference Board of Canada's **Michael Bloom**,<sup>5</sup> this event brought together prior learning and public policy experts from across the country and

internationally to discuss and comment upon the field in general, and the progress of the project in particular. The ensuing discussion — ably facilitated by **Rick Williams** and **Lynne Toupin** of the Human Resources Council of the Voluntary/Non-Profit Sector — provided invaluable comments, critiques and suggestions that confirmed and elaborated a number of our basic directions and led to some important revisions and recasting of our argument and focus. We also appreciate the professional services of **Alexia McGill** of Agenda Managers in Halifax for the logistical arrangements of this event.

Finally, 10 days later the project had a further opportunity to present a revised version of its approach at a one-day session titled “Recognizing Adult and Experiential Learning: Mapping the Field in Canada.” This event, hosted by the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in Abbotsford, B.C., was organized by **Wendy Watson** of UFV, and **Christine Wihak** of Thompson Rivers University. Again, the responses and comments of the participants were extremely helpful in clarifying and shaping our work.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, despite many set backs and obstacles, we have been able to draw on the rich and varied expertise of the people who have kept PLAR alive and moving forward in Canada over the past thirty years, such as the PLAR practitioners and advocates who have worked on the ground with and on behalf of a broad diversity of adult learners in transition across a broad range of settings.

Included in that host — as well as a number of public policy and adult learning experts — are the following individuals from across Canada and beyond to whom we are especially grateful for their suggestions and support: **Diana Bamford-Rees** (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, U.S.A.), **Deb Blower** (Red River College, Manitoba), **John Bryden** (University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland), **Lenore Burton** (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa), **Margaret Cameron** (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, Scotland), **John Daniel** (Commonwealth of Learning, British Columbia), **Leona Daniels** (Industry Training and Partnerships, Manitoba), **Justus de Hooge** (Ministry of Learning and Work, the Netherlands), **John Hugh Edwards** (Canadian Labour Congress, Ottawa), **Karen Evans** (University of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia), **Kathleen Flanagan** (Adult Learning Knowledge Centre, New Brunswick), **Guy Fortier** (Centre collégial montréalais de reconnaissance des acquis et

des compétences, Québec), **Brigid Hayes** (Consultant, Ontario), **Teresa Hemar** (Centre interinstitutionnel de Bilan de Compétences Artois-Ternois, France), **Diane Hill** (FNTI), **Sandi Howell** (Competitiveness, Training and Trade, Manitoba), **Ray Ivany** (Consultant, Nova Scotia), **Mary Kenny** (Residential Construction Industry Training Organization, British Columbia), **John Konrad** (Consultant, U.K., EuroguideVAL Project), **David Livingstone** (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Ontario), **Robin Millar** (Centre for Education and Work, Manitoba), **David Mac Donald** (Human Resources and Social Development Canada, Ottawa), **Katharine Mott** (PLA Centre Associate, Nova Scotia), **Mike Osborne** (University of Stirling, Scotland), **Ralph Paufler** (Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, Alberta), **Susan Simosko** (Consultant, British Columbia), **Derwyn Sangster** (Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, Ontario), **Michele Stanton-Jean** (Visiting Scholar, University of Montreal, Quebec), **Alex Stephens** (Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, Ontario), **Maurice Taylor** (University of Ottawa, Ontario), **Wendy Watson** (University of the Fraser Valley, British Columbia), **Christine Wihak** (Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia) and **Patrick Woodsworth** (Regroupement des collèges du Montréal métropolitain, Québec).

We also acknowledge the high-quality professional services of **Bonnie Ross**, who created the graphic visual representations of the current situations we have tried to describe, and the vision of the lifelong and “life-wide” learning culture we hope to achieve; and of **Karen Lam**, who provided expert proofreading, formatting and copy editing support.

Throughout the project we kept in mind Paul Cappon’s initial admonition: “We don’t really need more research studies on PLAR; we need some action!” Accordingly, here we attempt to describe our current circumstances; outline the broad demographic, economic and social pressures we face; and capture a sense of our future learning challenges and possibilities in realistic and grounded terms. Finally, we suggest some innovative yet practical ways to move forward on a pan-Canadian basis to encourage the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in all its forms, and to use PLAR in particular to include and integrate the vast and under-utilized *experiential*, *informal* and *non-formal* learning resources of Canadians with our well-developed formal education and training structures.

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to all those named above, to the band of PLAR practitioners and advocates who have championed their achievements and potential for over 30 years, and particularly to the legions of courageous adult learners in Canada. We accept full responsibility for any shortcomings, inaccuracies, misinterpretations or omissions reflected in this report.

*Mary Morrissey, Co-Director (Principal Author and Editor)*

*Douglas Myers, Co-Director (Author and Editor)*



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## SUMMARY OF CORE ARGUMENT

### CANADA'S DEMOGRAPHIC REALITIES

There is a rapidly increasing public awareness — most evident perhaps among employers and policy makers — that current demographic trends are about to present us with a labour market crisis in terms of both “bodies” and “skills.”

Scarcely a week goes by without another article in the press concerning this impending challenge. In early March 2008, to give just one example, the *Globe and Mail* Queen's Park reporter wrote “Skilled workers a retiring species,”<sup>7</sup> noting that the number of older people leaving the workforce will increasingly outnumber younger people entering employment, and quoting Conference Board of Canada figures that Ontario could face a shortfall of almost 200,000 workers by 2020 and over half a million by the end of that decade if nothing is done to address this problem. Similar forecasts are being made for every province and region, and labour shortages are already occurring and being noticed across the country.

At the same time, the full impact of this situation is somewhat masked in immediate terms by the fact that some sectors and areas are actually shedding jobs, most notably in manufacturing and some resource-based industries. Despite this, national unemployment rates remain low, and some dislocated workers are making relatively easy transitions to other similar sectors (e.g., from forestry to mining).

To further complicate the picture and intensify the challenges Canada faces, current recessionary concerns, rising energy costs, international dislocations and environmental imperatives must also be taken into account. Nonetheless, the basic population forces are inexorable. David Foot, the noted Canadian economist and demographer, put it succinctly: “If you want to know what's going to happen in 10 years, just move your population pyramid up a decade.”

There are some obvious responses to demographic trends and labour shortages that are already occurring, including improvements in wages and benefits, increased investment in labour-saving technology and expanded immigration. Each of these, however, has

limitations, and the evidence suggests that together they will not be sufficient to offset future skills and labour supply shortages.

Other approaches are clearly required. One critically important option is to promote more active labour market participation of currently under-represented and under-employed groups, which together represent a substantial “reserve” labour force. Among these are:

- Aboriginal peoples;
- mature and older workers (pre- and post-retirement);
- youth, particularly high school drop-outs and those at risk;
- adults with literacy/numeracy challenges;
- recent immigrants working in low-skill jobs because their competencies and qualifications have not been recognized;
- Canadian graduates of post-secondary programs whose skills are under-utilized;
- persons with disabilities and those facing systemic barriers; and
- dislocated workers and those receiving Employment Insurance and social assistance.

Provincial jurisdictions across the country are beginning to recognize and respond to this imperative. A number of provinces have reorganized their ministries so as to put greater emphasis on and investment in workforce development. Recent budget announcements in Quebec and Ontario identify labour market shortages as a key priority, target these marginalized groups for special attention, and provide significant resources for training and upgrading programs. Other provinces are likely to follow<sup>8</sup>

A March 23, 2008, *Globe and Mail* editorial comments approvingly with regard to the recent Quebec initiative:

“Quebec’s strategy should be an inspiration to other governments that have not yet mustered the will to tackle this problem.”

If the returns on these new human resources investments are to be fully realized, however, we need to examine our assumptions about skills and learning in our society and economy and our current approaches to education and training.

It is generally agreed that the most important asset that countries, regions or communities possess — especially in times of economic and social turbulence — is what their people, collectively and individually, know and can do. Canada, like many other countries, has established and developed extensive and comprehensive systems of formal education and training to foster and enhance the skills and knowledge of its citizens. As reports by the Canadian Council on Learning and others bodies attest, these efforts and their results have been successful in many ways.

At the same time, one of the side effects of placing a high value on the successes of formal education is that skills and knowledge acquired outside of those structures have become, over time, devalued, taken for granted and largely ignored. We have come, in fact, to think of learning almost exclusively in terms of “schooling” of one sort or another.

This is an odd and limiting attitude in a number of ways. After all, before there were schools, most people learned informally through example, trial-and-error, mentoring, contact with elders and peers, and so on — across the length and breadth of their life and work experience. This is still, in fact, how we gain valuable knowledge — in addition to whatever levels of formal education and training we may attain.

Formal education and training is, of course, an essential and valuable component of learning in our society. This commentary, therefore, should not be interpreted as an anti-schooling critique. Rather, it is intended to point out that a narrowly defined “schooling only” response to the skills and learning challenges with which this report deals is an insufficient response to Canada’s demographic, economic and social circumstances.

It is evident that a wider-angle view of learning is required and is increasingly acknowledged. The Canadian Council on Learning’s explicit commitment to the development of a “learning culture [in Canada] that goes beyond formal education to encompass all forms of structured and unstructured learning — in the workplace, the community and the home” is one such example.<sup>9</sup>

## THE PARTICIPATION GAP

Figure 1 below, and a number of visual representations throughout this document, illustrate the report’s core analysis and implications. The graphics show that the target groups, identified as being critical to inclusion in the Canadian labour market, are confronted by a formidable gulf — a deep and wide river, with many hazards — that runs between their current marginalized circumstances and their prospects for effective participation in employment opportunities, ongoing education and training activities, and voluntary community and civic involvement.



Figure 1: Obstacles to Personal and Career Aspirations

Graphics: Ross Illustration

In stark contrast, for people on the far side of the river, there are many pathways and “escalators” available through which to pursue their goals and objectives as full participants in Canada’s economic and social life. If such participation opportunities are not to remain distant and out-of-reach for those on the near side, a number of bridges need to be put in place and strengthened to enable them to cross that gulf.

Before addressing the specifics of those bridging measures, however, it is important to explore the nature of the “participation gap” confronting these excluded and marginalized



groups, and some of the factors that have created it. Most importantly, we know that, for the most part, the members of these excluded target groups do not think of themselves as “learners.”<sup>10</sup> In part, this is because many have not enjoyed success in school — that is, within the formal education and training system — and are intimidated by the prospect of returning to this form of learning. It is, however, characteristic of the prevailing mind set and discourse on learning that whenever skill shortages or transition challenges are diagnosed, formal education and training programs are immediately prescribed.

This is not to say that members of these under-represented groups have no skills and knowledge — many, in fact, have a great deal of both, which they have learned mostly through experience rather than instruction. However, as a result of their lack of formal training, these groups often tend to significantly underestimate, take for granted and under-value what they actually know and can do, and lack confidence in their own learning capacities. In terms of formal education and training, they could be well-described as “discouraged” or “excluded” learners.

Finally, it is important to note that in such a highly competitive and turbulent global economy and labour market, even those who have moved forward on the education and training escalator, acquiring appropriate credentials and qualifications and participating actively in the labour market, can suddenly find themselves thrown back across the river due to external forces over which they have little control.<sup>11</sup> Despite their comparative advantages, they too can suffer the severe loss of confidence and motivation typical of those who have traditionally been marginalized. These groups also need bridging supports to enable them to understand and draw upon the full range of their skills and knowledge, whether formally or experientially acquired, in order to re-cross that river.

Similarly, to achieve the expected returns from new investments in skills and learning in Canada, it is clear that wider-angled and more creative approaches are required as part of the bridging strategies. The goal is to enable marginalized, excluded and dislocated individuals and groups to reach the “other side” of the river that separates them from opportunities for full participation. In building these bridges, however, we need not start from scratch.

## **BRIDGING THE GAP: PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR)**

Over the past 30 years a wide array of innovative approaches has been developed to foster, recognize and utilize the full range of skills and learning that individuals and groups have acquired through both life and work experience and formal education and training. They have been repeatedly demonstrated and evaluated using a broad and diverse representation of Canadian adults across a wide range of settings and circumstances, and with consistently positive impacts and outcomes. Though these initiatives remain fragmented and seriously under-supported, they lie at the heart of more creative and effective initiatives to bridge the key participation gaps faced by many Canadians.

This cluster of approaches and methodologies is referred to as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). The approaches are based on the premise that people learn important skills and knowledge through life and work experience as well as through formal education and training, and that given the current volatile times, it is essential that we as a society identify, understand and draw upon the full range of peoples' achievements and capacities. Providing a means to identify, articulate and demonstrate this range of assets significantly increases peoples' confidence and motivation to identify and tackle learning gaps.

Moreover, for people with limited formal education and training in particular, PLAR asset-based approaches dramatically boost their sense of self worth as capable learners. Rather than focusing upon what they lack in terms of formal education and training, the PLAR approach assumes that every place is a learning place and every person is a learner. Similarly, for people who, despite having formal credentials find themselves caught in mid-career dislocations and structural shifts, understanding their experiential and unstructured learning attainments is immensely valuable in coping with such transitions.

PLAR services and programs are also extremely cost effective. Rather than wasting time and money relearning what they already know, PLAR enables individual participants, employers and providers of further education and training to target and build upon the

learning assets that people have acquired experientially and formally in order to fill the specific upgrading gaps that need to be addressed. Often these processes indicate that less formal education and training is required than originally thought and that the skills and knowledge acquired in one setting can be transferred to other situations.

What these initiatives almost always lack, however, is the policy and funding support that would make them sustainable and effective over the long term. The Conference Board's Michael Bloom points to three problems that prevent the full and effective adoption of PLAR services and programs to help meet today's labour market and skills shortage crisis:

- experiential learning and prior learning in general are undervalued by employers;
- employers do not yet see recognition as a major solution to the skills shortage; and
- governments have not made recognition a major priority.<sup>12</sup>

There are indications this situation is beginning to change. Certainly — as we discuss in this report — other countries increasingly see PLAR approaches as critical to effectively responding to the demographic, economic and social pressures they face. Accordingly, many are making major commitments to the policy initiatives and funding supports necessary to make such services and programs widely available and effective.

In Europe, for example, concerted efforts are underway to establish the value and validity of experiential learning. Based on principles established by the European Union in 2002, guidelines that explicitly recognize the value of what is termed “non-formal and informal learning” are now being actively considered for adoption. These guidelines identify such experiential learning as constituting a “vast untapped resource of invisible knowledge and skills, the recognition of which will lead to significant economic and social benefits for individuals, communities and countries.”<sup>13</sup> They also see as the key to success of these efforts “the establishment of non-formal and informal learning as a normal route to qualifications.”<sup>14</sup>

While this pan-European initiative has significant implications for the Canadian situation, it also has to be said that no country has established a large lead in this regard or has yet

put in place a fully functioning and comprehensive PLAR system. Indeed, given the remarkable range and vitality of creative and effective PLAR initiatives across Canada, and the well-established principles and the variety of effective practices and programs in Europe, such a lead could well be established here.

### **A PAN-CANADIAN APPROACH**

The principles and practices of PLAR in Canada to date have been almost entirely a practitioner/field-driven phenomenon, with intermittent interest and support from policy makers, institutions and agencies. The achievements of what has been essentially a “bottom-up” phenomenon have been remarkable. Yet, as the current European Guidelines comment with regard to the member states that have had a similar PLAR development chronology:

*One of the challenges facing these decentralized and diversified approaches seems to be sustainability. In some cases initiated through the input of public money (for experimental and testing purposes) some of these systems find it difficult to survive after the project funding has ended....<sup>15</sup>*

This is also very much the case in Canada. Several provinces, however, are moving toward a more coherent and comprehensive strategic approach. Quebec and Manitoba seem most advanced, but there are significant indications of similar developments in other jurisdictions. Also in evidence are examples of interprovincial arrangements to support greater investment, trade and labour mobility (which certainly includes recognition of prior learning, both credentialed and experiential). And the federal government continues to play a role in the human resource and transition aspects of economic development and immigration — matters that have obvious skills and learning implications.

Given the unrelenting external economic and social pressures facing Canada, it may be that these incremental initiatives, taken together over time, will eventually result in what would amount to a pan-Canadian strategy for PLAR.

A number of key elements of such a strategy are beginning to emerge. It will not be necessary, for example, to devote major resources to building a whole new adult

schooling system. A “third-sector” community-based learning system already exists through the various agencies and networks that serve the under-represented target groups who most need learning-in-transition support. PLAR principles and practices fit very comfortably into the mandates and services of these community-based organizations. It should be noted that enhanced support for this “third sector” would also encourage and complement a greater degree of outreach and accessibility on the part of the established education and training system.

Employers, too — as Bloom points out — must approach the challenges of recruitment, retention and succession in innovative ways, with much greater attention to the experiential, as well as the formal, skills and knowledge of their workforce. As labour market shortages greatly increase pressure on small and medium-size businesses (a major segment of Canada’s labour market), where time and resources are especially strained, particular attention should be paid by both public policy makers and public and private employers to finding better ways to recognize and support employee skills and learning. Collaborative approaches are needed as a base on which to strengthen those capacities.

The obstacles to concerted and collaborative pan-Canadian development in any field — and especially this one — are obvious and well-known. In his recent biography of Canada’s first prime minister, Richard Gwyn describes the Canadian situation in these terms:

*In quite a few ways, we were post-modern before we ever became modern. That was the way we were in John A. Macdonald’s time. In 1884, Goldwin Smith, the leading political commentator of his day, summarized Macdonald’s lifelong mission as “to hold together a set of elements, national, religious, sectional and personal, as motley as the component patches of any ‘crazy quilt,’ and actuated each of them by paramount regard for its own interest.” Here, Smith identified exactly Macdonald’s supreme talent — that he knew how to herd cats.<sup>16</sup>*

These post-modern characteristics seem evident in Canada today and are likely to become more so. A recent account of Ekos survey research on value and ideology issues, for example, concludes that among the post-boomer cohorts there is “no apparent heir to the Pearson–Trudeau model of progressive, strong federalism,” and warns us to “be prepared for a very different and more loosely united Canada.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps, then, we need to shift more of our attention and effort from “herding cats” to a “quilting bee” approach that welcomes and includes very diverse elements within a collaborative process based on widely accepted principles and practices. This metaphor may offer clues to future possibilities. If the European Union, for example — despite its deeply rooted national, regional, political and cultural diversity — is able to develop and establish a pan-European skills and learning “quilt” for the benefit of all its citizens, can Canada not somehow manage to do so as well?

At the moment, we face, with few exceptions, a leadership vacuum in the recognition of prior and experiential learning in Canada. While we have a wealth of innovation, exemplary practice and positive outcomes developed over 30 years of demonstrations and evaluations, PLAR still lacks the strategic and sustained public policy commitment, and the active sectoral support, necessary to meet our current and future demographic realities. As these labour market trends clearly indicate, we must enable many more people from what have traditionally been marginalized and under-represented groups to more fully participate in employment, further education and training, and community engagement. Nor is this simply a matter of social justice and civic responsibility — though it certainly is both — but it is also a matter of pressing economic urgency.

On balance, it seems unlikely that we will achieve the learning and human resources development outcomes necessary to meet the new circumstances we face by continuing business as usual. Nor should we balk at putting new mechanisms and approaches in place in order to achieve those goals. Accordingly, this report identifies 23 areas for creative and strategic development with regard to PLAR as an action agenda for a new Pan-Canadian PLAR Learning Forum, led and supported by a strong, independent and proactive Secretariat body.

The authors regard PLAR in Canada as a work in progress. It is our hope that our findings, analyses and suggestions will stimulate reaction and response from many quarters and will contribute to moving forward on a more integrated basis.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

### PROJECT FOCUS AND MANDATE

In its 2007 report on post-secondary education (PSE) in Canada, *Strategies for Success*, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) questions whether Canada is establishing the conditions for success in a post-secondary education field crowded with effective international competitors. “Is Canada creating the structures, practices and mechanisms that will make it more – or less – likely that the sector will contribute as fully as its potential allows to the economic and social goals of our land?”<sup>18</sup> In response, it suggests that for the country to succeed in establishing conditions for success it must address three serious challenges:

1. the paucity of comprehensive and detailed information on PSE and adult learning as a basis for planning and evaluation;
2. the need for clear and coherent pan-Canadian objectives set out within a comprehensive policy framework; and
3. the absence of capacity and commitment for coordinated program planning and implementation across the country.

*Strategies for Success* further suggests that the field of lifelong learning continues to be a chief weakness in Canada and that there are no pan-Canadian mechanisms to improve the sector’s response to the needs of non-traditional learners and adult workers. To better align Canada’s structures and ambitions for PSE in our society, the report identifies three areas where an integrated approach is most urgently needed:

- credit transfer;
- quality assurance and accreditation; and
- prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR).

This report addresses the third element and focuses on how the development of a more integrated approach for recognizing learning can enhance Canada’s response to the demographic, economic and social imperatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It acknowledges the complex evolution of the concept and practice of PLAR and the lack of a coordinated

policy context at the federal or Canada-wide level from which to build sustained and cohesive initiatives.

Notwithstanding the challenges inherent in the work, the project proceeds from a positive perspective and builds on the many assets and strengths of the field while realistically appraising the barriers and impediments to change. It also suggests practical next steps for moving forward.

In large part the goal of this project is to explore the potential of PLAR to act as a bridge between the wide range of informal and experiential learning typically undertaken by adults and the various systems of recognition and participation that exist in the formal education and training system, the workplace and the community. The project acknowledges that today's economic and social turbulence is affecting the lives of all Canadians and that the task of making successful life transitions across the breadth and depth of our society is of paramount concern if Canada is to maintain its standard of living and quality of life — now and for the foreseeable future.

### **PROJECT OBJECTIVES**

From the perspective of how the systems for recognizing learning can be made more accessible and meaningful to adults in transition, this project has pursued the following objectives:

- to gain a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the state of development of PLAR in Canada with regard to learning policies, programs and practices, while identifying gaps and opportunities for strategic interventions;
- to explore the current and potential demand for expanded PLAR practices and services, taking account of key socio-economic trends and the needs of specific populations of adult learners;
- to identify exemplary policy supports and program models in Canada and internationally; and
- to summarize the themes, issues and challenges, and present options and recommendations for new directions in the development and application of PLAR in Canada.



## **LINKS TO MANDATE OF THE CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING**

A new element in the learning scene in Canada in 2004 was the establishment of the CCL, with its five-year mandate to describe and address the key issues and learning realities facing Canadian citizens. Of particular significance, in relation to PLAR, were the terms in which the CCL staked the ground and articulated the scope of its approach to learning across the lifespan. From the outset the CCL has emphasized the “life-wide” as well as the lifelong characteristics and impacts of learning.

The CCL also adopted UNESCO’s “four pillars of learning,” which include the social, humanistic, intellectual and utilitarian aspects of learning — together with a commitment to “foster a learning culture that goes beyond formal education to encompass all forms of structured and unstructured learning — in the workplace, the community and the home.” These stand in striking alignment with the principles and purposes of prior learning recognition. Explicit declarations on the nature and scope of learning in all its forms could well serve as a charter for all those who have been involved in the development of PLAR in Canada.

Similarly, to a significant extent the CCL’s position can be seen as a re-articulation of the approaches that characterize the learning traditions of the Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, in its 2007 report *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency*, the CCL explicitly acknowledged the strength and validity of those traditions:

*Aboriginal peoples have traditionally regarded lifelong learning as a means to develop the whole person, including the spiritual, intellectual and physical aspects of being. Aboriginal people see learning as a way to attain collective and community goals. As such, learning develops the skills and knowledge needed for economic success and deepens an appreciation for Aboriginal traditions, cultures and languages.<sup>19</sup>*

It is in recognizing multiple ways of knowing and learning, as identified here and supported by CCL, that the inspiration for this work and the myriad pathways and possibilities for achieving individual and community aspirations and goals begin to take shape and grow, providing impetus and support to the central challenge of this study: developing an integrated pan-Canadian approach for PLAR.

## **STRUCTURE AND SCOPE OF REPORT**

The report consists of four documents: the project report and three background reports.

### **Project report: *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for PLAR in Canada***

Chapters One and Two introduce the study and provide a review of research and policy literature relevant to the history and development of the field.

Chapters Three and Four provide a diagnosis — or comprehensive review — of the current situation and the forces and pressures affecting it. Chapter Three identifies 10 specific adult populations who might benefit from expanded access to PLAR and its services and programs. Chapter Four provides an analysis of the demographic and labour supply challenges that impact current and future levels of demand for PLAR.

Chapter Five describes the current state of PLAR in Canada and in comparably developed nations, and summarizes the principal issues and lessons learned from Canadian and international experience to date.

Chapter Six summarizes themes, issues and challenges, and presents options and recommendations for strengthening the exemplary and foundational aspects of the field. On the basis of Canadian and international experience, the report concludes with some practical suggestions on how to move forward in supporting a pan-Canadian strategy for the development of PLAR.

The emerging approach can be seen as an essential resource for building a lifelong and life-wide learning culture and meeting the many new challenges in the fields of labour force development, economic competitiveness and productivity, and social and cultural integration in Canadian society.

### **Background reports**

Three background reports are appended:

- Recognition of Prior Learning Activities in Canada (12 Jurisdictions) (Appendix A);
- Development of Policies and Practices Related to the Recognition of Prior Knowledge and Skills in Quebec (the Quebec Report) (Appendix B); and

- Eight International Case Studies in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (Appendix C).

The first two reports describe prior learning activities in all jurisdictions in Canada. The situation of change and growth of PLAR activities in Quebec was judged to be of sufficient interest to warrant a separate report. The reports provide an overview of the public policy context as well as a description of the purpose, sources of funding and lead players in most initiatives. The reports are not meant to be comprehensive inventories of all PLAR activities in Canada; however, they do capture a significant number of stakeholder organizations including governments, educational institutions, employers, regulators, sector councils, unions, employment services and community-based organizations.

The international report presents examples of PLAR initiatives in eight countries: Australia, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, the Netherlands and the United States. As is demonstrated in later chapters of this report, the choice of these case studies is in line with the purpose and use of PLAR in the Canadian context. The case studies represent a variety of uses and a broad range of assessment processes. They present diverse public policy contexts including employment, education, immigration and labour mobility. Individually and together these cases provide valuable practical information on the history and experience of PLAR in developed countries and serve as models for potential development strategies.

In addition to these background papers, the report provides in Appendix D examples of guidelines or standards and principles for PLAR, and in Appendix F an analysis of the impediments to adult learner and institutional participation. Appendix E includes the Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning, and Appendix G lists the Board of Directors of the PLA Centre as well as participants to the project's Expert Consultation held in Feb 2008.

## **DEFINITION OF PLAR**

### **PLAR and adult learning**

It is useful at the outset to situate PLAR in relation to the different fields of adult learning and to clarify basic terminology regarding learning activities.

The *Spheres of Adult Learning* chart in Figure 2 describes the scope of adult learning and the diversity of settings in which it takes place in Canadian society.<sup>20</sup> It identifies two basic spheres and six more-or-less discrete fields of adult learning.

The first “formal” sphere encompasses structured educational activities delivered for the most part by professional educators and provided by academic and community institutions, public agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector companies. It encompasses three main fields of educational activities: formal academic programs, non-formal educational programs (i.e., organized and purposeful adult education activities not leading to academic credits or credentials), and professional or workplace-based training programs.

The second “informal” sphere comprises learning that occurs in situations where education is not the primary purpose or function of the activity, and where there are usually no formal curricula or professional educators involved. However, learners in these settings are often purposeful in their pursuit of new knowledge and skills as they plan learning projects, identify mentors, encourage and support each other and invest their time and energy. It is suggested that such informal learning typically takes place through three principal fields of daily life for adults: the workplace, community organizations and activities, and family and personal life. The fourth field of informal adult learning is entirely experiential and, for the most part, non-intentional. It refers to the learning we absorb through the ubiquitous influences of culture, the mass media and other forms of socialization and attitude formation.

It is the purpose of PLAR in its various forms to strengthen and facilitate links within and between the different fields of learning, to help adults become more aware of the nature, extent and value of all their learning, and to enable them to use their skills and knowledge most effectively in facing the continuous transition challenges generated by Canada’s turbulent economic and social conditions. PLAR acts as a bridge between the two spheres of formal and informal learning, and also (not evident in the graphic) between learners and the labour market and the wider community.



## **Terminology**

The definition of PLAR itself is a focus of continued debate. Perhaps the most important difference of approach centres on the question of whether PLAR should include processes for transferring academic credits and recognizing formal education credentials in addition to assessing and recognizing informal or experiential learning.

The initial concept of prior learning in Canada was based on the definition in use at the time in the United States that focused on experiential learning and excluded assessment of formal learning. The definitional issue has since been complicated by international debates centred largely on the place of non-formal learning. Another trend in Canada has been the use of PLAR methods to assess formal learning by immigrants where academic credential assessment was not feasible or reliable.

In addition, the term PLAR has sometimes been used interchangeably with the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). In the context of this report, therefore, it is important to say what is meant and intended by the two major descriptors.

According to the Saskatchewan government's policy framework, RPL is a broad "umbrella" concept that values all learning that people have gained in their lives (at home, at school, at work and in the community). This learning could be:

- formal learning — structured, intentional and achieved through credit-based programs/courses;
- non-formal learning — intentional and gained through participation in non-credit courses, workplace-based training or workshops;
- informal learning — incidental and gained through life experience, workplace-based tasks, volunteer activities, self study, hobbies, family responsibilities, etc; and
- experiential learning — either intentional or incidental and encompasses the concepts of non-formal and informal learning.

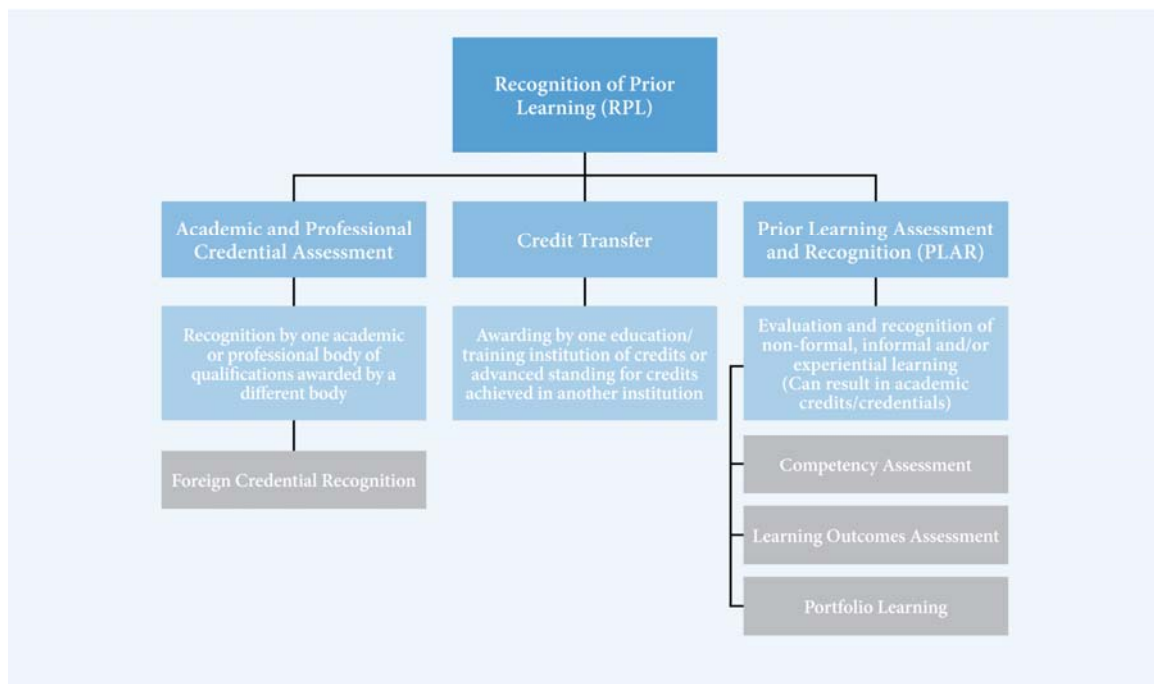
Under this definition, RPL consists of three key processes for recognizing the forms of learning mentioned above:

- qualification recognition or academic credential assessment — seeking recognition for a completed degree, certificate or diploma;

- credit transfer — requesting credit at one educational institution for courses or programs that were completed at another recognized institution; and
- prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) — assessing what a person knows and can do, no matter how the knowledge was acquired, in relation to a certain goal.

The literature defines PLAR as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e., skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences. Recognition of learning can be used toward the requirements of education and training programs, occupational and professional certification, labour market entry, and organizational and human resource capacity building.

As indicated in the following chart, in this report the term RPL is used generically to include the assessment and recognition of all forms of prior learning — formal, structured and credentialed, as well as unstructured and informal learning through life and work experience — and includes the three key processes identified above.



In this report, PLAR has a somewhat more restricted focus, which usually involves the evaluation and recognition of *experiential* learning in its unstructured and informal forms.

In the past, the various forms of PLAR were used mainly to enable individuals who lacked academic credentials to gain entry or advanced standing in formal educational programs. More recently, PLAR has come to be seen as an effective approach to enhance individual employability and/or career advancement, with or without resort to further education or training. Even more recently, PLAR has become increasingly recognized for its capacity, especially in its portfolio learning variations, to enable individuals to recognize themselves as capable learners, with skills and knowledge resources that can be applied to more productive family and community engagement, and to employment and further education and training. Indeed, it could be argued that such self-recognition leading to greater self-confidence and motivation as adult learners is the most fundamental element of PLAR and is the primary source of the other positive outcomes.

### **Core principles and diverse practices**

There are three fundamental principles that may be said to be held in common by the entire field of RPL:

1. Adult learners should not have to devote additional time, energy and money learning over again what they already know and can do.
2. What adults know and can do matters more than where or how they acquired that learning.
3. Services and programs should be available through which adult learners are able to have the skills and knowledge they have acquired through their life and work experience, as well as their formal education and training, appropriately evaluated and recognized.

PLAR challenges and extends the prevailing discourse on *learning* that focuses almost exclusively on formal education and training. As is readily apparent, the immediate response of most observers to such problems as skill shortages, dislocated workers, low literacy levels and high dropout rates is to propose more education and training programs — that is, more *schooling*.

The experience of PLAR practitioners and the record of PLAR programs, however, suggest that a wider-angle perspective — one based on the premise that *every place is a learning place and every person a learner* and that every person acquires important skills and knowledge through their broad and varied life and work experiences — would be



much more productive. This is not an “anti-schooling” position; rather, it is better understood as an “anti-*only*-schooling” critique of the dominant discourse on adult and lifelong learning in our society.

One of the most documented outcomes of PLAR is, in fact, that it opens up possibilities for further formal education and training by individuals who previously saw such opportunities as completely beyond their reach. Even if one’s sole objective, therefore, was simply to increase enrolment in various forms of formal institutional adult and continuing education and training programs, a wide-angle, asset-based PLAR approach would be an effective means to achieve this objective. Indeed, PLAR — and its portfolio learning aspects, in particular — has its origins in efforts to provide access on the basis of a person’s experiential learning to just such formal education and training programs.

How then does PLAR provide these learning-for-transition bridges? The following cluster of processes, activities and mechanisms are usually included in any list of PLAR practices that may be used to evaluate an individual’s skills, knowledge and suitability/potential for further education and training, for employment and/or career advancement or for voluntary/community engagement:<sup>21</sup>

- reviews of transcripts, licenses, certificates, diplomas, employment records and references;
- interviews and discussion;
- standardized tests that indicate an individual’s aptitudes and capabilities;
- challenge exams as a substitute for taking a course/program;
- skills demonstrations and product/project/achievement evaluations;
- competency-based/job or role-specific/transferable skills and knowledge evaluations (usually in a workplace setting or career development context);
- learning outcomes approaches (usually in a formal education/training program context); and
- portfolio learning development and evaluation.

Reviews of records and documents, along with interviews, are perhaps the longest standing and most familiar of these approaches. Standardized tests, challenge exams and

demonstration methods are more recent and competency-based; learning outcomes and portfolio learning methodologies, more recent still. It is important to emphasize that which of these methodologies is “best” is entirely contingent upon the context within which they are used, the background and situation of the learner, and the objectives and goals that are identified.

What they all have in common is an intention to identify and evaluate a person’s abilities and potential on the basis of their *prior* learning (i.e., skills, knowledge and experience). Moreover, they can be used in various combinations — and often are. If, for example, an individual wants and is able to make a quick transition from where they currently are to where they want to be, there are PLAR methodologies that are available. If, on the other hand, the learner faces more serious and complex transition challenges — or simply prefers to undertake a more comprehensive and systematic approach — such PLAR options can be used. What virtually all statements of PLAR principles and guidelines stress, however, is that a wide range of PLAR services, support and programs should be in place and that individuals should be able to choose which of these best meets their circumstances and needs.

The last three of these approaches — competency-based, learning outcomes and portfolio learning — deserve detailed attention because of the very significant investments that have gone into their development in recent years.

### **Competency-based assessment and recognition approaches**

Over the past 10 years, substantial investments have been made in private and public sector workplace settings to develop skill and competency grids and performance indicators against which an individual’s capacities can be assessed in terms of what is required for various jobs, roles and responsibilities. Other countries, too, have developed extensive vocational skills assessment tools.<sup>22</sup>

This form of PLAR is based on the premise that the specific skills and knowledge an individual possesses and can demonstrate are at least as important as the formal credentials he or she may have attained. The approach starts by analyzing the specific skills and knowledge that are required to do particular jobs or types of jobs. If individuals

can show that they possess a sufficient proportion of those required competencies to do the job satisfactorily, they should be eligible for employment and promotion, no matter where or how they acquired the necessary learning. Extensive and detailed inventories of occupational skills, competencies and responsibilities are widespread in many organizations, as are procedures for individuals to match their skills and knowledge to those requirements.

The most successful and productive approaches that are based on competency, essential skills and vocational qualifications frameworks encompass counselling services and portfolio learning-type processes that build the confidence and motivation of those being assessed and evaluated.

### ***Perceived strengths and weaknesses***

Such systems can offer a welcome openness and specificity to enable individuals to draw upon their experiential as well as their formal learning in seeking career advancement and professional development. On the other hand, competency grids by their very nature try to include the complete array of everything that a person *should* know and be able to do in a particular job, and therefore tend to be “ideal” constructs. As a result, even the most competent and confident of individuals may well be taken aback when presented with all the skills, competencies and knowledge that would ideally be required to do the jobs they currently hold.

Less ominous, perhaps, but certainly relevant, is the fact that lists of competencies and outcomes are often forbiddingly lengthy and detailed. There is some evidence that the responses of the individuals to whom they are applied quickly become a matter of routine and are largely compiled by rote.

Finally, compelling critiques of job analyses and time-and-motion studies and their applications have been made since the time of Henry Ford and “Taylorism” in terms of the fragmenting impacts they can have on real multi-faceted people doing real multi-faceted jobs in real multi-faceted settings. Not only has this been a hallmark of labour–management tensions, but there are growing indications of concern and push-back by

professional groups and highly skilled occupations where the autonomous judgement of practitioners has been a long tradition.<sup>23</sup>

The possibility of a conflict-of-interest tension between the employer and employee in the workplace is explicitly acknowledged and addressed in the *European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*, which regards “striking the right balance between the interests of the individuals and the interests of the company as a business” as highly desirable, with potential positive outcomes for both parties. At the same time, it notes the possibility that “the drive for visibility and upgrading of an individual’s competencies will not be seen as entirely beneficial from the individual’s perspective,” without measures to ensure transparency, consultation and confidentiality. It also cautions against the misuse of these processes for purposes such as “restructuring of a workforce or remuneration decisions unilaterally.”<sup>24</sup>

If a balance is not struck between reasonable expectations and unrealistically high standards of performance, such systems can quickly become overly rigid and bureaucratic.<sup>25</sup>

### **Learning outcomes assessment and recognition approaches**

Though more controversial in the formal education system, “learning outcomes” are that sector’s equivalent of “competency-based approaches” in workplace or career development settings. They are based on the premise that the objectives and results of educational programs can be analysed, identified and articulated in much the same way as the competencies and skills required by various jobs, roles and responsibilities.

Accordingly, there has been increasing support for the principle that participants in formal education and training should have a clear and explicit idea of the skills and learning objectives the course or program they are undertaking intends to achieve — and some way of evaluating whether it, and they, have attained those goals.

Certainly, if individuals are trying to match the skills and knowledge they have attained through their life and work experience in order to gain admission to or advanced standing in a course or program, it is essential to have some specific learning criteria against which to assess the experiential learning capabilities of such candidates.

### ***Perceived strengths and weaknesses***

A number of the same pros and cons associated with competency-based approaches are evident with learning outcomes. Critics contend that learning outcome systems that are too detailed and extensive undermine the synergistic and holistic nature of learning. On the other hand, the advantages of having a more clear and detailed account of what those who have successfully completed a course or program should know and be able to do is of significant interest and utility for graduates and employers, as well as for those seeking entry or equivalency on the basis of their prior experiential learning.

Spirited debates abound as to what learning outcomes can and should be identified and articulated.<sup>26</sup> And the same problems confront those developing learning outcomes as do those devising appropriate approaches that are both specific and detailed but flexible and responsive to individual needs and to the complex realities of learning, working and participating in Canada's current society and economy.

### **Portfolio learning approaches**

The portfolio learning process was initially designed to enable mid-career adults with no college diploma or university degree to gain admission and advanced standing in post-secondary programs on the basis of the skills and knowledge they had acquired through work and life experience. To demonstrate to institutional and academic authorities that this learning was real and substantial, the process itself has been developed in such a way as to ensure rigour and reliability. It has been used successfully in a variety of post-secondary institutional settings and with a wide diversity of adult learners.<sup>27</sup>

In its standard form, a portfolio learning program is a facilitated process with a group of eight to 12 participants. A trained practitioner meets with participants once a week for three hours for 10 to 15 weeks. The program enables participants to systematically and comprehensively identify, articulate, provide evidence for and present the complete range of skills and knowledge they have acquired through their work and life experience as well as their formal education and training. The process builds confidence and motivation, identifies learning strengths and gaps, clarifies future employment possibilities, and develops learning and action plans to participate more fully in economic and civic life.<sup>28</sup>

### *Perceived strengths and weaknesses*

A chief strength of the portfolio process is its capacity to assist the individual in re-positioning his or her relationship and attitude to the external, as well as the internal, realities they face. However modest and limited a person's skills and knowledge may be, fully understanding and being able to utilize those assets seems to have a transformative effect on confidence, motivation and sense of self-efficacy.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the identification and recognition of their learning assets and strengths seems invariably and naturally to lead participants to identify their learning gaps and deficits.

These realities include, of course, the essential skills, competency grids and performance indicators required by employers, licensing bodies, institutional authorities and the like. Taking an integrative and developmental approach to learning seems to reduce the threatening and intimidating nature of many of these external realities — especially for those who have been marginalized or who face sudden and unexpected transitions.

The key difference, of course, is that this form of assessment is not initially located in some external process or context, but is fully identified and acknowledged by the learners themselves.

Critics have expressed concern about the significant amount of time and effort required as well as the costs of this process. In the context of normal and accepted program/course duration and fee schedules, these do not seem excessive. In addition, it is important to note that various PLAR approaches, including portfolio learning, need to respond to the situation and requirements of the individual and cannot be applied on a universal and mandatory basis.

### **PLAR standards: A work in progress**

Having acknowledged the three core aspirational principles of RPL, and noted the main practices of PLAR — with particular reference to competency-based assessment and recognition approaches, and portfolio learning processes — how, then, can these PLAR components be organized and implemented to realize those principles and attain those goals? This has been a central concern of those involved with PLAR over the past 10 years and is the focus of many current initiatives, both internationally and in Canada.

In 1997, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) issued a one-page list of 14 standards or criteria called “What should a good PLAR system look like?”

Although other versions and elaborations of these principles have appeared since and continue to be developed and adapted to various situations, that basic question and those succinct responses to it, remain pertinent and relevant over a decade later.<sup>30</sup>

The 14 issues the CLFDB addressed were as follows:<sup>31</sup>

1. **Accessibility and relevance** — PLAR must be accessible and relevant to people as individuals. It must focus on the unique needs and abilities of the individual.
2. **Learning, not experience** — Assessment and recognition must reflect the learning — knowledge, skills and judgment acquired through study or experience — rather than simply the experience itself. That is, rather than simply describing the experience, one must be able to stand back and reflect on what has happened, in order to ascertain the learning. It is this process of detachment and reflection that is essential to the PLAR experience.
3. **Fairness and equitability** — The PLAR process must be fair and equitable. It must be barrier-free and bias-free.
4. **Efficiency** — The PLAR process must be efficient. It must make the best use of resources.
5. **Effectiveness** — The PLAR process must be effective. It must provide the opportunity for recognition of prior learning, but it must not hold out false promises.
6. **Transparency** — The PLAR process must be transparent. The individual must know the criteria and standards used to assess his or her skills and knowledge.
7. **Reliability** — The assessment must be reliable. The criteria must be recognized by all the labour market partners. 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.
8. **Validity** — The assessment tools and their PLAR application must be valid. They must be recognized and accepted by all the labour market partners.
9. **Practitioner training** — Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform this task.
10. **Choice and options** — The assessing organization must provide a number of ways to carry out an assessment. Individuals must have the opportunity to

choose how their assessment will be done. If necessary, they should get help to make their choice.

11. **Equivalency** — Recognition awarded through PLAR should be considered equal to recognition awarded in the traditional manner.
12. **Transferability** — Recognition should be transferable between organizations, provinces and territories.
13. **Voluntary, not mandatory** — PLAR must be an option or opportunity, not a mandatory process.
14. **Right of appeal** — If a person is not satisfied with the PLAR assessment, an appeal procedure must be available.

### **Key issues, tensions and opportunities**

To a large extent, these criteria remain central to the concerns of those involved in efforts to establish appropriate and effective PLAR institutional and sectoral programs and systems and/or to move PLAR “to scale” across national or regional jurisdictions. Not surprisingly, however, several of these terms and standards have been re-thought, elaborated and revised over the past decade and therefore require further comment.

### ***The implications of accessibility***

In terms of *accessibility*, for example, increasing attention is being paid not only to the availability of PLAR services and programs, but to some form of legislated *right* to have one’s experiential as well as formal learning assessed and recognized. Similarly, the need for better information and advising services is seen as an essential part of improving accessibility.

### ***Realistic expectations for PLAR***

The concern about *false promises* or *raising unrealistic expectations* has perhaps diminished somewhat as PLAR principles and practices, potentials and limitations have become more widely understood. At a time when having an undergraduate degree is no guarantee of finding employment, the notion that a skills and learning portfolio will automatically lead to a job or to admission to, or advanced standing in, a formal education and training program would be naive. Employers still make hiring decisions; academic authorities still make admission and placement decisions. PLAR practitioners must continue to make those distinctions clear.



Nor — despite its remarkable and transformative impact on individuals, groups and communities — can PLAR, or portfolio learning in and of itself, change major external forces such as the shedding of labour, the shifting of jobs offshore, rising income disparities or international financial crises. At the same time, it does offer possibilities for improved participation and inclusion, for seeking viable options within a broader economic and social context, and in rebuilding the vitality and resilience of individuals and communities so negatively affected by external forces.<sup>32</sup>

### ***The reliability/validity tension***

Of key importance is finding the right balance between reliability and validity. Perhaps as a new and innovative approach to learning that is seeking to establish its legitimacy, a great deal of emphasis was initially placed on the former. *Reliability* is concerned with establishing and attaining detailed and precise standards that are replicable over time. *Validity*, on the other hand, sets a wider range of criteria that are more adaptable to particular situations and circumstances.

Reforms now underway in England and Wales are especially instructive in this regard. By 2010, the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system, one of the earliest and leading comprehensive competency-based frameworks in Europe, will have been replaced by a new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The original NVQ system, as reported by one of the architects of these proposed new arrangements, turned out to be a nightmare of bureaucracy, in part, because it placed an over-emphasis on reliability in assessment and was not sufficiently responsive to individual needs.

Instead, what is sought with the QCF is to build an “inclusive ... simple, accessible approach with a minimum of bureaucracy, which is able to support flexible ways of recognizing achievement ... One explicit task in this reform is shifting the culture of assessment from reliability toward validity.”<sup>33</sup> A similar tension for PLAR in Canada exists in the relationship between and emphasis on reliability and validity.

### ***Options and ownership***

Another complex area of discussion concerns the matter of choice among a variety of learning assessment and recognition methodologies, and the importance of maintaining a

voluntary rather than a mandatory approach to participation in such methodologies. Similarly, concerns about ownership and confidentiality often arise, particularly in relation to portfolio learning programs.

While many employers recognize the individual's ownership of their own skills and learning portfolios, and respect their confidentiality, there are examples to demonstrate that such employee/worker concerns are not misplaced. In fact, most portfolio learning participants are eager to demonstrate and share what they have discovered about their own skills and learning assets and potential. Still, the decision of what or what not to make available must remain with the individual.

### ***PLAR practitioner training and development***

There is considerable ongoing discussion regarding the preparation, development and standards of practice of PLAR practitioners (i.e., advisors, assessors and facilitators). People in this field bring a wide variety of expertise and backgrounds to their PLAR work from such areas as adult and continuing education, human resources training and development, career counselling and academic advising.

There are also a growing number of training programs specifically related to PLAR. Many Canadian practitioners have taken professional development programs and workshops from the Council of Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the United States. Red River College in Manitoba has offered similar programs and certified a significant number of Canadian practitioners. As part of its capacity-building strategy, the PLA Centre in Halifax has trained and certified over 450 PLAR practitioners over the past decade.

It may be fair to suggest that the same reliability/validity tension exists in this area as it does for assessment. There is certainly increasing attention being paid to appropriate ways to prepare and support practitioners; the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is currently leading an effort to identify and establish national standards for the field. Given the core principles central to RPL in all its forms, as well as the diverse backgrounds and qualifications of those now working in the field, it will

remain a challenge to maintain accessibility and openness while at the same time encouraging high-quality level service and performance.

CAEL takes a somewhat open approach to PLAR practitioner development:

*All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.*<sup>34</sup>

In this example, the focus is primarily on the assessment and recognition of learning for academic purposes. Perhaps because of this, and the autonomy of the PSE institutions involved, this statement carefully avoids precision as to what specific types of training and professional development might be regarded as “adequate.” Nevertheless, in the quest for quality assurance and national standards, people working in the field of PLAR in Canada and elsewhere will have to find ways to encourage exemplary practice and improved quality without building the same barriers of prerequisites and one-size-fits-all standards that it challenges in other settings.

### ***The advisor/assessor tension***

As noted above with regard to the issues surrounding realistic and unrealistic expectations, there is a similar tension involved when the roles of advisor and assessor are combined. This tension does not arise to the same extent if there is a clear distinction made between those PLAR practitioners whose role it is to advise, facilitate, encourage and support the learner’s efforts to identify, present and utilize her or his skills and learning in the most effective way possible, and those whose role it is to make decisions about hiring, career advancement, admission or advanced standing.

This role distinction may be particularly important in dealing with adult learners whose confidence in their own skills and learning capacities is low because of systemic social barriers or has been shaken by external circumstances (plant closures, restructuring, etc.). If the role of the advisor, counsellor or facilitator is unreservedly one of doing everything possible to enable the individual to understand and use the full array of their learning assets in order to make a necessary transition, it often seems easier for that individual to accept the fact that someone else — an employer, academic authority, licensing body, etc. — ultimately has to make a decision regarding the level and acceptability of those

assets. This is not to say that the support and evaluation roles of the advisor/practitioner cannot be combined in certain circumstances, but rather that attention needs to be paid to the implications and complications involved, especially from the learner's point of view.

## **THE EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF PLAR IN CANADA**

### **Origins and chronology; practices and principles<sup>35</sup>**

In spring 1997, Marlene Brant Castellano, Professor Emeritus at Trent University and a member of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, addressed the seventh annual PLA Conference in Belleville, Ontario, hosted by the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI), located in the nearby Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory. In commenting upon the relationship between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Canada, Professor Castellano referred to a long-standing tradition:

*There are prophecies in many Aboriginal nations about the encounter between the original people and the newcomers to Turtle Island. The prophecies tell of the bright promise of the relationship in the beginning, promise that would give way to a dark period of loss and despair. The elders would fall asleep and the people would almost forget the wisdom of their ancestors. Then in the time of the seventh generation, or when the eagle had landed on the moon, there would be a reawakening, when the wisdom of the first peoples would be sought out by the newcomers.<sup>36</sup>*

When the definitive history of the development of PLAR in Canada comes to be written, the adoption by the FNTI of an approach to adult learning, which reflected and resonated with the holistic learning traditions of the Aboriginal peoples and, at the same time, connected in a grounded and practical way to contemporary economic and social realities, will be seen as a significant aspect of that “reawakening” and even as a step toward that still unrealized original “bright promise.”

This connection had begun more than a decade earlier in 1985 when two faculty members from Loyalist College in Belleville were seconded to the newly established FNTI to assist in developing a Social Service Administration program, which would address the needs of Aboriginal communities.<sup>37</sup> This initiative drew upon a body of adult learning and research developed in the United States, led by Morris Keeton and fostered by the Chicago-based CAEL.<sup>38</sup>

What the Loyalist College/FNTI faculty saw in these American initiatives was a way to enable adults to identify, articulate, demonstrate and celebrate the skills and knowledge they had acquired through their life and work experience. As a result, the approach seemed to build a solid base from which individuals could make transitions to the further formal education and training they needed in order to support their communities and to participate more fully in the broader economic and civic life of the country.

In addition, the PLAR approach — particularly in its portfolio learning variations — seemed to link directly to some deeper Aboriginal cultural and learning traditions that had been severely damaged by the impact of colonization and its devastating effects on First Nations individuals and communities. These PLAR methodologies respected what people learned through their experience — from mentoring, peer learning and practice. A PLAR perspective on learning seemed connected and holistic rather than mechanistic and compartmentalized. It resonated with the cycles and stages of life and nature central to Aboriginal perspectives and values.<sup>39</sup>

At the same time, this methodology was intensely rigorous and practical. It focused on specific skills and knowledge. It required reflection, analysis and evidence. It developed learning and development objectives and goals within a career and life planning context. Most crucially, with regard to the communities FNTI served, by starting with learning strengths and assets that people already had, PLAR built the confidence necessary to identify knowledge and skills gaps and the motivation to take action to fill them.

### **Morris Keeton, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the University of Maryland University College**

The PLAR practices that had been developed in the United States under the leadership of Morris Keeton and his colleagues — through CAEL and the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) — had a different population focus and challenge than was the case with FNTI. What they had in common, however, was the objective of using the experiential learning that people had acquired through their lives and work — as well as whatever formal education and training they had attained — to enable them to build a “bridge” into further formal education and training.

For CAEL and UMUC, these efforts were focused upon successful mid-career adults — usually in white-collar positions — who, for one reason or another, had not obtained a college diploma or university degree at the usual 18 to 24 year-old stage of their lives. These individuals had experienced success in their occupations and had clearly developed capabilities and expertise through their roles and responsibilities. They had reached a point, however, where they wanted and/or needed to undertake further formal education and training in order to achieve appropriate certification and recognition.

It did not seem to make sense that these individuals should have to go back to the beginning of a post-secondary program, as if they were 18 years of age, simply because they had gained most of their skills and knowledge through their life and work experience. Yet that, for the most part, was the only option available. Indeed, faculty members and institutional authorities were generally sceptical that such learning could be taken into account without serious jeopardy to established academic standards and requirements. The challenge, therefore, was to demonstrate to this audience that that was not the case, and that experiential learning — as well as formal education and training — was real and legitimate.

### **The first decade: Beginnings, 1980–1989**

The impulses behind these American PLAR developments were also being felt in Canada during the 1980s. That decade however, was more about beginnings than of accomplishment. A few of these, however, were notable and lasting.

Most strikingly, Quebec was the first Canadian jurisdiction to begin serious system-wide consideration and implementation of PLAR approaches, stimulated by the benchmark Jean Commission on Adult Learning in 1982 and its recommendations for *la reconnaissance des acquis extrascolaire*.<sup>40</sup> The province introduced PLAR into the secondary school system and the CEGEPS (*College d'enseignement général et professionnel*) and took a number of steps to provide policy and funding supports for these activities. Although often better known outside Canada than elsewhere in the country, Quebec has maintained a steady interest and lead role in this field ever since.

In addition to its applications of PLAR principles and practices for Aboriginal learners and communities, FNTI also began to play an important leadership role in the development of the field as a whole. In 1989, FNTI held the first annual PLA Conference in Belleville, an event that will soon mark its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary and that continues to attract PLAR practitioners from across the country and internationally.

Finally, in addition to FNTI, in 1980 two community colleges — one in Ontario (Mohawk) and one in Manitoba (Red River) began to implement PLAR as part of their learning supports and services. The latter, in particular, has continued to play an important lead role, especially in regard to PLAR practitioner development.

### **The second decade: Gathering momentum, 1990–1999**

This period saw increasing PLAR interest on the part of provincial jurisdictions and the federal government. Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia all launched major PLAR initiatives in the early 1990s. The Ontario Council of Regents, for example, established a PLA Secretariat to undertake research into the applications of PLAR in the community college sector, and in 1993 began a three-year implementation investment of \$3 million to establish PLAR services and programs across its 24 institutions. PLAR policy development, training, monitoring and reporting activities were all carried out during that period and commitments were made to provide PLAR for students on an ongoing basis. These commitments were continued in various ways, but the end of special funding provisions hampered further systematic and comprehensive development. Newfoundland and Labrador and Manitoba also became involved in PLAR a year or two later, and Prince Edward Island followed by the end of the decade.

During the 1990s, the PLAR field itself began to be more visible and active. FNTI fostered the collaborative efforts that led to the establishment of CAPLA as a national umbrella organization in 1994. Several provincial networks of PLAR practitioners and advocates also emerged.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) initiated PLAR consultations and studies early in the decade, and in 1995 sponsored the first National Forum on Prior Learning Assessment in Ottawa, with 500 participants. The department sponsored two

more such events — in Montreal in 1997 and Vancouver in 1999 — each drawing more than 600 enthusiastic participants.

In 1996, the first independent, community-based, collaborative PLA Centre in Canada was established, located in Halifax, Nova Scotia; it was followed in 1998 by a similar centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba, which later became the Centre for Education and Work (CEW). At the end of the decade, as the result of province-wide community consultations, the newly established 13-campus Nova Scotia Community College became the first post-secondary institution in Canada to adopt, as an explicit strategic objective, the goal of becoming a “portfolio college.”

Researchers and policy makers were also becoming more interested in the field. A new national research network, coordinated by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto and headed by David Livingstone, was set up in 1996. The project, called New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL), soon began to undertake studies and provide databases, literature reviews, research reports and evaluations on PLAR, adult learning and related themes.<sup>41</sup> And in 1999, HRDC funded the first cross-Canada study of PLAR, *A Slice of the Iceberg*, exploring and evaluating its impact in a number of community college/CEGEP settings across the country.<sup>42</sup>

Sector councils, labour representatives and employer groups began to show increasing interest in the applications and potential of PLAR as it became more and more apparent that skills and knowledge were key assets for Canada in coping with the economic and social transition challenges facing the country. The CLFDB was established in 1995 to reflect those interests and it became a strong PLAR advocate until it was disbanded in 1999.

### **The third decade: Losing steam? Gaining traction? 2000–2008**

A number of factors — independently and taken together — seemed to slow progress in PLAR interest and development during the first decade of the new century, including:

- budget deficits and funding cut backs that governments and institutions struggled with in the 1990s;



- further federal devolution to provincial jurisdiction, political change and public policy uncertainties;
- changes in institutional and jurisdictional priorities and leadership; and
- the established power of conventional thinking that equates learning with formal schooling.

This did not happen all at once. In fact, the signs tended to be mixed and sometimes contradictory, but the spirit of innovation and accomplishment began to dim somewhat. After the major initiatives of the mid-90s in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia, long-term policy support and sustainable funding did not follow and programs and networks began to unravel.

On the other hand, early in the decade the federal government launched a massive, multi-departmental initiative, Canada's Innovation Strategy, which encompassed extensive consultations across the country and a multitude of studies and reports — all emphasizing the crucial importance of skills and learning for Canada's economic prosperity. The reports include frequent references to the importance of PLAR. Efforts culminated in a National Summit on Innovation and Learning in Toronto in the fall of 2002.<sup>43</sup>

In retrospect, the summit seemed more like the last gasp of federal leadership in this area, than a clarion call to future development. Indeed, after the fourth and fifth national forums on PLAR in Halifax (2001) and Winnipeg (2003), federal support for this event was no longer forthcoming.<sup>44</sup>

The 2001 forum, however, was particularly notable for the development and adoption of the *Halifax Declaration of the Recognition of Learning*. This was the first national conference to bring together the full array of people working on the Qualifications Recognition (both international and domestic) and the PLAR areas of the RPL field. The Declaration was the result of an extensive survey, and focus group and consultation process of the several hundred conference participants before, during and after the event. It called for improved policy and funding support, appropriate information and support services, quality assurance standards for programs and practitioners, pan-Canadian leadership and coordination and active federal initiative in regard to the labour market, and the economic and social aspects of adult skills and learning.<sup>45</sup>

Despite declining federal interest, the provinces and territories continued to pursue PLAR. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) commissioned two important studies on the status of PLAR in Canada: the CAPLA Survey of Post-Secondary Institutions and Provincial and Territorial Initiatives entitled *A Spring 2003 Snapshot: The Current Status of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada's Public Post-secondary Institutions: Part One*, and the October 2004 IBM *Final Report Part 2: Assessing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Systems and Practices Across Canada*. This was followed by a CCL study on the State of the Field (2006).

It seems fair to say that the development of PLAR in Canada has been a history of doors opening, closing and opening again. Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia took new initiatives to develop and/or implement PLAR policies and strategies through this period. With Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) funding, the Halifax PLA Centre conducted a major three-year national demonstration project (2003–2006) in which staff in some 60 Employment Assistance Service (EAS) agencies across Nova Scotia were trained as PLAR practitioners and provided portfolio learning programs for nearly 600 unemployed clients.

Similarly, the CEW undertook a three-year demonstration and evaluation study focused on PLAR/portfolio learning as a support for workers and communities facing dislocation and transition challenges. The study involved more than 300 individuals in four locations across the country.<sup>46</sup>

Even as policy and funding support decreased, research and policy studies argued that investment in measures that would even modestly raise adult literacy levels would generate significant productivity and prosperity dividends.<sup>47</sup> There were also signs in mid-decade that Alberta and British Columbia were beginning to take steps to revitalize significant PLAR initiatives that seemed earlier to have stalled. Survey research undertaken during this period has indicated that interest in and demand for PLAR services and programs remains high across the country.<sup>48</sup>

Quebec and Manitoba continue to extend and strengthen their services and supports to adult learners with PLAR as a central component of those strategies. Practitioners and advocates continue to seek the professional development and mutual support provided by FNTI's annual conferences and CAPLA's bi-annual fall forums,<sup>49</sup> though the numbers attending are declining. PSE institutions, particularly the community colleges, continue to provide PLAR services and supports, sometimes focused on particular programs, sometimes available across the institution.<sup>50</sup>

### **PLAR in Canada today: What lies ahead?**

In surveying the development of PLAR in Canada over the past three decades, two things are striking. The first is the repeated and successful demonstrations of the capacity of PLAR in its various forms to enable individuals, in all kinds of circumstances and settings, to identify, articulate and utilize the full range of their skills and knowledge — experiential and formal, structured and unstructured — in order to cope with whatever transition challenges they may face.

The second is that despite its demonstrated quality, effectiveness and benefits, to a large extent support for and adoption of PLAR remains partial, fragmented and marginal, and subject to uncertain funding, intermittent policy attention and weak institutional leadership.

It could be argued that, despite many positive achievements, PLAR is an idea and an approach that, even after 30 years of effort, just cannot seem to get off the ground. There is, however, much more evidence to support the view that PLAR is an idea that simply will not go away despite inconsistent policy support and limited and sporadic top-down investment. There are, as this report notes, strong indications that Canada's current social and economic circumstances — particularly in relation to demographic and labour market trends — make what PLAR does and how it does it increasingly relevant and essential. If that analysis is correct, then it seems very likely that the latter view of its development so far will prevail. PLAR in Canada, therefore, may well be on the verge of an entirely different level of policy attention, sustainable support and comprehensive application.

If so, there will still be reason to hope that that the Aboriginal prophecies of which Marlene Brant Castellano spoke in 1997 may yet come to pass.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND POLICY LITERATURE**

### **OVERVIEW STUDIES**

The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview of relevant findings that link PLAR to some of the major progressive thrusts in the wider educational and policy literature. This includes information on such topics as: the state of the field; related research on informal learning and the demand for PLAR; global competition, productivity and competitiveness; apprenticeship and workforce development; immigration; essential skills and literacy; and lifelong and life-wide learning.

#### **State of the field — PLAR**

Two major studies on the state of the field have been commissioned in the last five years, one by the CCL and the other by CMEC.<sup>51</sup> These studies have been influential and widely circulated. They articulate much of what is known today about the status of PLAR in Canada and include the following somewhat contradictory observations:

- PLAR is widely recognized to have an important role to play in lifelong learning. It holds the power to serve as exchangeable currency for wide public recognition of learning.
- PLAR is generally viewed as a “pathway to the institution,” yet after 20 years of history and a relatively mature body of knowledge, the implementation of programs, in practical terms at the institutional level, especially among universities, is still reported as “embryonic.”
- The potential for the use of PLAR in workforce development has not been fostered effectively and the absence of re-usable tools and specific assessment methods hampers quality assurance and the benefit of economies of scale.

Due to the strong role played by dedicated practitioners in developing the field, there is a consensus in the reports that the overall approaches to PLAR are reported to be consistent, PLAR has become an issue of interest and concern to education and training systems of many countries worldwide, and portfolio learning is increasingly acknowledged to add new dimensions to the field.

The reports identify gaps in research, such as the need to synthesize data and learn from international experience, and explore the place of PLAR within comprehensive policy strategems for adult and lifelong learning.

## **Studies on informal learning and the demand for PLAR**

In Canada, research indicates that fewer than 50% of adults between the ages of 16 and 65 participate in adult education programs and courses.<sup>52</sup> However, despite the low level reports of organized learning, studies by David Livingstone indicate that the average Canadian adult devotes three times as many hours per week (12 to 14) to intentional informal learning activities as the time (3 to 4 hours) spent by those engaged in formal education and training courses or programs.<sup>53</sup>

A follow up study, *2004 Canadian Learning and Work Survey*, part of OISE's research network on "The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL)," built upon the earlier survey regarding involvement in informal learning.<sup>54</sup> This survey found widespread interest in PLAR, especially in the employed workforce, and large unmet demand for adult education courses and PLAR. There were significant demographic differences: younger adults were much more interested in PLAR regardless of their formal educational attainment, as were non-whites and recent immigrants. Those most involved in informal learning activities had the greatest interest in PLAR, most notably young high school dropouts.<sup>55</sup>

An earlier study by the Conference Board of Canada (2001), *Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognizing Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada*, provided important information on the impact of unrecognized learning. This study estimated the following gains associated with improved learning recognition:

- Eliminating the learning recognition gap in Canada would give Canadians an additional \$4.1 billion to \$5.9 billion in income annually.
- More than 540,000 Canadians stand to gain an average of \$8,000 to \$12,000 each year from improved learning recognition.
- Three groups stand to gain the most: immigrants, people with prior learning gained through work and training, and transferees between post-secondary institutions or, in the case of licensed occupations, between provinces.
- An improved system for recognizing learning of immigrants would offset the brain drain.

Since the release of the WALL study, policy makers and funders have voiced some scepticism of the findings based on the fact that the survey puts forward responses to hypothetical questions and possibilities that might not be acted upon if such PLAR opportunities were actually available. While it is certainly undeniable that such options cannot be pursued if they do not exist, these survey findings and the results of the Conference Board study are persuasive of the reasonable expectation that, properly funded, integrated and marketed within a life-wide and lifelong learning strategy, PLAR services and programs would be taken up by significantly large numbers of Canadian citizens.

### **Global competition, productivity, competitiveness and economic development**

International comparisons indicate that Canada is at risk of jeopardizing its overall international competitiveness. For example, in 2005, Canada ranked 13th on the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Index. In 2006, Canada slipped to 16th place. Canada's international ranking in technological readiness slipped from 15th in 2005 to 17th in 2006. Our international position in the priority organizations place on employee training slipped from 12th to 20th in 2004.<sup>56</sup>

In addition, Canada's productivity is reported to be at its lowest level in almost 10 years. Recent reports indicate that Canada lags behind the United States in productivity by 18%. Real incomes have been falling relative to the United States for over two decades. Canada also had the third-lowest rate of growth in real GDP per capita among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries over the period 1950–2000.<sup>57</sup>

Levels of productivity are increasingly important to an economy facing a shrinking labour supply. Using income and income premium as a proxy for productivity, the premium for university graduates has been measured at 40% — or \$1 million more over a lifetime than those without post-secondary education — leading to the assumption that high levels of economic productivity can be equated with high levels of PSE participation and greater economic development.

However, data collected by the CCL tells a different story. It indicates an uneven distribution of income premium among PSE graduates. In fact, a recent study by Hugh Mackenzie for the Rae Commission in Ontario shows that the premium is actually negative for 25% of university degree holders. International comparisons by Patrice de Broucker confirm this trend, showing the dispersion of income is greatest in Canada, as measured by the proportion of working-age population with university degrees who receive half the median earnings or less.

As this current report shows, PLAR holds the potential for playing a role in improving productivity, competitiveness, over-qualification and under-employment. Chapter Three demonstrates that portfolio learning has been recognized as effective in assisting individuals in school-to-work, as well as work-to-school and other career transitions.

### **The apprenticeship field**

Studies report labour shortages in the area of apprenticeship and in the trades, and predict even more critical shortages for the future.<sup>58</sup> Declining completion rates are not only a concern for the existing market — they are recognized as crucial in terms of forecasted demand.<sup>59</sup>

A 2005 Statistics Canada study illustrates that while registrations in apprenticeship in the trades were up, completions were not.<sup>60</sup> Of the 267,775 registered apprentices in Canada in 2004, only 19,724 individuals were reported to have completed the apprenticeship within the same time period.<sup>61</sup> The study also notes that the low number of people completing registered apprenticeships has barely changed in decades, despite the fact that the need for skilled trade workers is growing at a rapid rate. Further to this, it is noted that shortages are experienced with different degrees of intensity in different regions of the country. For example, shortages are more pronounced in Western Canada where there is an economic boom in the resource and construction sectors.

As a support to workers' mobility and the hiring practices of employers, adults in the apprenticeship field who are experienced but uncredentialed may be able to benefit directly from the application of PLAR practices and processes in demonstrating the



knowledge and skills they have gained from experience to employers and certifying institutions.

### **The essential skills and literacy field**

References to recent reports and studies, such as *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System* (Myers and de Broucker, CPRN 2006), and national and international surveys on literacy and adult education, occur throughout this report. These reports have been invaluable in providing a comprehensive analysis of the adult education system in Canada and the challenges facing individuals in participating in a knowledge-based society. For example, we know that over nine million Canadians aged 16 to 65 have literacy skills below the level considered as necessary to live and work in today's society.<sup>62</sup>

Evidence suggests that Canada's continued economic success will depend not only on PSE participation rates but on raising the average worker's level of literacy and reducing the proportion of adults with relatively low skills. It also suggests that literacy and PSE are complementary and that both yield the return on investment that drives much of government, business and individual decision-making. In addition, research has established the link between increased adult learning and training and concrete improvements in business performance and productivity.<sup>63</sup>

In particular, studies have established that a rise in a country's literacy scores by 1% relative to the international average is associated with an eventual 2.5% relative rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per head — and that these effects are three times as great as for investment in physical capital. Moreover, the results indicate that raising literacy and numeracy for people at the lower and mid range of the skills distribution is now known to be more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates.<sup>64</sup>

Yet despite considerable investments in adult literacy programs, the first international adult literacy survey ranked Canada fifth among 24 countries on prose literacy — behind Sweden, Finland, Norway and the Netherlands — and in the middle of the pack on quantitative and document literacy. In the most recent picture presented by the

International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS, November 2005), Canada's literacy scores remain relatively unchanged: between 1994 and 2003, 41.4% versus 41.9% of working Canadians ranked below Level 3. The OECD considers Level 3 to be the minimum level of literacy required to participate fully in modern societies and economies.<sup>65</sup>

Reports on learning suggest that the literacy rates in Canada are well below what many people would expect from an advanced nation with a well-developed educational sector. The finding that "there has been no substantial change in adult literacy over the previous decade" (IALSS) suggests that even with changes in the number of working people in Canada, we are achieving literacy improvements at a rate slower than population growth.

Literacy levels and the lack of policy supports to programs are of particular interest to this study. Recent reports, such as *Too Many Left Behind* and others, suggest a lack of long-term vision and serious problems in funding for literacy programs. Federal funding is largely confined to pilots, interest groups and fostering coordination. Program funding is largely provincial and varies from province to province. Long waiting lists for adult basic education exist in all provinces, and the lowest income provinces are also those with the highest concentration of low literacy adults and the least ability to pay for programs. This creates extremely challenging, if not impossible, conditions for individuals seeking to connect to the educational, social and economic systems of survival and advancement in their respective communities and across the country.

### **The human resource/workplace development field**

According to OECD data (2005), fewer than 30% of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education compared with 45% in the United States. In addition, U.S. firms spend about 50% more in training per employee than Canadian companies (Goldenberg 2006). This information may go some way to explain the 18% gap in productivity between the two countries.

Research also shows that the low participation rate in training is particularly evident in small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which make up the vast majority of Canadian companies. Workers in large companies are almost twice as likely to participate

in training as those in small enterprises. Data from the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) shows that 265,000 jobs went vacant in 2002 due to lack of suitably skilled candidates. As stated by CFIB, “SMEs need to become more innovative in finding hiring alternatives. Short of workers, one-third of firms chose to ignore new business opportunities, depriving themselves and the economy of growth.”

Nevertheless, participation in formal job-related training in Canada increased between 1997 (29%) and 2002 (35%) when an estimated 4.8 million workers between the ages of 25 and 64 participated in formal job-related training. One-quarter of Canada’s adult workforce benefited from employer support in 2002.

Between 1997 and 2002 there was little change in overall participation rates except among 25 to 34-year-olds, whose participation in employer-sponsored training rose from 23% to 29%. However, of all employees who took any sort of formal work-related training, the proportion whose training was supported by employers declined from 79% in 1997 to 72% in 2002. Workers in 2002 were taking training at their own initiative and expense<sup>66</sup> and investments by employers in essential skills training accounts for only 2.2% of all training spending.

A growing area of interest relates to informal learning. Informal work-related learning tends to be self-directed and aims to refine workers’ abilities in areas such as computer skills or time management. In 2002, one-third of the workforce participated in informal work-related training. Rates were higher among women, younger workers, and those with higher levels of formal education (as is the case with participation rates for formal learning). It is important to note that in some sectors, such as information technology (IT), informal learning is more effective than a structured approach. A 2005 study found that about 70% of IT workers had participated in informal work-related training.

Workplace concerns for issues like recruitment, retention and succession are increasing dramatically and the recognition of prior learning presents an important opportunity for training, retaining and advancing those already in the workplace, as well as for recruiting new workers from across industries and jurisdictions.

### **The immigration field**

Immigrants accounted for 70% of net labour force growth between 1991 and 2001 — a proportion that is projected to reach 100% in the next decade.

Statistics show that immigrants to Canada tend to have high formal education levels and strong labour force attachment. Over 45% of all immigrants planning to settle permanently have completed university and 15.7% have a trade certificate or non-university diploma (CCL). Nonetheless, Canada's high immigration rate also brings in a growing number of people without the literacy skills to integrate successfully into the labour market. For example, even though new immigrants are more educated than in the past and are twice as likely as the Canadian-born population to have a university education,<sup>67</sup> among immigrants, literacy performance in all domains is below the average of the Canadian-born.

A newly released Statistics Canada *Labour Force Study* (2007) sheds light on the integration and employment experience of new Canadians.<sup>68</sup> It suggests that the experience of immigrants differs considerably among provinces, as well as by time spent in the country and by gender. For example, the study suggests that immigrants throughout Canada struggle for work in the 10 years after they arrive (especially in the first five years), and that during this time, the jobless rate is 11.5% — more than double the Canadian average of 4.9%.

The primary reason for this low job rate among immigrants is the need to adjust to a new life — that is, to deal with a variety of new cultural and social circumstances, to master a new language and different ways of working, as well as to have previous qualifications recognized and to undertake further training and certification. Immigrants say the most serious difficulties in entering the workforce are lack of Canadian experience, lack of recognition of their credentials and language barriers (Statistics Canada, 2003).

### **Links to lifelong and life-wide learning<sup>69</sup>**

A number of studies link lifelong learning to life-wide education, and these findings suggest important policy implications for recognizing and supporting learning. Studies show that in many countries, adults who already have formal education tend to take

greater advantage of formal learning opportunities as they grow older than those who have fewer formal learning experiences (e.g., less than Grade 12). However, there are international differences in this age-participation pattern that suggest that public policy can moderate adult education participation inequalities. For example, the inequalities are the lowest in many of the Nordic/Scandinavian countries, highest in countries like the United States, and more moderate in Canada.<sup>70</sup> Several writers argue that such data demonstrates that there are crucial differences in what adult learning attempts to do, and what it can do within different socio-political contexts.<sup>71</sup> Commenting on the variance in participation rates, Esping-Anderson concludes that in countries with high participation rates and low disparities, the overriding policy goals for adult lifelong learning reflect a shift “from a preoccupation with income maintenance towards a menu of rights to lifelong learning and qualification.”<sup>72</sup> Such a menu of rights emphasizes citizenship and social inclusiveness as lifelong learning goals that are equal to skills-based and labour market objectives.

Research supports Esping-Anderson’s conclusion as studies reveal that countries with high participation rates and greater inclusiveness in adult learning are less likely to allocate funding for learning based solely on performance criteria such as educational gains, income maintenance and labour market success.<sup>73</sup> Certainly the criteria around knowledge and skills are not ignored, but they are placed within a broader social agenda that accentuates citizenship and social inclusiveness as equal goals of adult lifelong learning. Put simply, the countries with high participation rates balance the need to prepare adults for the demands of global labour markets with the goal of preparing citizens for building civil society. Further, the policies developed in these countries build upon the concept of a learning society — a concept that recognizes the various settings in which learning occurs (not just the formal, institutional ones) and the variety of purposes it serves, including vocational, personal, employment-related and citizenship.

## **FINDINGS FROM EVALUATION STUDIES**

Research for this report indicates that most provincial/territorial governments have no policies to monitor PLAR activities related to education, employment or regulated occupations. Although some institutions and regulatory bodies collect data, and the

results of PLAR pilot projects are generally reported to funding organizations, there is no comprehensive repository in any province/territory where information on PLAR programming is stored or evaluated. Nor is there any effective mechanism to foster information exchange on PLAR activities and outcomes between or among provincial and/or federal jurisdictions.

Notwithstanding these facts, a substantial body of research has been forming over the years on the impact of PLAR and the value it holds for adult learners, institutions and public policy. In fact, research shows at least five major studies evaluating the impact of PLAR have been undertaken in the last eight years. Four of these are described as cross-Canada or national studies. All are substantial undertakings that focus on measuring the impact and outcome of PLAR/portfolio programs.

**The Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (1999)**

This study, funded by HRDC and since lauded as a foundational study in PLAR research, provided the first national picture of individuals accessing PLAR and the institutional activities involved in the assessment process.

The study investigated activities at seven institutions across Canada from the years 1993/1994 to 1997/1998. At that time little formal research had been completed and much of the evidence regarding PLAR's efficacy was based on limited, anecdotal accounts of the experiences of individuals and specific projects.

The study was designed to observe whether PLAR increased the recognition of informal learning; and to assist institutions, governments, adult learners and workplaces with their decision-making on funding, development, delivery use and evaluation of new and existing PLAR services. It gathered data on the characteristics of PLAR learners (those whose informal or experiential learning has been assessed to determine admission, eligibility or standing in a formal course or organized training), PLAR activities and the impact of the PLAR experience from the learners' and institutions' perspectives. The study also made observations on how PLAR learners compared with traditional students with respect to demographics and academic achievements.

## ***Findings***

Based on the data gathered, the study concluded that PLAR:

- was an academically sound practice that contributes to adults' learning;
- successfully linked informal learning to formal learning and improved adults' confidence in their own knowledge and skills;
- enhanced the chances of continuation of learning over the long term; and
- contributed to learners' employability.

Among the study's findings, it was noted that:

- PLAR learners did have educationally relevant, college-level prior learning that could be successfully assessed and recognized within post-secondary educational settings.
- PLAR learners were successful students. Evidence indicated that learners earned solid grades both in courses applied through PLAR and in courses delivered through traditional means, that pass rates were higher, that PLAR learners took more courses than traditional students and graduated at a higher rate, and that PLAR students' GPAs were slightly higher.
- PLAR strengthened learners' confidence in their capacity to learn and motivated adults to pursue further education.
- PLAR represented important efficiencies in shortening programs and reducing course loads and costs. In particular, it was beneficial to part-time students who decided to return to school to achieve employment-related training and occupational credentials.

### **The Slice of the Iceberg: Follow-up (2003)**

A follow-up study of 7,200 PLAR learners and 14,000 assessments, entitled *Feedback from Learners: a Second Cross-Canada Study of PLAR*, was undertaken in 2003 at the same seven partner institutions. Its purpose was to create the clearest possible picture of adult learners' views on PLAR by reporting on the perspectives of both PLAR and non-PLAR learners (those oriented to PLAR but who did not proceed with assessment), and to use this information to identify what needed to be done to improve and expand PLAR in Canada.

### ***Findings***

Participants reported a high level of satisfaction with the PLAR experience. PLAR and non-PLAR learners were similar in their motivation for considering college and undertaking PLAR — to gain credit while working, save time and money, and take fewer courses. Both reported that the availability of PLAR was an important factor in considering college — suggesting that PLAR is a potential motivational tool, and is important in a post-secondary recruitment and retention strategy as well as in learner persistence.

With regard to the status of PLAR activities, the study concluded that:

- Basic PLAR methodology had withstood the test of time.
- Over the long term, PLAR had grown nationally, but in colleges it had fluctuated considerably and no clear trend at any single institution was apparent. The number of assessments at partner institutions remained low given the number of years they had been conducting PLAR, their size, and the national growth in the numbers of mature adults attending post-secondary institutions.
- The primary source of PLAR learners' prior learning was the workplace.
- Assessment activity tended to be centered on programs in a small number of disciplines, in programs delivered on a part-time or continuing education basis.
- With the exception of the Canadian military, anticipated growth of PLAR in the workplace did not materialize in the eight years of the two studies. Learners reported that employer financial support was low.

### **The Gateways Project (2007)<sup>74</sup>**

This study invited more than 100 Canadians to participate in PLAR at the college and university level in a study designed to assess the capacity of the portfolio approach to respond effectively to demands from employers, educators, policy makers and citizens in rural, remote and urban settings for recognizing learning from any source.

### ***Findings***

Project results consistently demonstrated that portfolio could be used as a “valid and reliable” process to evaluate the knowledge, skills and values that have been learned through non-formal education, training and/or experience in a wide range of circumstances. The portfolio model was reported to work well in rural, remote and urban



settings. The project also demonstrated the capacity of qualified specialists to determine the equivalency for academic credit at the PSE level.

Among its findings the study reported significant cost and time savings for students, evidence of portfolio as an important element in the institution's recruitment and retention of adult learners, and PLAR as a tool for educational planning. In particular, the study found that:

- Portfolio participants gained, on average, approximately one year's worth of academic credit toward credential completion. This represented a saving equivalent to four and one-third years of part-time studies — cutting the degree completion time in half for part-time studies. The credit earned was reported as consistent for participants in 10 jurisdictions across Canada.
- Participants indicated that they would not have returned to school without having their prior learning recognized.
- Participants saved thousands of dollars in tuition, attendant living costs and the potential loss of income.
- Although universities lost tuition revenue, they gained adult learners for an additional one to three years.
- Students retained employment and maintained pre-existing commitments to family, household finances and community involvement.
- Further benefits such as salary enhancement, new and better jobs, credential completion and engagement in continued education were produced.

### **CEW research project: PLAR for workers in transition**

In 2003, the CEW, a not-for-profit educational organization in Winnipeg, conducted a three-year national study of the effects of PLAR strategies with workers in transition. The study focused on measuring the effect of portfolio workshops as a tool for helping people move forward at a transitional point in their lives. The project was set up in four regions: Atlantic Canada, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia. More than 300 people participated, including workers who were unemployed, under-employed or concerned about the ongoing stability of their employment.

## ***Findings***

The study found that the portfolio development process of identifying skills and providing evidence of those skills is just as, or more, important than is the portfolio product to people in the employment transition process. Further, the portfolio process proved to be a tremendous asset in helping people clarify their personal goals and values as well as identify their workplace knowledge and skills.

Specifically, the portfolio process helped the workers in transition to identify new skills or recall skills that they had acquired during their work and community activities but had not used in recent employment.

Identifying the transferable skills from work and everyday experiences also helped people during their job search opportunities. For example, the participants indicated that the portfolio process made the job search process more effective, and many used their portfolios to prepare for job interviews. Some took the portfolios to interviews and used them to demonstrate their skills to potential employers. Others took their portfolios to interviews and, although they did not use them during the interview, they knew that they could do so if the appropriate opportunity arose. This knowledge instilled confidence. Still others said that the portfolio helped them to prepare for the interview by bringing to mind their skills and accomplishments.

Finally, the research findings demonstrated that the most overwhelming effect of a portfolio process on participants was the self-confidence that they gained from the process. Near the end of the study during their second round of interviews, participants described how the portfolio process gave them greater confidence in the job search and interview process, in their willingness to identify career goals and steps needed to achieve them, and in their ability to believe in the value of their own skills in the workplace. This finding was consistent across all regional sites.

## **Nova Scotia Employment Assistance Services Prior Learning and Assessment Research and Demonstration Project (2006)**

In September 2006, the PLA Centre in Nova Scotia completed the three-year portfolio leadership and development pilot project, Prior Learning Assessment Research and

Demonstration Project, with funding from HRSDC and administrative support from the Nova Scotia Region of HRSDC and Service Canada.

The project was undertaken in three stages:

1. professional development training, provided by the PLA Centre for staff in community-based agencies that deliver EAS on behalf of Service Canada;
2. delivery of the PLA Centre's Portfolio Development Program (PDP) as an EAS intervention to clients in community-based EAS agencies; and
3. evaluation of the project and its impacts on EAS clients by an arm's-length research firm, PRAXIS Research & Consulting Inc.

The professional development trainees began by participating in the full 30-hour portfolio development course and completing their own portfolios. After a transition workshop to help them plan and prepare for their practicums, they then delivered PDP courses to groups of unemployed clients from their respective agencies. Upon completion of their practicum, the PLA Centre certified the trainees as qualified portfolio practitioners. Most carried on during the project by facilitating additional portfolio courses with agency clients. The practitioners did most of the recruitment of EAS clients for their PDP courses.

### ***Findings***

Ninety staff members from 48 EAS agencies in all parts of Nova Scotia participated in the professional development component of the project. By the end of the project, 54 of the trainees were certified as PDP practitioners. Some 580 EAS clients<sup>75</sup> completed their portfolios in a total of 92 PDP courses over the life of the project.

This evaluation study addressed three levels of program implementation and impacts:

- overall program design, implementation, management and administration;
- quality of service delivery to EAS agencies and clients; and
- client outcomes in terms of transitions to employment or to knowledge and skills acquisition in preparation for employment.

Data collection methodology included focus groups, surveys and key informant interviews. The study generated three principal findings:

1. Program excellence — The design and contents of the PDP were found to be of a very high standard, as was the delivery and the facilitation of the courses themselves.
2. Positive employment outcomes — After completion of PDP courses the participants made significant advances in labour market participation, were more motivated to seek employment and to do employment-related training, and had more positive attitudes towards their jobs.
3. Positive impacts on EAS clients facing the most severe employment challenges — Employment and return to education/training outcomes were equally positive for EAS clients who faced relatively more severe employment challenges (disability, extended periods out of the labour market, low levels of formal education, etc.) as for those with relative advantages.

Taken together, these findings indicated that the PDP was effective as an EAS for community-based delivery to unemployed people.

## **POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

### **Federal**

Research indicates that there is no federal legislation on PLAR. Federal policies, initiatives and programs that support the recognition of prior learning in Canada do so as a means of promoting lifelong learning, economic development and positive citizenship. The federal government has focused attention on financial support for recognition initiatives since the early 1990s. The federal departments most involved now are HRSDC and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

Between 2000 and 2005, HRDC (which became Human Resources and Skills Development Canada in December 2003) funded over 30 PLAR-related projects.<sup>76</sup> In 2002, the department led the development of Canada's Innovation Strategy and published *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*, a statement of the federal government's position on important policy issues facing the country. In both reports, PLAR was identified as an important gap in Canada's learning infrastructure. In fact,

*Knowledge Matters* called for accelerated progress toward a coherent system and included PLAR as a federal government commitment in its innovation strategy.

Later that same year, CMEC issued a statement asking institutions in all provinces to work together to “enhance and maintain credit transfer opportunities,” and HRDC funded a study by the Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO) to provide an overview of articulation agreements.

The second federal department involved in promoting the recognition of prior learning — primarily in the area of international credential recognition — is CIC. CIC has financially supported several initiatives; further information on these and other initiatives supported by HRSDC are outlined in the appendices of this report.

### **Provincial**

This report acknowledges that much has been done at the college/university and provincial levels:

- All provinces have moved to recognize prior learning. Many provinces have adopted policies to encourage the practice of reviewing, evaluating and acknowledging the information, skills and understanding that adult learners have gained through experiential, or informal or non-formal learning rather than through formal education.
- In 2001, colleges adopted a pan-Canadian protocol on mobility and transferability to maximize the recognition and transfer of learning acquired through formal education, workplace training and life experience.
- A substantial body of research regarding current initiatives and exemplary practice is forming.
- CMEC has compiled an inventory of existing PLAR policies, practices and programs in Canada’s post-secondary institutions (2003).

In February 2003, CMEC contracted CAPLA to prepare an information base on the current policies and practices of provincial and territorial PLAR systems. The survey was intended to provide an overview of policies on PLAR in government departments, major initiatives within the broader community, and examples of PLAR projects, studies and initiatives at colleges and universities. While citing policies and a number of interesting

initiatives at the institutional level, the survey noted few, if any, examples of official provincial policies for implementing PLAR.

With the exception of policies in Manitoba and Quebec, and a provincial framework in Saskatchewan, all other provinces and territories reported having “no official policy.” Policies at post-secondary institutions were reported to exist unevenly across provinces and in various forms — that is, they ranged from comprehensive institutional policies to permissive regulations and ad hoc processes.

The lack of policy, however, does not preclude a wide range of PLAR activity in the provinces and territories. The CAPLA survey captures examples of foreign credential recognition (FCR) and integration programs for immigrants; networking among institutions; and the development of portfolio and bridging programs for school, workplace and career development. However, it concludes that, with the exception of Manitoba, the provinces and territories have focused their PLAR activities within the education sector.

Manitoba is cited as an exception for the comprehensive way that PLAR has been planned, in terms of policy and implementation, in education and training, immigration, and other areas of the labour force. The CAPLA survey suggests that this appears to be a unique approach that may affect not only the sustainability of PLAR in colleges and universities, but its integration into the broader community.

A full review of federal, provincial and territorial policy initiatives is included in Appendix A (12 Canadian jurisdictions) and Appendix B (Quebec).

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND SECTORAL RESPONSES**

### **Universities and colleges**

The CAPLA survey demonstrates that universities fall well below colleges and university–colleges in terms of formal institutional policy. Almost three-quarters (73.8%) of the colleges in Canada had PLAR policies in place, and most without such policies had plans to institute them. Universities and university–colleges were much less likely to have plans to institute a policy in the future.

The survey observed an interesting gap between the existence of formal PLAR policies in universities (31%) and the existence of a policy for admission of adult learners into specific programs (69%). This gap is almost non-existent for colleges. Comments from the survey suggest that this may be due to a fundamental difference between colleges and universities regarding the value placed on prior learning assessment. Colleges appear to be more positive about crediting prior learning, while universities often express concerns that crediting experiential learning may have a negative effect on the value of the degree as well as the reputation of the institution.

More than half of the schools within each type of institution used informal PLAR practices in 2002. In fact, universities reported more informal than formal practices, and only 21% indicated future plans for policy implementation — raising possible concerns regarding the quality of services and activities without the assistance of formal policies.

The survey showed that colleges delegated a good deal more staff and resources to implementing PLAR policies than universities. Of the small number of universities that reported having PLAR policies, fewer than half had a PLAR office/coordinator, academic counsellor or program advisor, but more than half of all colleges had such services.

Colleges were also more likely to collect data around assessment outcomes than universities. A number of colleges indicated reporting PLAR activity on the student information systems. No specific structure or data capture system was mentioned by university respondents.

Colleges in general were reported to have more mature PLAR programs, although not every college was reported to be at the same stage of development. In the second half of the CMEC study, the authors noted the complementary fit between the nature of the college mandate and program and the PLAR model. “PLAR fits best in institutions that are flexible to adult learner needs and adopt a performance-based approach to program delivery, both of which colleges are more likely to do.”<sup>77</sup>

Data also indicated that a greater number of formal assessments occurred in colleges than universities.<sup>78</sup>

## **Sector councils**

The sector councils represent the federal government's single strongest response to labour market challenges. Created to assist industry in responding to the human resource development needs of the economy, they offer a range of responses and approaches to training and development. The CAPLA survey and a web-based search of sector council activities reveal the use of PLAR methodology in the certification and training processes of a number of councils.

Competency criteria and standards are established based primarily on the National Occupational Standards. PLAR methodology is employed as a means to measure experiential skills and knowledge against the established standards. Industry examples where PLAR is embedded in the assessment and certification process include sector council activities in areas of the environment, tourism, automotive repairs and service, textiles, trucking, aviation, information and communications technology, and mining.

## **NGO and community perspectives**

Recent research in Canada and the United States indicates that non-profit and community organizations could be hit by talent shortages exacerbated by the projected baby boomer retirements — but that there are unprecedented opportunities, as well.

Statistics show that in proportion to its total labour force, Canada has a huge voluntary and non-profit sector. More than 1.2 million people, or 7.2% of the country's total labour force, work in voluntary and non-profit organizations. As indicated in a recent study by the HR Council for the Voluntary & Non-profit Sector, there are more signs today than ever before that organizations are less and less able to recruit the talent they need in today's tightening labour market.

Without improving the ability of the sector to recruit and retain workers, and without finding ways to improve employees' skills, the sector will be less able to deliver needed services to Canadians, and will thus not make the best contribution to a strong, resilient social fabric in communities and in the country as a whole.<sup>79</sup> In addition, many non-profit organizations, particularly the small and mid-sized ones, are reported to lack the “bench strength,” or staffing depth, to develop young leaders coming up in the organization.



At the same time, research from the United States points to the unprecedented opportunities for non-profits; the huge baby-boomer cohort represents a potential asset for non-profit employers — and not just in numbers. Baby-boomers in the United States, as in Canada, are healthier, more educated and wealthier than any previous generation — and more inclined to stay in the workforce. Numerous surveys indicate that many boomers expect to work in their so-called “retirement” years, and there is solid evidence that aging boomers want jobs that are not only personally satisfying, but that also improve the quality of life in their communities.<sup>80</sup>

Many of these retirees possess the professional and management skills needed in non-profit organizations, and non-profits need to tap into these talent pools. As pointed out by the HR Sector Council and others, this is a time of great transition for the sector and it will require a serious labour strategy and transition plan. CAEL, in the United States, has recognized the tremendous potential that PLAR — and especially portfolio learning — hold for this sector, and has set PLAR/portfolio learning programs for mature workers and “encore careers” as a top priority in national organizational planning.

### **BARRIERS TO THE GROWTH OF PLAR**

There is increasing evidence that PLAR is being taken seriously by government and government agencies, as well as by organizations in the community and workplace. Concerns remain, however. As Michael Bloom, at the Ottawa Expert Consultation on PLAR, points out, many employers are not yet fully aware of the extent to which the economy and labour force will be challenged in the immediate and foreseeable future and the potential PLAR holds as a first-order solution to these labour challenges.<sup>81</sup>

Nonetheless, most of the research on PLAR’s growth and development has been more narrowly focused on identifying the barriers within the institutional context. Over the last 30 years a substantial body of research has developed that has been devoted to examining issues of access and the experience of institutions in developing PLAR policies and practices. In particular, many studies have focused on examining the barriers that adults face in getting their learning recognized, and the level and types of resistance to PLAR that are inherent in institutional structures. These studies are instructional in laying out the basis of individual and institutional resistance — and helping us to see the multi-

dimensionality of response that can occur in moving toward such a fundamentally new and challenging concept as prior learning recognition.

From these studies it is clear that the most significant challenges to the growth of PLAR include low PLAR activity levels in post-secondary institutions, barriers to adult learner participation, impediments to institutional participation, and lack of understanding of the conceptual links to adult education. A survey of research findings on the barriers to adult learner participation (situational, institutional and dispositional) and institutional impediments to the growth of PLAR (structural, conceptual and contextual) is included as Appendix F.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter begins with a comprehensive overview of the concept and evolution of PLAR; the policy and practice context in which it has been immersed; and the opportunities, tensions and challenges that have proved to be endemic to its development.

A review of the research and policy literature suggests, first and foremost, that much has been accomplished in articulating the philosophy and developing the practice of PLAR. The literature reveals a history rich in successful demonstrations of PLAR's capacity to assist individuals in coping with life transitions. At the policy and institutional levels however, it suggests that PLAR and the field of RPL remain to a large extent partial, fragmented and marginalized, subject to uncertain funding, intermittent attention and institutional and public policy leadership.

Although some definitional confusion is reported, PLAR is generally understood to involve the evaluation and recognition of experiential learning. PLAR is also recognized by many informed observers as reflecting a holistic approach to learning consistent with traditional Aboriginal culture and learning traditions, with current progressive thinking on lifelong learning in other industrialized nations and with the learning mandate of the CCL.

The literature speaks to the credibility of PLAR programs and practices. In fact, a substantial body of evaluative research on PLAR and the impact of its programs have been growing over the last ten years. The research provides evidence that PLAR is an

academically sound practice that successfully links informal to formal learning and improves an adult's confidence in his/her knowledge and skills. It further suggests that PLAR learners have proven to be successful students and that PLAR can serve as a motivational tool in post-secondary recruitment and retention strategy as well as in learner persistence.

In addition, PLAR's strengths in providing economic efficiencies to learners as well as to institutions are well documented. Although PLAR was reported to be underutilized in the community and described as an "important untapped resource" for the workplace, research on portfolio programs provides evidence that such programs have been very successful for workers in transition. In fact, portfolio programs received consistently high ratings in quality of delivery and demonstrated positive employment outcomes for even the most severe employment challenges.

Barriers and challenges to the growth of PLAR are also well documented, as are the policy responses. The most significant challenges are: low PLAR activity levels in PSE and industry, individual and institutional barriers to adult participation, impediments to institutional participation, and a lack of understanding by many of the conceptual links to adult education. This research — especially with regard to the conceptual and contextual impediments experienced by institutions — while rather daunting on the surface, actually provides a kind of virtual checklist against which to plan strategy. It documents the legitimate concerns as well as the mythology facing the practical application and growth of PLAR in the individual, institutional and public context.

There is no doubt that PLAR is an effective mechanism for linking informal to formal learning and that opportunities for its use abound in the community and workplace. Initial research on the state of the field, and data on provincial/territorial and institutional policies and practices, provide an important baseline from which to measure progress. These studies have also called for a synthesis of relevant international data and a more comprehensive picture of the full range of Canadian activities across the provinces and territories, and the education, workplace and community sectors. That comprehensive review is found in this report's appendices; the following two chapters contain an analysis of that information, and:

- clarify the demand for PLAR (through actual learner experience and profiles);
- explore the impact of external forces and pressures influencing that demand; and
- gain a comprehensive understanding of the current situation — its opportunities and challenges — both domestically and internationally.

It is to an understanding of the current and projected demand for PLAR, and the implications this holds for individuals as well as for our formal education and training, workplace and community learning systems — that we now turn.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE DEMAND FOR PLAR

### BEGINNING WITH LEARNERS: TEN LEARNER PROFILES

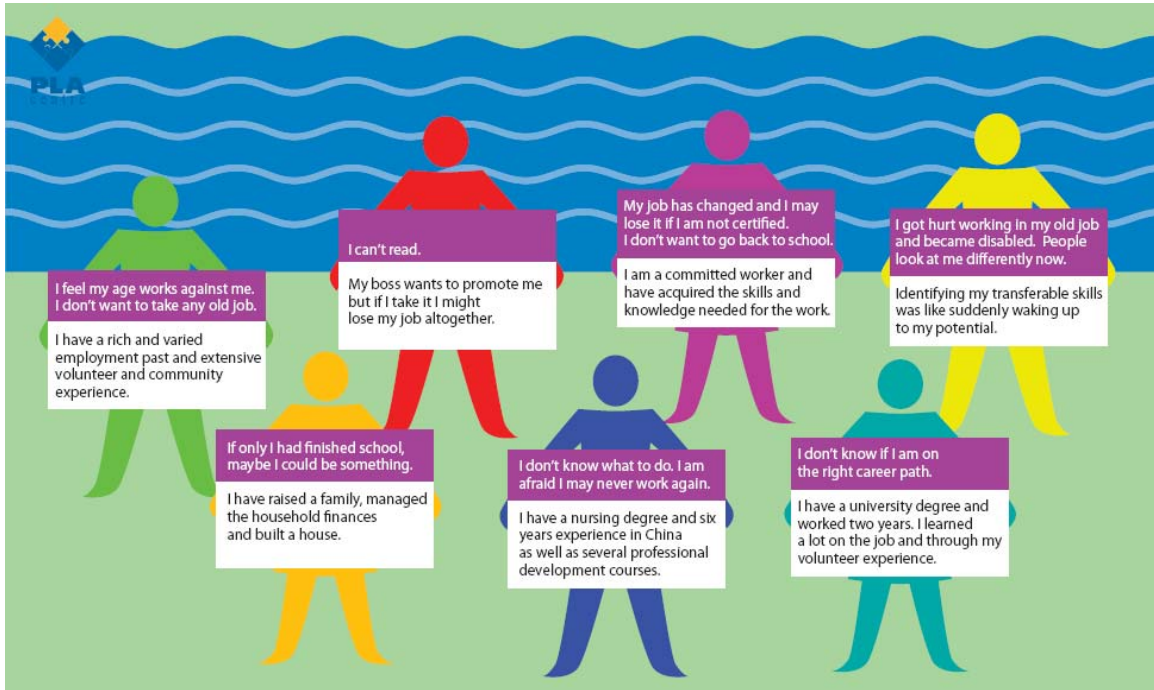


Figure 3: Unrecognized learning

Graphics: Ross Illustration

### Introduction

Recent survey research indicates a significant and largely unmet demand among adults in Canada for PLAR services, supports and programs. It also suggests that “further development and implementation of PLAR policies and practices would have positive effects on the educational development of Canadian adults and would increase education and training and employment opportunities for those who face greater barriers.”<sup>82</sup>

This chapter presents a sampling of individual case studies and profiles of the range of Canadian adults, across 10 target groups, who would be served by such PLAR provisions (see Figures 4 and 5). It also reviews some of the socio-economic trends affecting the demand for PLAR. The individual case studies illustrate how 10 specific adult populations would benefit from expanded access to PLAR programs. The 10 target groups are:

- Learners facing literacy challenges
- Aboriginal adult learners
- Recent immigrants
- Persons with disabilities
- Women facing barriers re-entering the workforce
- Apprentices and workers involved in professional certification
- Older workers
- Youth at risk
- Recent university graduates
- Displaced workers

Eight of these examples come from groups that have participation rates in formal learning significantly below the rest of the Canadian population. One group — recent university graduates — has formal schooling above the Canadian average but has difficulties making the transition to the labour force. The workers facing transitions may also have training and formal educational experiences in the workplace, but such experiences often go unrecognized by themselves and by others when they have to change jobs or occupations. Case studies are included to show how PLAR processes could help people meet such transitional challenges. They also reveal that PLAR practices and policies have multiple uses and outcomes and should be available to everyone — not limited to those without work or formal learning. There is a need for PLAR interventions targeted on high-needs populations, but there is also a need to make PLAR programs generally available to individuals with higher levels of formal education and more positive employment histories.

What all of these groups face in common, along with our society as a whole, is an unprecedented level of turbulence and dislocation and an increasing need for programs and services that encourage and support adult learning for transition purposes.

Most of the case studies involve the use of portfolio for assessing and recognizing learning and developing personal and career plans. Other PLAR tools employed in the examples include credential/qualification review and assessment, standardized tests and challenge exams, interviews and discussions, skills demonstrations, and competency-

based/transferable skills and knowledge workshops and evaluations. As emphasized earlier, which of these approaches and methodologies is “best” depends on the circumstances and needs of the individual adult learner. But for many of those marginalized and/or dislocated target groups identified in this report, there is often no quick PLAR transition approach that will be effective. Portfolio learning programs have repeatedly demonstrated a relevance to such target groups, often with dramatically transformational impacts. At the same time, projects in both Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador have had considerable success with programs in the fishing industry to upgrade skills and certification levels using experienced fish harvester

- 9 million people (42% of the adult population) score below Level 3 literacy skills
- 2.7 million adults aged 25 to 64 have no high school and no further education/training

mentors, and matching transferable skills in navigation, seamanship and maintenance to provide transportation and supply services for the offshore oil and gas industry. Though not full portfolio programs, these initiatives share the same asset-based approaches to skills and learning for transition.

In each case study, the learners are responding to questions concerning their PLAR experiences. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

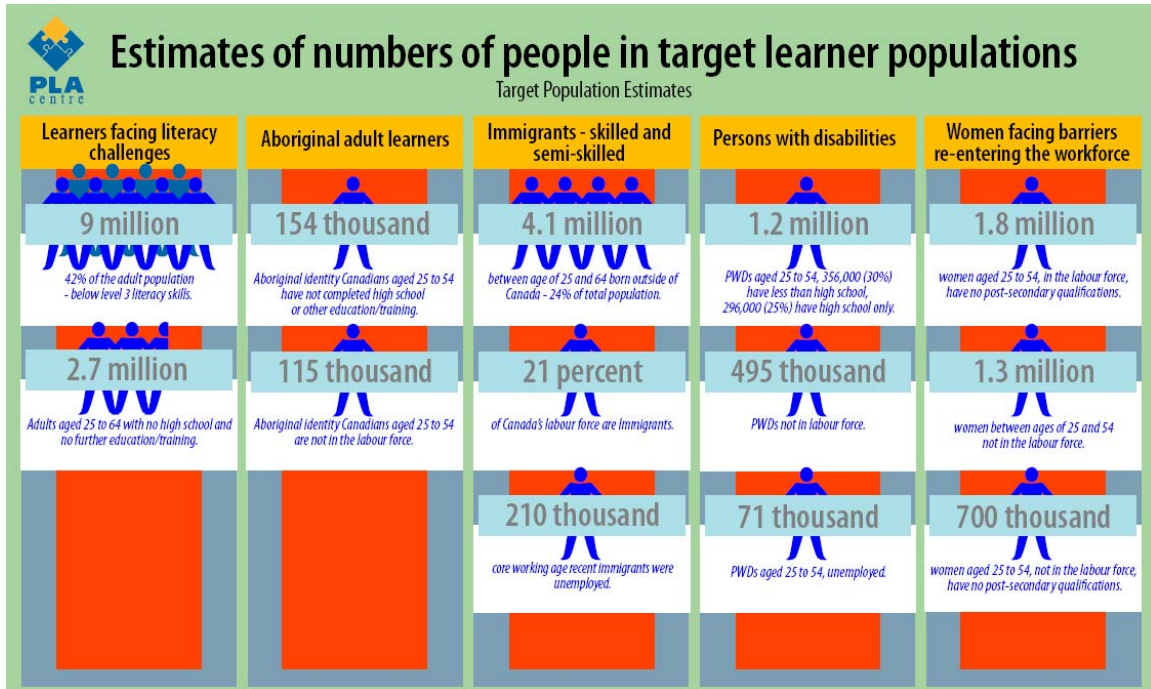


Figure 4: Estimates of numbers of people in target learner populations (1 of 2)

Graphics: Ross Illustration

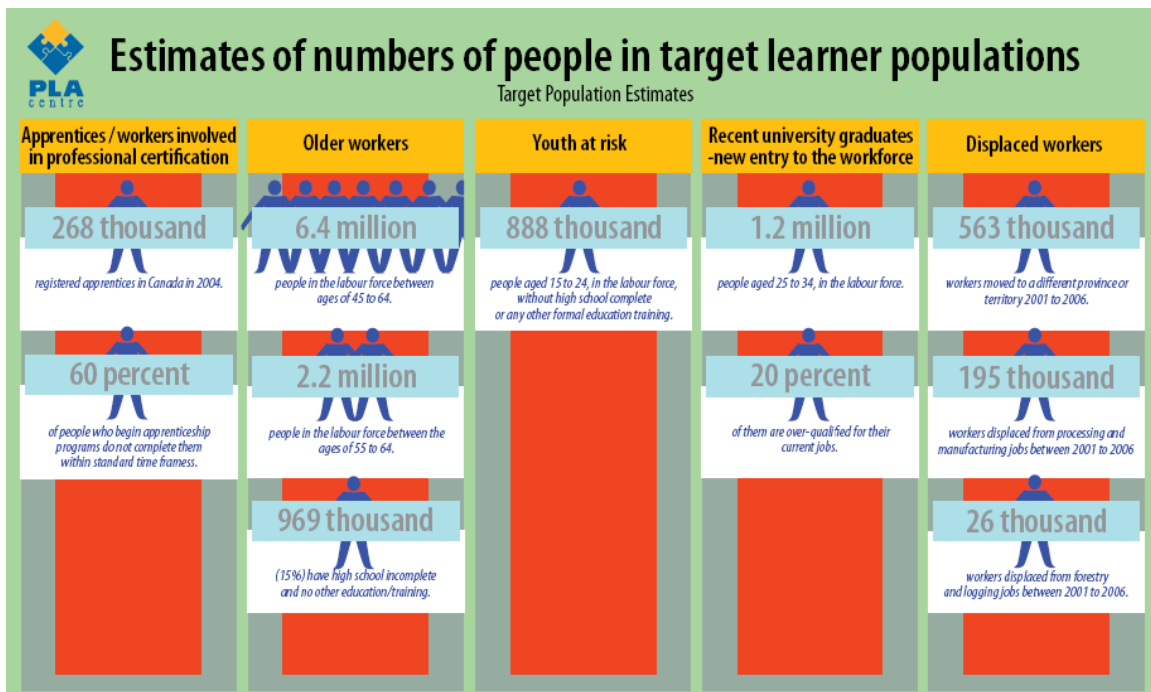


Figure 5: Estimates of numbers of people in target learner populations (2 of 2)

Graphics: Ross Illustration



## Learners facing literacy challenges

*I used to drive a truck around New Brunswick and Newfoundland. My boss would send me to certain areas to deliver our products. The only way that I could tell when I was at the right location is that he'd write it down on a piece of paper. I'd have to stop and look at the signs and the letters and compare it to the paper.*

*My boss really liked my work and he offered me the foreman's job but I said, "No, I can't handle the responsibilities." But that wasn't the real reason. The real reason was my fear of filling out the forms and writing the reports. I found it got harder to do those things as I moved around the job because our company wanted us to do a lot more writing. So I was really worried that I might lose my job if I was a foreman even though I knew more about all of our products than anyone else including my boss. I had no confidence whatsoever.*

*James*

Like many adult Canadians who do not participate in organized education and training activities, James worried that his literacy skills were low relative to the demands of the workplace expectations and labour market requirements. He had extensive experience in doing his job but did not feel confident in his ability to undertake many of the reading and writing tasks now required.

James heard from his employer about the possibility of academic upgrading through a provincial workplace education initiative. He decided to attend "to try to discover what skills [he] had." As a result of participation in the program, James discovered that he had a great many skills. Support from his advisor helped renew his confidence and gave him the internal boost he needed to participate in a local upgrading program two evenings a week.

*I had no confidence before taking these courses [academic upgrading and portfolio], and now everything seems different. I feel more confident after taking the portfolio program. It was the right thing to do just before I enrolled in this upgrading course. Now I can show everyone what I know and I might even apply for that foreman's job once I finish working on my writing skills. It really is good to know that you know more than you think.*

Another participant in the same portfolio course, Annie, told of how her limited literacy skills meant low self-esteem. Although she had raised a family, helped build the family home and had taken care of her elderly mother, she thought that her skills were limited.

*When you don't have your Grade 12 you assume that everyone else does and you start to sell yourself short. You see a job and say, "If only I had my education, I could do that." You see people who are getting ahead and you think, "If only I had finished school, maybe I might have something." I felt like all the stuff that I done in my life — raising the family, handling the finances, taking care of my mother, building my house — these were things that didn't count. They were just things that I did in my life but they didn't count as learning.*

Annie's lack of success in formal schooling caused her to perceive herself as outside of, not part of, the formal learning culture. As a result, she did not feel that her life experiences had any learning value because she lacked formal credentials. Annie became discouraged and felt as if she had nothing to offer an employer. This limiting perspective took a toll on her self-worth and made her feel "not good enough" for any employer.

*Everywhere I went — Grade 12, Grade 12. What for? If you know how to do the work, why do you need your Grade 12? But I couldn't get that fact out of my head — that I had not completed school. I started to think that I was a failure and all of the things that I had done during my life were worth nothing. That was me — nothing.*

Annie does not carry such sentiments any longer. Her participation in a portfolio program led her to realize that many of the skills that she had acquired during her time as a parent, house builder and manager of household finances were skills that could be transferred into other employment sectors. Further, as her confidence improved, she realized that she could now complete her Grade 12 education while also seeking employment.

For both James and Annie, the PLAR interventions that were the most effective in helping them to improve their literacy skills involved program elements that addressed specific personal and social barriers. In particular, James stated that it was only as a result of the support that he received from a Workplace Education Initiative advisor that he was able to complete the program. In both cases, portfolio and advising services were instrumental in increasing self-confidence and allowing James and Annie to see themselves as part of a learning society.

Census data indicates that the people in greatest need, including recent immigrants, older workers and dropouts from the formal education system, are least likely to get further training. PLAR interventions that may be most effective in helping adults facing literacy challenges involve the reorientation and more efficient use of existing educational infrastructure combined with new policy and program elements to address specific financial constraints and psycho-social barriers. As the two profile narratives suggest, and the research data supports, the provision of PLAR services for this group could help up to 4 million adult Canadians view themselves as learners and encourage their greater participation in the labour force.

### **Aboriginal adult learners**

- 154,000 (33%) of Aboriginal-identified Canadians aged 25 to 54 have not completed high school or other education/training
- 115,000 (24%) of Aboriginal-identified Canadians aged 25 to 54 are not in the labour force
- One in three Aboriginal persons aged 25 to 64 has not completed high school
- One-fifth had high school as highest level of education
- 60% of urban Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan scored below Level 3 literacy skills

*I think that for me, PLAR made me realize that I could make a difference in my life. I could get back something that I had lost. A lot of people think they can't make a difference in their life. They can. But I didn't always feel that way. For a long time in my life, I thought that I was a failure.*

*Krista*

Krista is a mother of two young children. She is of Mi'kmag heritage and lives off reserve. She explains that her interest in PLAR came about because of a desire to help her two young children. She wanted to show her children that “a person can have hope” and that “you are always learning, even at home and in the community.” Krista participated in a portfolio course to help her understand how living is really about learning. Later, on the

basis of her portfolio and an interview, she applied for and received admission and advanced standing in a two-year program in graphic design at a local community college. The portfolio had provided an opportunity for her to recognize and document her artistic knowledge and skills. It further helped her to make the connections between her passion for self expression and the world of learning and work.

*All of the drawing and painting that I did while growing up and while raising my kids — I used that to get credit in the program [graphic design]. And yet, for many years I only saw my drawing as a hobby and never dreamed that one day I could actually get a credit for my work. It [the drawing] was really just a way to help me cope with all of my problems and hardships, you know, of growing up without very much and feeling like other people were always judging me because of my culture.*

These PLAR experiences changed Krista’s perception of herself and gave her greater confidence in her abilities. She completed the graphic design program within the required two-year time frame and immediately found a job with a printing company. She notes that her children are both “doing well in school” and explains that her outlook on life is much different.

*It’s funny, you know. I feel as though anything is possible now. PLAR helped me in a lot of ways, getting this job and all. But I think it was the confidence I got from realizing that I knew more than I thought — that I was learning all the time. That [knowledge] really helped me in my personal life. I’m not scared anymore. I feel normal, like I can sit in a crowd of people who are educated and feel like I belong. It’s hard to explain how that feels — feeling like an equal — but I can tell you that it feels good!*

An outstanding example of an approach that combines multi-method PLAR supports, portfolio learning processes and essential skills development is the partnership initiative between First Nations and Métis populations and Manitoba Advanced Education and Training called *Igniting the Power Within*. Participants report the same types of impacts and outcomes as Krista describes.<sup>83</sup>

When compared with the Canadian population as a whole, the Aboriginal population, which totaled nearly one million in 2001, is significantly younger. Thus, if one considers that Aboriginal Canadians are expected to make up an increasingly large proportion of the working-age population by 2017,<sup>84</sup> it is essential that their literacy skills and levels of educational attainment be improved. As this narrative suggests, the provision of PLAR opportunities can be a crucial first step in fostering the necessary self-confidence for Aboriginal learners to pursue such educational opportunities.

### **Recent immigrants: Skilled and semi-skilled**

- 24% of the total population (4.1 million) aged 25 to 64 were born outside of Canada
- Of the 700,000 recent immigrants (i.e., arrived between 2001 and 2006), 101,000 (15%) had high school as highest level of education and 64,000 (9%) had less than high school
- Immigrants account for about 21% of Canada's labour force
- The employment rate for recent immigrants aged 25 to 64 is 67% (compared to 82% for Canadian-born peers). 210,000 core working-age recent immigrants were unemployed in 2006

*When I first arrived [in Canada] two years ago, I wanted to work as a nurse. That is my training in China. But no one would hire me. My training is not recognized. Maybe I am too old and maybe no one will hire me because I do not speak English very well. I think that if I could show people what I could do, that would be good. Yes, I could work here if I could show someone that I am a good nurse.*

*Lina*

Lina immigrated to Canada from China with her husband and three children 10 years ago. She has a nursing degree, has worked in China as a nurse for more than six years and has completed several professional development courses. Like many immigrants to Canada,

Lina is interested in identifying the specific skills that Canadian employers would find useful. She wants to demonstrate her formal education and her previous work experience in ways that would be transferable to a similar career in Canada. However, after numerous unsuccessful attempts to have her education and skills recognized, Lina grew increasingly uncertain about her previous training and experience. She also felt more confused regarding other possible career options and found that she was losing confidence. “I did not know what to do and I thought maybe I would never work again,” she confides. But through a series of PLAR processes, including portfolio and challenge exams, she developed greater confidence.

*I think that is how the PLAR process is helping me. I feel like I can talk about my skills in a different way and maybe now I can get a job as a nurse once I take some more training. I feel like a new person.*

Although she has not yet been able to secure recognition of her credentials, nor find a bridging program to address the gaps in her nursing education, Lina has been able to identify how her previous work experiences relate to skills required by Canadian employers for interim employment in related fields. The process itself has fostered increased self-confidence and enabled Lina to feel more prepared for job interviews. Lina continues to look for ways to gain recognition of her professional education and to continue her learning.

Andrea is an immigrant from Ethiopia who was employed as a welder, but has not been able to find employment in Canada. The Workplace Integration of Newcomers program of the Centre for Education and Work in Winnipeg has developed specific criteria and outcomes to measure performance in skilled trades areas. Andrea was able to use this process to identify her welding skills and to identify and address the gaps she needed to fill. This, in turn, enabled her to gain a valid Canadian workplace certification. She is now employed in that capacity and able to support her family.

The PLAR process can help immigrants by identifying their skills and experiences and relating those skills and experiences to the Canadian workplace. For those who seek immediate employment, the emphasis on transferable skills helps immigrants focus on what Canadian employers value in the workplace.

### **Persons with disabilities**

- Persons with disabilities aged 25 to 54: 71,000 unemployed and 495,000 not in labour force
- Of 1.2 million persons with disabilities aged 25 to 54, 356,000 (30%) have less than high school, and 296,000 (25%) have high school only

*People seem to look at me differently now that I have a disability. I got hurt working in my old job [manufacturing] and became disabled. So I no longer have the mobility that I once had. For a while, I was really down on myself and I had absolutely no idea what I should do.*

*Calvin*

While in his mid-forties, Calvin suffered a serious injury at work. The injury resulted in a loss of mobility, and within several months he had to leave his job. Although the injury was serious, his support worker determined that he could work at a different job involving little, if any, physical labour — “a desk job,” as Calvin called it. However, he did not feel that he had any skills for such a career change and, as a result, he became somewhat depressed.

*One day you have complete mobility and the next day you lose it. Just like that, you become disabled. I really struggled with that idea — of being disabled — and I hated the term. But I didn't know what to do. Those were long, dark days.*

It was through his Workers' Compensation counsellor that Calvin was referred to the local community college, and through them to a career transition service. Calvin went through a skills assessment process and then signed up for a full portfolio program. Through participation in the portfolio course, Calvin discovered a new career direction.

He found that he had many transferable skills, although initially he could talk about them only in relation to his previous occupation.

*I discovered that I had a lot of transferable skills, although at first, I couldn't see them in relation to a new occupation. I guess I defined myself by my previous work and I kept thinking about what I couldn't do. Now I think about what I might be able to do with the skills that I have.*

For Calvin, the PLAR portfolio process enabled him to identify his transferable skills. This identification of transferable skills permitted him to focus on what he could do, rather than on what he could not do or could no longer do. The effect of such a renewed perspective arising from his PLAR experience was, in Calvin's words, "like suddenly waking up to your potential."

3.6 million Canadians reported having a disability — including about 10% of those aged 15 to 64, or about 2 million people. Canadians with disabilities have lower incomes, lower rates of labour force participation and less formal education than other Canadians.

The expansion of participation by persons with disabilities in learning requires greater efforts to address the wide range of barriers faced by people with different types and levels of disability. These involve issues of transportation and physical access, and the need for translators, other support persons and assistive devices — many of which involve significant costs. The provision of PLAR services can facilitate communication regarding these issues as learners gain awareness of their needs and strengths.



## Women facing barriers re-entering the workforce

- 1.3 million women aged 25 to 54 are not in the labour force
- 700,000 women aged 25 to 54, not in the labour force, have no post-secondary qualifications
- 1.8 million women aged 25 to 54, in the labour force, have no post-secondary qualifications

*It was when I was turned down for the third time [applying for a job] that I thought that there might be something wrong with me. Sure, I had been off work for a while, but I had a lot of experience both working and volunteering. But I had no way of telling an employer how good I was.*

*Susan*

Susan took six years off from working to look after her young children. As with many women returning to the labour force, she felt that this interruption in her employment career worked against her during the job search process. This feeling of “employment uneasiness” was compounded by her expressed uncertainty regarding career direction.

*I also had no real clue about what I wanted to do. So it became difficult for me to know how to approach the job search process, let alone how to handle the stress of future interviews. I started to lose confidence and, at one point, I honestly thought about giving up on ever working again.*

Through a local women’s support network, Susan heard about a process called PLAR and she investigated possible services in her community. She contacted various agencies but found little information until she met with an employment counsellor who suggested that she participate in an interviewing workshop. During the workshop, Susan “discovered” that the same agency that offered the interviewing workshop also offered a portfolio course which the facilitator suggested was a more detailed way to prepare for an interview. Now, after having completed her portfolio and taken the interview preparation course, Susan’s perspective on her readiness to re-enter the workforce has changed.

*I feel more employment-ready because I took time to reflect on my skills and I had time to think about what I bring to a job. Also, I feel more interview-ready because I have something more than just a two-page résumé, which doesn't tell you anything about who I am or what I can do. Now, because of PLAR, I feel that if I can land an interview then I have a leg up on a lot of other people.*

The PLAR process offered Susan the opportunity to demonstrate the depth and variety of her paid and unpaid work experience while also revealing the learning resulting from these experiences. Not only did the process give her confidence in her own experiences, it provided her with tangible evidence of her previous work and volunteer efforts — evidence that she could show a potential employer.

There is evidence that despite their higher rates of participation in adult education and training, women are disadvantaged when it comes to re-entering the workforce (especially after time off for family responsibilities). Further, even when they do get re-hired, many do not get support for training, and they may find that upward mobility in the workplace continues to be problematic.

PLAR provides a process that renews self-confidence and provides career focus. This personal confidence and career focus enables women to identify transferable and vocational skills and to match these skills with jobs that require them.

### **Apprentices and workers involved in professional certification**

- 268,000 registered apprentices in Canada in 2004
- Approximately 60% of people who begin apprenticeship programs do not complete them within standard time frames

*The whole PLAR process opened things up for me. Before, I looked at myself as not having a whole lot of skills even though I had a lot of work experience and I had taken a lot of courses. I kind of looked at myself like, “Well, I am in this apprenticeship training program and I did this and that but I’m not sure how to tell anyone about my skills.”*

*Jenna*

Jenna was in her second year of her four-year welding apprenticeship program. She worked under the direct supervision of a certified journeyperson, an individual who provided careful mentoring. She received a pre-defined wage while working, but during her classroom training her working wage stopped and she applied for EI benefits. Because apprenticeship involves both written agreements and implicit expectations regarding learning, Jenna knew that there were certain guidelines that specified the roles and responsibilities of each party — in particular, the right of program sponsors (her employer) to provide employment, her right to obtain such employment and her responsibility to keep track of her hours on the job and to participate in classroom training. However, what was missing for Jenna was clarity regarding her own learning needs and a process to document the experiential learning that she gained both on and off the job site. In effect, she wanted to explore other education and training opportunities that would help her in her work and personal life but was unsure of what she needed. The PLAR process (particularly the portfolio) served to clarify her actual need for additional formal education and helped her to understand her own personal learning style.

*Going through the course helped me to understand myself better. It opened me up so that now I see that I have more skills than what I actually thought that I did. It also gave me a way to talk about my skills. So now, when I want to get credit for what I have done and what I know, I have a way to prepare myself and I have the documents to support my claim. It really is a great feeling to realize just how much you know and to use that knowledge to help you get the recognition you need.*

Through reflection and examination Jenna was able to understand, in a more complete manner, her experiences and her present and future learning needs, and she developed a greater appreciation of how her technical tasks related specifically to the theoretical instruction. Such recognition of both spheres of learning (informal and formal) served to make her “feel like a complete learner.”

Terri’s story further demonstrates the support that PLAR can bring to experienced individuals hoping to gain certification in newly professionalized occupations.

When Terri graduated from high school, a career in continuing care was not in her plans. Raising a young child by the time she exited her teens, Terri began providing care as a way to help support her family. By the time she reached her late 20s, she had been

employed for several years at a small options home where she was involved in all aspects of care and support for the three residents. She knew that without certification as a Continuing Care Assistant (CCA) her employment options were limited, but she loved her work and was content to stay.

It was Terri's employer who brought the new CCA/PLAR program to Terri's attention. She felt Terri was the perfect candidate — a dedicated caregiver who had acquired the skills and knowledge required of a CCA, who took pride in the quality of care she provided and who was committed to her clients. Terri's employer also knew that Terri and her husband, now with two children, could not afford the time or money needed for Terri to return to school and acquire the certification. She explained that through the CCA/PLAR program, Terri could match her skills and learning to the program's outcomes, potentially receive equivalency for many of the 15 modules, then fill any remaining education gaps before writing the provincial exam. The program itself consisted of a series of intensive facilitated group workshops (i.e., two full-day or four half-day sessions) with five to 15 participants, together with several one-on-one advising sessions and a number of individualized self-reflection, analysis and evidence collection and development tasks.

Motivated by the idea of a more secure future, Terri registered for the program. Overwhelmed at first, she almost dropped out — twice — but the support of a dedicated advisor, her husband and her employer (who joined her in the program to show her support), convinced her to stay. Upon completion of the PLAR process, Terri was awarded credit for 90% of the 15-module program. Over the next several months she completed the requirements for the remaining modules. Finally, she registered to write the final exam — and passed with flying colours. One-and-a-half years after registering for the CCA/PLAR program, Terri proudly received her certification as a CCA in the Province of Nova Scotia.

*PLAR worked really well for me because I could set my own pace. I really liked the process and would do it again — and I would definitely recommend it to others.*

Almost immediately upon acquiring her certification, Terri applied for a position as a CCA — and got it. As she said, she is already reaping the benefits of the program: she is in a job for which she was previously unqualified. Surprisingly, Terri has found that the process helped in other ways, too. When she began her new job, she found the transition surprisingly seamless. CCA/PLAR, she believes, helped prepare her for that transition by bringing to the surface her skills and learning as a continuing care worker.

*It made me feel more confident, that's for sure. Things I was nervous about don't faze me anymore.*

Terri does not plan to stop here. She is eager to gain experience in all areas of continuing care and wants to learn as much as she can. She is also adamant about the importance of the advising and support function of PLAR assessors and advisors and claims she could not have finished the program without this help.

*"I'm not ready to stop yet but I'm not ready to go back to school," Terri says, then adds, only half-jokingly, "When is PLAR for Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) going to be available? I'd do that next."*

PLAR in the form of interviews, skill demonstrations, challenge tests, self and peer evaluations, as well as portfolio, offers workers and apprentices a way to collect and demonstrate on-the-job learning experiences that can assist them in gaining inter-provincial certification. Further, as Jenna and Terri's narratives suggest, PLAR programs offered each of them the opportunity to gain a greater appreciation of how their theoretical classroom learning links to their workplace learning. Therefore, not only did PLAR give them confidence in their own learning experiences, it provided them with tangible evidence of workplace learning to show potential employers and provincial certifying bodies.

## Older workers

- 6.4 million people in the labour force are between the ages of 45 and 64
- 969,000 of those workers aged 45 to 64 (15%) did not complete high school and have no other education/training
- 2.2 million people in the labour force are between the ages of 55 and 64

*I have a rich and varied employment past and I have extensive volunteer and community experience. However, I feel that my age works against me in my job search endeavours, but I'm not willing to work at just anything. I want a job that offers me the opportunity to both contribute and to grow personally and professionally. The problem is that I'm not sure what to do next or how to present myself with regard to my experiences. I am also not going to jump at the first opportunity.*

*Maria*

Maria is in her early fifties and has considerable skills and experience working in the not-for-profit sector. And yet, even with her impressive work history, she is convinced that no one will hire her because she is too old and fears that her age limits her employability. As a result, Maria finds the job search process discouraging.

*When you are older (I am in my fifties), you feel that your employability is compromised by your age. It's not that you don't have considerable skills and experience, but that you become convinced that no one will hire you because you are too old. As a result, you can become quite discouraged as you look for work.*

Maria's work in the non-profit sector gives her a very rich employment past. She has worked in fundraising, management, community development and has excellent oral and written communication skills. However, after having moved to another community to be closer to her aging mother, she finds it difficult to find work. She did find a part-time job writing for a community newspaper but the job paid poorly and offered no opportunity for professional or personal growth. She continued to apply for positions in the not-for-profit sector.

Through a chance meeting with someone at the paper, Maria learned of PLAR and the learning portfolio. A month-and-a-half later she completed her own portfolio, which

demonstrated the depth of her experience and the quality of her work. She described both the process and the product as invaluable in the job search process. Not only did the portfolio give her confidence in her own experience, it provided her with tangible evidence of her work to show potential employers.

*Thankfully, going through the PLAR process demonstrated the depth of my experience and the quality of my work. The process gave me confidence in myself as I have tangible evidence of what I have done and what I can do. But, even more importantly, I know what I want to do and this knowledge shapes my ongoing career plans.*

Gabe is an older worker whose position is going to be eliminated. He wanted to get some idea of his transferable skills that might be applicable to other jobs. With the help of his manager he gained access to the CEW's Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM), which enables individuals to self-assess their essential skills, strengths and weaknesses, and gives them some language for articulating their experiential learning assets. Gabe is now beginning a portfolio process using the WILM process as a base for further development.

The changing demographics in Canada are creating an older workforce. Policies and initiatives to engage older individuals are, therefore, in demand and need to be effectively integrated, targeted and adequately resourced.

Flexibility in employment could help Canada address its changing social context as more "boomers" reach retirement. Furthermore, there are economic and social gains to be made by encouraging an extended work-life, many of which (including mentorship and knowledge-transfer) will also benefit younger cohorts.

As a policy and practice instrument, PLAR also holds significant possibilities for encouraging experienced people to pursue encore careers and helping them assess a legacy of learning and experience. As a legacy planning tool, portfolio can be used creatively as a means to reflect on one's purpose and accomplishments, and thus help illuminate a plan for the next stages of life as well as career direction.

## Youth at risk

- 888,000 people aged 15 to 24, in the labour force, without high school complete or any other formal education training

*I didn't feel good about it [quitting school], but no one was pushing me to go to school. So I thought it was OK to quit. I mean, my parents didn't push me to go to school, so why bother. But now I realize that it's hard being my age [19] and without high school. I have a lot of fear...fear of survival, fear of never finding work, fear of the future.*

*Louis*

Louis expressed a fear of future learning opportunities that was rooted in his lack of success in previous learning practices. He understood that his options were limited and felt that there was little that he could do to “get out of the rut.”

*I mean what can you do without your high school education? Really, what do you do? Maybe you work at a fast-food restaurant or do some cleaning work. I realized pretty quickly that my future was looking dark.*

A friend of Louis' who also dropped out of school suggested that he meet with the local community college to talk about options for “getting back into learning.” Louis met with several of the student services staff of the college and they explained that he could participate in an academic upgrading program at the college. The program would give him the skills necessary to apply for diploma programs at the college. Upon starting the program, Louis discovered that many of his previous learning experiences helped him in understanding the work. Further, his participation in a college portfolio course revealed personal skill sets that he did not know existed.

*Well, I can face the fear now. See, the biggest benefit of PLAR is that you work through that fear and you get to talk about surviving strategies, and talk about the hope that you can have within yourself and within the community. It's nice to have hope. It's like a big balloon inside of you.*



Research shows that adults and young adults with less than high school education have significantly lower literacy skills, are much less likely to participate in adult education and training, and are more likely to experience poor labour market outcomes. Research also indicates that these same respondents are more likely than their educated counterparts to report that a learning episode helped them to achieve a positive outcome – increased income, a promotion or a new job.

The PLAR process is helpful for young people at risk as it reveals transferable and occupational skills that will help them make good career choices. Further, PLAR helps young people to name the skills that they have gained from a variety of work and volunteer experiences. Reflecting on the goals and values in the portfolio workshops is particularly helpful in giving direction to the occupational decision-making process.

### **Recent university graduates: New entries to the workforce**

- 1.2 million people aged 25 to 34 are in the labour force
- 20% of them are over-qualified for their current jobs

*I finished university two years ago and held a couple of jobs but I really felt uncertain about whether I was on the right career path. The jobs provided very little satisfaction and they were all term positions with few benefits. I had no idea when they might come to an end and none of the jobs provided the possibility of a full-time position.*

*Jamal*

Jamal attended university and completed an undergraduate degree. He borrowed money to complete his four years of study and hoped to find work upon graduating. However, like many people who graduate from university, Jamal was not certain of the occupational area in which he wanted to work. He was also not sure how to identify his

skills and felt that while his formal education was easy to define, his volunteer learning efforts were difficult to explain.

*I did well in university but once I finished, I wondered if it had been the right educational experience for me. It seemed that most of my work-related skills were learned on the job and through my volunteer experiences. Since I had no way of talking about my work skills and no papers to show what I had learned on the job, I started to think that maybe I didn't have an appropriate skill set for employment. I was not fully confident that I had sufficient skills to move into any occupational area and I didn't even know what occupational area I wanted to move into. It was really frustrating and confusing.*

Like many people who are young and new to the workforce, Jamal had a difficult time setting an occupational direction for himself. He knew that he had many skills but did not always recognize their value. Further, he was not certain how to apply them in the workplace in ways that would provide job satisfaction.

The PLAR process helped Jamal to identify his skills and clarify his career possibilities and future educational/learning needs. He could now name the skills that he had gained from his part-time work and his various volunteer efforts.

*The PLAR process has really helped me to identify the many transferable skills that I already have, and has also helped me to understand how my skills are important in the workplace and to employers. The process also helped me to name the skills that I gained from my work and volunteer experiences. For the first time, I feel like I have direction in my career and that I can find a job that will give me satisfaction.*

Sarah, a child of the millennium generation, has a story similar to Jamal. Sarah went from seeing herself as a student, “an unfinished product” with little hope of getting any work related to her interests, to understanding that she already possessed a depth of skills and experiences that could be valuable to an employer.

Sarah left home to study at a large Canadian university right after high school. The daughter of university-educated parents, no one had expected that she would do otherwise. Four years later she graduated with an honours degree in English and followed up her studies with an intensive Creative Writing Programme at the University of Edinburgh.

After living away from home and traveling on her own she found the adjustment of moving back in with her parents to be very difficult. She tried to find work, but aside from her studies, her résumé included only a smattering of minimum wage part-time and summer jobs in retail, food services, kitchen work and catering. After a year of finding no success in securing full-time employment, her father offered her a part-time job as a receptionist in his office. She soon realized that she would not be able to move out and live on her own (something she desperately wanted to do), even with two part-time jobs. Seeing that her employment and career prospects were weak she began to think about returning to school. Indeed she saw a return to school as the only viable alternative to low wage employment and living at home.

Although she was tired of studying and wanted to secure work in her field, she could think of no way to accomplish this without more education. At about this time a friend told her about a locally available portfolio program and suggested she take it to help her think through her options in a more comprehensive way and come to a decision about her career path.

She enrolled in the portfolio program with some trepidation about whether she would have enough life experience to produce a portfolio. She saw other older members of the group as knowing much more than she did, and that perhaps all she really needed was a couple of hours of career counselling. After a few sessions, however, she found that she had more in common with members of the group than she thought and that they, too, were struggling with questions and concerns regarding life choices and transitions.

The portfolio program helped Sarah to recognize the limitations she had placed on her understanding of her own knowledge and experience. She realized she saw her “knowledge” as a culmination of what she had been taught at school, and her “experience” as her job experience (i.e., the list of minimum wage jobs outlined in her résumé).

The portfolio program helped Sarah identify significant life experiences and distil the learning that she had gained from them. But more than that, it helped her to transform the way she saw herself and to make the connections between her interests, values and

passions, and the opportunities presented by work. She was able to put into words the real skills and competencies that she had developed and to identify common threads and themes to be further developed. Even better, she began to see how she could realistically talk about her skills and connect them to the workplace in a way that she was comfortable with what she could offer. This gave her confidence and a new sense of how to present herself. The actual work of building her portfolio became the mechanism for bringing together her life's "story" — for recognizing the values and interests, the solid base of accomplishment, and the real and practical competencies that are part of who she is, and what she knows and can do.

One day, after having completed her portfolio, Sarah noticed an advertisement in the paper for an entry level position in a large publishing company. She applied with a lively letter in which she was able to link her skills and competencies with the qualifications of the job. For two months she did not hear back — but remained hopeful and interested. Eventually she got a call inviting her to an interview. It seemed they had been inundated with hundreds of applications from liberal arts and English graduates.

Sarah prepared well and brought her portfolio to the interview. Through it she was able to demonstrate her lifelong love of books, her formal qualifications, and her practical experience and skill in editing and writing. Within 24 hours she was offered the position.

*I could not have done this without the portfolio! Every day I wake up and pinch myself ... I cannot believe it ... I am working with authors and being paid to go to book launches!*

A year later she is taking courses related to book publishing and has received a promotion to Production Editor. She continues to write on her own, and marvels at the amount there is to learn about editing, publishing and writing. She says she may still return to school in a couple of years — but this time she will do so with more confidence and clarity of purpose about what she wants to do next, and build on her growing expertise and experience.

*It helped me to understand that I have real skills that are practical and transferable. I used to think that talking about oneself was boasting and that made me uncomfortable. Now I know how to listen for what the*

*employers are looking for and to assess practically if there is a match between their needs and my skills and competencies.*

There are many more students graduating from universities and colleges than can be absorbed in new jobs. For example, only 46% of jobs in the Canadian labour force in 2000 required all forms of PSE, and an almost equivalent number (43%) of existing jobs required high school or less. “We are clearly *not* now in a position where almost half of jobs require a bachelor’s degree, as the Statistics Canada prediction of 1994 implied.”<sup>84</sup> Even more disturbing is the finding that Canada actually graduated twice as many university students in the 1990s as the number of jobs created during that period that required a university credential. In effect, four times as many college graduates were produced than could be absorbed into jobs. The mismatch between Canada’s expanding post-secondary participation and the realities of the labour force is but one example of how our massive diversion of young people to post-secondary education is not a simple story with a happy ending for all.<sup>85</sup>

Young adults took up to five years longer to make life transitions in 2001 than they did in 1971. A study by Statistics Canada examined five transitions that young people make on their way to adulthood: leaving school, leaving their parents' home, having full-time work, entering relationships and having kids. The study concluded that the transition to adulthood has become elongated and delayed and that young people are taking longer to achieve independence.

A further report confirmed that nearly half (44%), or roughly 4 million, of young adults between the ages of 20 and 29 lived under their parents' roof in 2006. This was a 12% jump since 1986, and a 15% growth from 2001 to 2006.<sup>86</sup> Although the reasons for staying at home are not entirely economic, the report acknowledges that many students are struggling to pay off student loans or struggling to find work that can cover the costs of living independently.

And yet, as Monica Boyd, a professor at the University of Toronto, wryly notes, "People are not looking at this situation with horror, nor are they embracing it. It has become normal." Indeed there are many reasons why young people are prolonging their stay in the parental home; however, it is important to acknowledge that making successful transitions within a reasonable time frame cannot be underestimated for the development of young people.

The portfolio process has proven itself to be a powerful tool for facilitating a wide range of life transitions for recent university graduates, and has demonstrated how it can assist in the important work of mapping out the very challenging school-to-work transition.

## Displaced workers

- 195,000 workers were displaced from processing and manufacturing jobs between 2001 and 2006
- 26,000 workers were displaced from forestry and logging jobs between 2001 and 2006
- 563,000 workers moved to a different province or territory between 2001 and 2006

*I think that what's emerging in this community is a sense of fear now that the mill is finally closed. Really, you'd have to be crazy or have no feelings at all not to sense the fear that's in this town. We've lived here all our lives, and now our livelihood is being taken away. What do you do when you've worked for 15 or 20 years and suddenly you lose your job? Where do you go? Do you leave town or do you stay and tough it out?*

*André*

André has had a long career as a mill worker. However, his career came to a rather unceremonious end when the local mill closed because of the combined forces of increased competition in the wood products industry and a change in corporate ownership. Like most of his co-workers, many with more than 15 years experience working at the mill, André feels unsupported by the company and unprepared for an alternate career. He believes that he requires training in order to obtain new work, but does not have the financial support in order to be able to participate in a training program. He is confused and angry.

*People are saying that their kids are moving. If their kids trained to be a nurse, they move out of the province. If they trained to be a teacher, they move out of the province. Is that what we want to happen to all these small towns in this province? Do we want all of our young people moving away? And if they do move, what do we do — those of us in our 40's and 50's? What skills do we have?*

André defines himself in relation to his work at the mill, which makes it difficult for him to see his skills in light of a different type of occupation. Although he believes that he has many transferable skills, he has no way of articulating them. He requires financial

support for retraining and seeks direction regarding future career choices. Perhaps most importantly, he wants his confidence returned.

Through various PLAR activities, including participating in a portfolio course, counselling seminars, and a workshop at the provincial university regarding advanced standing, André begins to understand how to identify and present his transferable skills. His confidence returns, along with a hope for his and the community's future.

*Well, guess what? We have a lot of skills, as I discovered when I went through this PLAR process with the other guys. We know a lot and we're going to make it. It will not be easy and I am not saying everything will be perfect, but I think we all feel that we have the skills to get through this [mill closure]. We have hope and we have each other.*

The current formal learning system and many of its supports rewards and encourages sequential learning — as if the circumstances of peoples' lives (which are learning experiences) have no bearing on their participation in formal learning. And yet, circumstances intervene — parents get sick, jobs get lost, money is difficult to come by — and these events both encourage and prevent people from participating in formal learning. Workers who have spent many years at the company may find themselves without a job and perhaps lacking the skill sets that could permit them to find other work. If the federal policy framework supported non-sequential learning and informal learning, the harsh realities of unemployment scenarios could be mitigated as workers could participate in sponsored training during the layoff periods and also have their informal learning recognized through PLAR activities long before the layoff occurred.



## CHAPTER FOUR: SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRENDS AND EDUCATION CHALLENGES

### DEMOGRAPHIC AND LABOUR SUPPLY CHALLENGES

The purpose of this chapter is to review evidence on socio-economic trends that impact current and future levels of demand for PLAR services. This analysis contributes to a clearer understanding of the potential contributions of PLAR to wider policy and program initiatives to address labour supply and skills issues across the Canadian economy.

#### **Population growth**

Like most western nations, Canada is experiencing a falling rate of natural population growth. Working with scenarios for low, medium and high growth, a recent Statistics Canada report presented the following outlook:

*Natural increase (births minus deaths) would become negative under all the scenarios ... but at different times. It would happen in 2020 in the low-growth scenario, and much later, in 2046, in the high-growth scenario. In every scenario, migratory increase would sooner or later become Canada's only population growth factor.<sup>87</sup>*

Population change will be driven by trends at both ends of the age spectrum — falling birth rates and rising mortality among older Canadians. However, the expansion of the older segment of the population is particularly significant.

*The aging process has already started, and it will accelerate in 2011, when the first of the large baby boom cohorts will reach the age of 65. Rapid aging is likely to continue until 2031, at which time seniors will make up between 23% and 25% of the total population ... Although Canada's population in 2005 is younger than most populations of G8 countries, it is expected to age more rapidly in the coming years as a direct result of the major baby boom in Canada following the Second World War.<sup>88</sup>*

In its conclusion, the Statistics Canada report identifies key policy challenges related to these demographic trends:

*How can we meet the special and growing needs of an aging population? How can we maintain a large enough working-age population to satisfy labour requirements and foster economic growth? How can we meet the specific needs of regions that are very different demographically? How*

*can we ensure the successful economic and social integration of new immigrants?*<sup>89</sup>

### **Shrinking labour supply**

As the retirement of older workers increasingly outpaces the inflow of young new entrants, the labour supply issue will become more critical. In the Statistics Canada low-growth scenario, the labour force will begin to shrink by 2018, while the medium- and high-growth scenarios indicate modest growth through the 2020s. In every case, immigration will be the most significant source of new labour supply.

In a 2007 conference paper, Hong Qui provides the following perspective on the labour supply issues.<sup>90</sup>

*Research shows that Canada's labour force grew by about 226,000 per year during the last 25 years. This growth will be cut by nearly half to only 123,000 per year during the current decade. To make matters worse, the growth rate will drop to only 42,000 per year during the first half of the next decade. By 2016, the annual growth rate will be near zero.*<sup>91</sup>

In a 2007 conference presentation, the Conference Board's Michael Bloom pointed out that labour force growth will slow drastically beyond 2010 and that key industry sectors have already reached "the point of transition from excess labour supply to excess demand for labour."<sup>92</sup>

Addressing the same issues at a PLA Centre consultation session in Ottawa in February 2008, Dr. Bloom reaffirmed his view that Canada is already facing critical labour shortages, a situation that will become much more serious over the next 10 years. He pointed out that reliance on immigration and technological advances to solve labour market problems will not be sufficient.

*The scale of the problem is too big to be handled by this approach alone and calls for new tools. We would need to go beyond a massive immigration projection of 360,000 newcomers by 2025 ... we actually need 300,000 to 360,000 newcomers per year forever to stay in positive labour numbers!*<sup>93</sup>

### **An older labour force**

In addition to tightening of labour supply, these demographic trends also mean that the workforce is becoming progressively older. Data from the 2006 Census confirms this

trend. In 2006, 15.3% of the total labour force was aged 55 and older compared to 11.7% five years earlier.

As a result, the median age of the labour force surpassed the 40-year mark for the first time; it rose from 39.5 years in 2001 to 41.2 years in 2006. (The median is the point at which half are above and half below.) According to the Census, just over two million individuals aged 55 to 64 were employed in 2006, 43% more than in 2001. At the same time, the overall labour force participation rate for this group increased from 54% to 59.7%.<sup>94</sup>

In an economic environment that demands continuous skills upgrading to support continuous productivity gains, and which will require greater labour mobility across regions and industry sectors, the progressively older profile of the labour force will generate unique challenges. In his 2007 CAPLA Fall Focus presentation, Dr. Bloom pointed to the kinds of interventions that will be needed:

- eliminate ageism;
- modify rigid work schedules;
- encourage skills upgrading;
- create age-friendly workplaces and production processes;
- implement lifelong learning initiatives to rectify the skills obsolescence of older workers;
- provide more training, learning and mentoring for older workers; and
- certify training and learning demonstrated through performance or learning records.<sup>95</sup>

A recent report by the Atlantic Provinces Economic Council (APEC) confirms the need for such supportive interventions and emphasizes the importance of assessing the knowledge and skills that older workers have acquired through work and life experience.

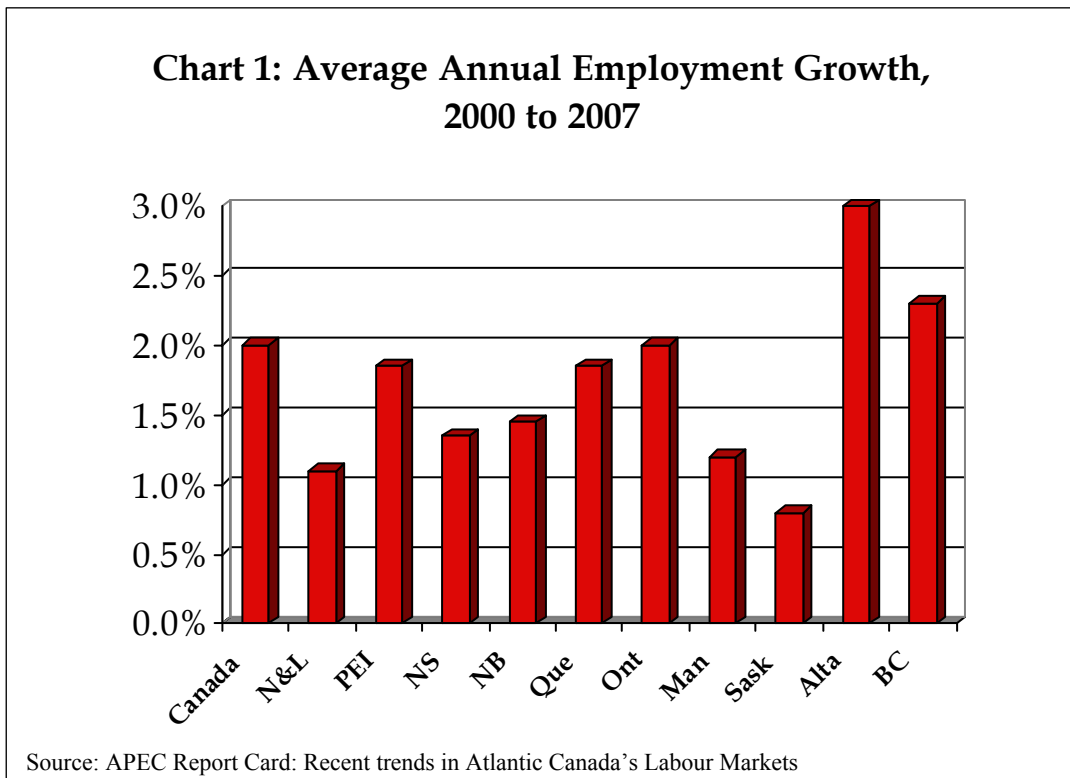
*Expanding labour force participation among older workers will require employers to value the strengths of older workers and utilize their experience, for example, through mentoring or teaching younger workers... While re-training is important to help displaced older workers,*

*it is important to recognize and assess the skills and experience of older workers who may lack a high degree of formal education. Training opportunities also need to be tailored to economic diversification within a community. Internship programs and other opportunities to explore new occupations need to be available for older workers. In addition, would temporary financial incentives help improve re-employment rates for retrained older workers?<sup>96</sup>*

### **Labour market “churning”**

Consideration of labour supply issues begins with the fact that Canada is in a period of sustained economic growth. Census data reveals that from 2001 to 2006, total employment increased by 1.7% per annum, the fastest rate increase among the G7 nations.<sup>97</sup>

However this growth has not been even across industrial sectors and regions. Figure 6, adapted from a recent APEC report, shows average annual employment growth for Canada and the provinces over the 2000–2007 period.<sup>98</sup> It illustrates a dramatic pattern where employment growth is increasingly concentrated in the west, and seven provinces had growth rates below the national average.



**Figure 6: Average Annual Employment Growth, 2000 to 2007**

These regional trends reflect changes in labour demand by industry sector. Employment in mining and oil and gas extraction grew by an annual average of 7.5%, four times the national average. Alberta accounted for 70% of the employment growth in this industry. Similarly, job growth in the construction sector averaged 4.5% per year, with much of this expansion centred in Ontario. Retail sector employment increased by 1.8% per year. On the negative side, manufacturing had a 1.4% decline per year, the greatest impacts again felt in Ontario.

The fastest growing occupations from 2001 to 2006 were those related to the construction industry, where trades helpers and labourers increased by 57%. There was significant shedding of jobs for textile and steel worker occupations.

According to Census data on labour mobility, from 2001 to 2006, 563,000 workers moved to a different province or territory. Predictably interprovincial mobility was greatest for workers in mining and oil and gas extraction, but was also relatively high in public administration.

This data describes a labour market that is increasingly subject to “churning” as workers move from one industry sector to another, from one occupational field to another, and from one region to another in response to large-scale shifts in economic conditions. Along with the demographic changes discussed above, the western energy boom, the high Canadian dollar, the dynamic housing market, the Vancouver Olympics and other such macro-level phenomena have created a situation of significant and somewhat contradictory labour market dynamism in Canada. New approaches are needed to facilitate and support transitions across occupations and industry sectors as well as inter-regionally.

### **Skills shortages**

In many industry sectors the rate of expansion combined with demographic shifts is creating critical shortages for skilled and qualified workers. The following are examples from different industry sectors:

- The Construction Sector Council estimates that in Ontario alone, 85,000 new skilled construction workers will be needed over the next nine years, with 50,000 of those required just to replace retirees.<sup>99</sup>

- The sector council for the Canadian truck transportation industry reports that the shortage of qualified drivers represents a major concern for trucking employers in Canada. In a recent survey, 60% of employers reported that driver shortages were one of the top two concerns in their organizations. The 2006 Class 1/A driver vacancy rate was 12.3%, increasing from 9.6% in the 2002.<sup>100</sup>
- The sector council for the agriculture industry reports that “according to the 2001 Census of Agriculture the average age of a Canadian male farmer is 51.8 years and 50.0 years for a female farmer. The aging agricultural workforce has led to labour shortages in the harvest and seasonal labour sectors, increased the need for succession and transfer planning, and increased the need to attract a younger workforce to the industry.”<sup>101</sup>
- The sector council for the automotive service industry reports that their sector “will experience ... cumulative shortages over the next ten years [of] 43,700 to 77,150 positions. Labour shortages are already widespread across the sector, as almost one-half of employers reported that the lack of qualified staff was affecting the profitability of their organization.”<sup>102</sup>
- The sector council for the tourism industry in Canada reports the following: “the tourism industry in Canada has begun to experience the labour shortages predicted [in previous reports] ... Retiring “baby-boomers” and the shrinking pool of youth entering the labour force will increasingly affect the ability of Canadian businesses to remain competitive ... As competition increases for workers and tourism continues to grow in Canada, it will become more and more challenging to have an adequate labour supply for the tourism sector.”<sup>103</sup>

These are a few of many sectors that report increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining the skilled workers they need. The combined impacts of rising skill requirements in the workplace with the accelerating retirement of skilled and experienced older workers mean that, perhaps for the first time since the World War II period, the lack of human resources is widely identified as the major threat to business viability in many sectors.

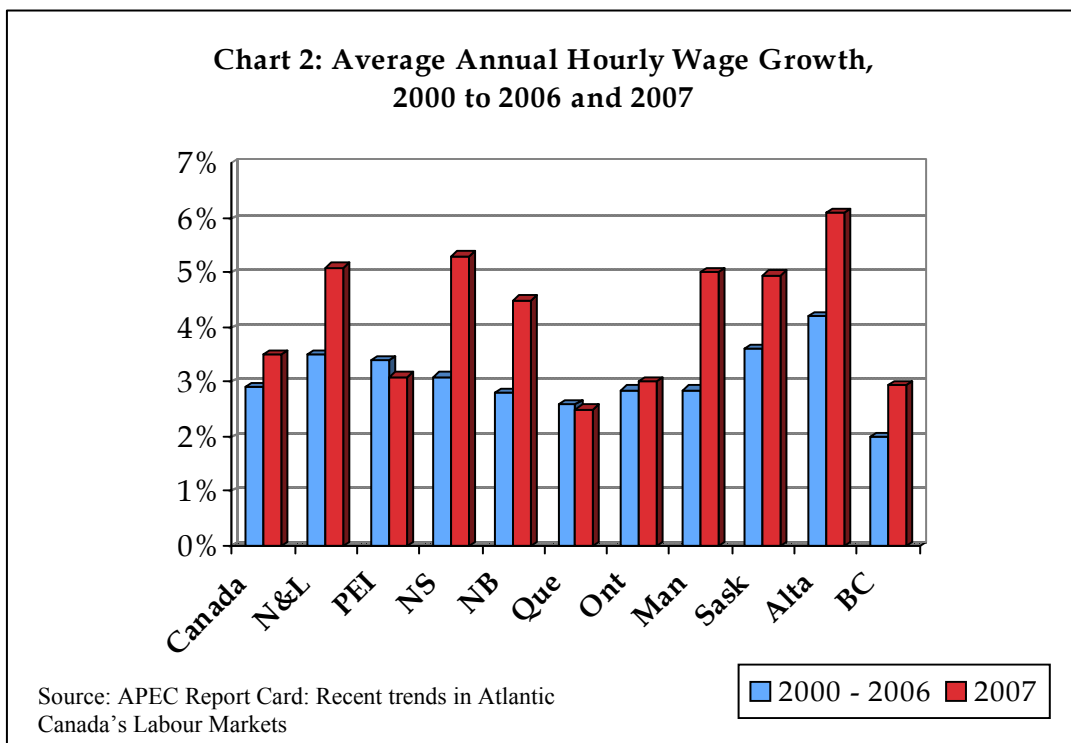
### **Rising wage rates**

After an extended period of relative stability, wage rates are beginning to reflect the growing demand pressures. Figure 7 shows annual rates of growth in average hourly wage rates for Canada and the provinces over the 2000–2006 period and in 2007 alone.<sup>104</sup>

Two important trends are sharply evident in this graph: the strong regional variations and the major rise in wage levels in the most recent year (2007). Regarding the former, it is

striking that significant wage growth is evident in the provinces of greatest economic expansion, notably Alberta, and in Atlantic provinces that have traditionally had lower wages overall and are now struggling to retain labour supply in the face of the strong pull from the west.

In an environment of shrinking labour supply, employers are looking to increase productivity to offset rising labour costs. We can therefore predict greater employer interest in training, both to make jobs more attractive and to support employer investments in new technologies and other means to achieve productivity growth.



**Figure 7: Average Annual Hourly Wage Growth, 2000 to 2006 and 2007**

Referring to the Atlantic region specifically, the APEC report articulates the emerging public policy and business management challenge across Canada:

*Economic restructuring will continue to influence the Atlantic economy in the coming years as firms respond to a more competitive global marketplace and to local labour supply challenges. Labour force strategies in the region will need to respond to changing demands as new industries emerge and the skill requirements of existing industries evolve.*

*In particular, greater emphasis must be placed on training as employers strive to secure the skills and competencies they need to succeed and as the region seeks to develop more higher-paying but higher-skill jobs.<sup>105</sup>*

### **Professionalization of unregulated occupations**

A significant proportion of the Canadian labour force is employed in occupations that are not subject to specialized education and training requirements or licensing standards.

Industries that depend heavily on such occupations include:

- residential construction;
- transportation and warehousing;
- accommodations, food services and other sub-sectors relevant to the tourism, recreation and culture sectors;
- the voluntary sector (with 1.2 million paid employees);
- agriculture, fisheries and forestry;
- the retail services sector; and
- many areas of the public service.

Many employers in these sectors have traditionally relied on a readily available population of relatively low-skilled and low-paid workers. They are now struggling to adapt to a very different labour market environment with rising retirement rates and the resistance of young people to these kinds of jobs. While these industries continue to be of great strategic importance to the Canadian economy, and several are experiencing significant growth, employers now need to upgrade current workers and offer more attractive careers to potential new entrants.

Sector councils and related organizations have provided leadership and direction in meeting these challenges in several key industry sectors. Their activities often include professionalization programs to develop and implement formal training requirements and certification or licensing regimes. Examples include:

- The sector council for the Canadian tourism industry has created Canadian certification standards for 27 specialized occupations across the sector.<sup>106</sup>



- Industry groups are working with provincial government regulators and apprenticeship boards in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Nova Scotia to introduce new licensing standards for residential construction contractors and to develop professional certification for trade specializations.<sup>107</sup>
- In the fishing industry, regional certification boards have established mandatory professional standards and licensing regimes in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. British Columbia has a voluntary certification regime.<sup>108</sup>
- The sector council for truck transportation has created a pan-Canadian Professional Driver Recognition Program to certify drivers under the new National Occupational Standards for Professional Drivers.<sup>109</sup>
- The national sector council for the automotive service industry has developed competency and training standards for 34 sub-occupations in the industry, and industry organizations have introduced new certification regimes for key sub-trades in the in several regions across Canada.<sup>110</sup>

The experience to date shows that these initiatives can generate important benefits in making occupations more attractive to new entrants, aligning training programs with industry needs, building partnerships with training providers, and promoting a training culture in sectors that have not had such traditions. One of the main constraints, however, is resistance from workers already in the industry. They often have wide experience and advanced competencies learned on the job but fear that such professionalization programs may force them to go “back to school.” These experienced workers typically look for assurances that their knowledge and skills in the industry will be recognized and formally credited.

### **Integration of new Canadians**

In 2006, 3.6 million members of the Canadian labour force — representing 21.2% of the total — were foreign-born. This proportion was up only slightly from 19.9% in 2001. Comparison of employment rates for new Canadians and Canadian-born workers shows that, despite signs of improvement, there are significant barriers to the integration of immigrant workers. The employment rate for core working-age immigrants increased from 76.4% in 2001 to 77.5% in 2006. However, the rate for their Canadian-born counterparts was 82.4% in 2006.<sup>111</sup>

Among recent immigrants (arriving in Canada between 2001 and 2006), the employment rate for core working-age people was 67%, up 3.6 points over 2001. However there remains a 15.4% gap in employment rates between recent immigrants and Canadian-born workers.<sup>112</sup> Immigrant women face particular challenges: their employment rate was 56.8% compared to 78.5% for their Canadian-born counterparts.

As Canada looks increasingly to immigration to solve labour supply problems, much more attention will be given to ways to improve and accelerate the integration of foreign-born workers. Hong Qui examines the experience in Canada in using immigration policy to address labour shortage issues and draws the conclusion that, given the potential scale of Canada's labour supply needs and the complexities of finding and integrating foreign workers, the "immigration solution" may not be straightforward.

*Overall, the impact on labour shortage generated by immigration policy is limited and the final result is mixed depending on the strength of other determinants and the interactions among policy, immigrants and labour markets. However, improvements of immigration policy will increase both the quality and the quantity of labour supply.<sup>113</sup>*

A recent report by the Construction Sector Council (CSC) identifies specific ways in which industry does not take full advantage of the knowledge and skills of new Canadian workers. Their study found that...

*... foreign-trained workers are at a disadvantage because of language barriers, insufficient documentation, and lack of knowledge about Canadian health and safety regulations, building codes, and other workplace requirements. 'Many foreign-trained workers are falling through the cracks when it comes to skill assessment,' says CSC Executive Director George Gritziotis, 'and that translates into a loss of qualified labour at a time when some regions and sectors of the industry need it more than ever.'<sup>114</sup>*

New approaches are needed to ensure that immigrants are able to transfer their competencies and qualifications to Canadian work environments so that their lives improve and that labour supply needs are met. There is already competition among industrialized nations to attract skilled immigrants — and the ability to find rewarding employment suitable to qualifications will be a key factor.

## **Over-qualification and under-utilization of skills**

Labour markets are not always efficient in matching workers and their skills with appropriate jobs. A study for Statistics Canada that focused on employment situations for university graduates in Canada provides important insights into the problem of over-qualification (or under-employment relative to qualifications).<sup>115</sup> As Statistics Canada puts it:

*Over-qualification is an important issue for employees, employers and policy makers. On a personal level, it has a psychological dimension. Under-employed university grads often experience the frustration of lower earnings and job dissatisfaction. For the nation as a whole, it represents an under-utilization of human capital. According to the study, the number of university-educated workers who were over-qualified for their job increased by nearly one-third between 1993 and 2001. An estimated 331,100 workers had experienced this situation at some point in 2001, up from 251,600 in 1993. These people accounted for about one-fifth (19%) of all the university-educated people in the work force in 2001, up marginally from 18% in 1993.*<sup>116</sup>

The study found that younger workers just out of university were most likely to be working in a situation for which they were over-qualified, but they tended to do so for relatively limited periods. Those who remained in these positions for extended periods found it increasingly difficult to escape them.

*Once workers were in a situation where they were over-qualified, the older workers showed a tendency to stay there. In other words, the incidence of being over-qualified 100% of the time increased with age.*<sup>117</sup>

This issue of over-qualification is particularly pressing for new Canadians.

*The study also showed that recent immigrants, those in Canada for 10 years or less, had a higher incidence of over-qualification than their Canadian-born counterparts. More than one-half (52%) of recent immigrants with a university degree worked in a job requiring only high school education at some point during the six-year period. This was almost twice the proportion of 28% among their Canadian-born counterparts. In addition, they were also twice as likely to stay over-qualified 100% of the time. Much of this problem may have to do with recognition of their foreign educational credentials and their workplace experience.*<sup>118</sup>

Interestingly, the study found no significant differences in the rate of occurrence of over-qualification by gender, region or industry sector in Canada. Factors that did make measurable differences were unionization and size of firm, with non-unionized workers and those in smaller firms being more likely to be overqualified for their jobs.

This study looked only at university graduates. There are indications from other research that workers with various qualifications can actually be “de-skilled” in work situations for which they are initially over-qualified. In relation to literacy skills, for example, the 2003 Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL)<sup>119</sup> survey found that 48% of respondents with high school diplomas scored below Level 3 literacy skills, as did 36% of college graduates and 22% of university graduates.<sup>120</sup> In a similar vein, Willms and Murray compared results from the 1994 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) study and the 2003 ALL survey and found that, on average, Canadians lose skills over their lifetime equivalent to one year of schooling.<sup>121</sup> Their findings also indicated that the level of reading engagement at work and participation in further education and training had positive impacts equivalent to completing university. They concluded that Canadians’ skills are widely under-employed in the economy and that many adults actually lose essential skills on the job.

It is important to note that, in the context of widespread policy concern about skills gaps and the need for workforce upgrading, there is convincing evidence that employers do not always take full and effective advantage of the competencies available to them among their employees.

## **LITERACY AND EDUCATION/TRAINING CHALLENGES**

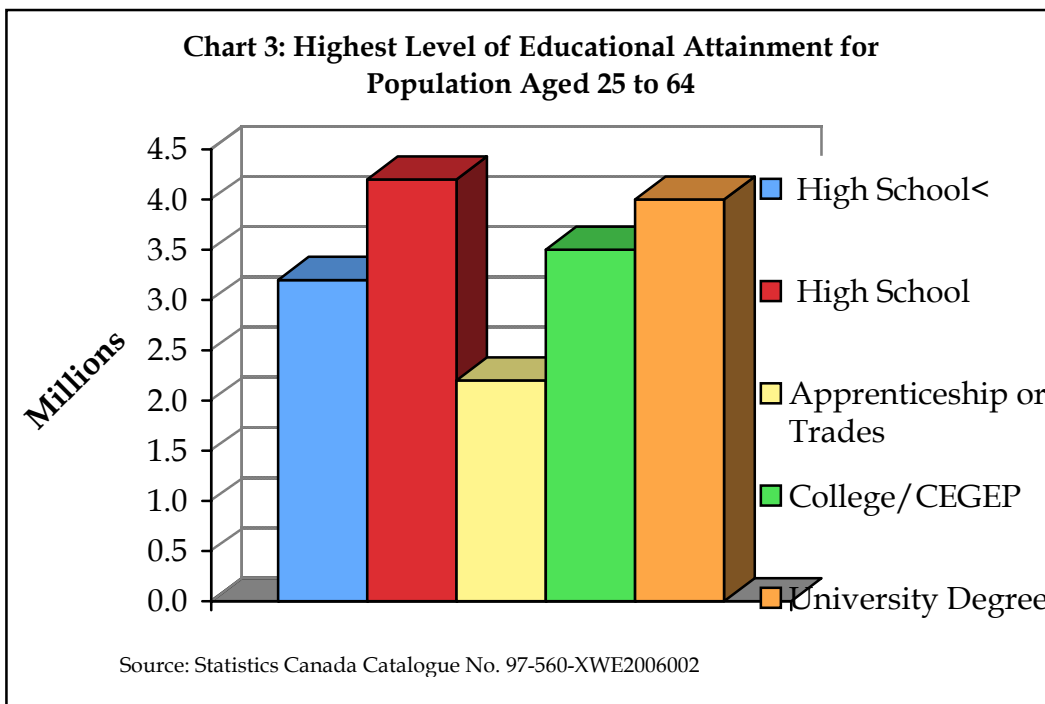
In this section we look at the education levels of working-age adults, participation in education and training, and information on the challenges associated with literacy and essential skills deficits in Canada.

### **Levels of formal education and training**

Recently available information from the 2006 Census provides an up-to-date picture of the levels of formal education and training achieved by working-age adults in Canada.

There are 17.4 million people between the ages of 25 and 64 who represent the working age population in Canada. Figure 8 illustrates the characteristics of this population in terms of highest levels of educational attainment in 2006.<sup>122</sup>

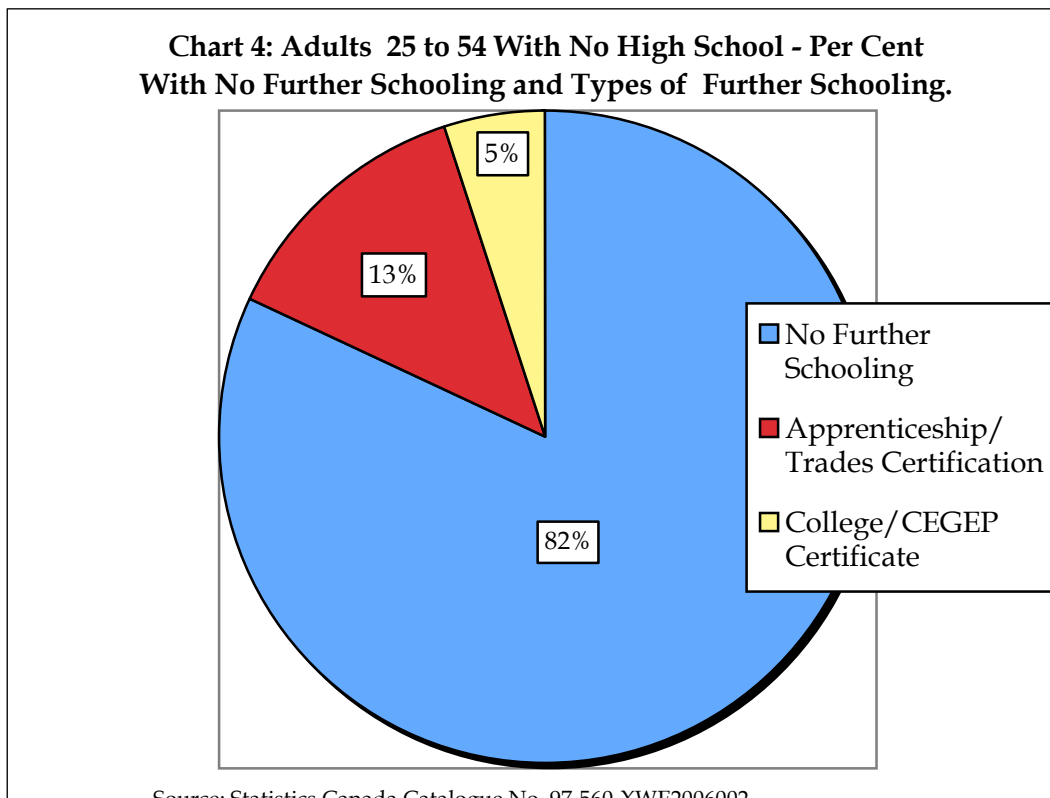
Within the 25 to 64 age group, some 3.3 million Canadians have not completed high school and 4.2 million have high school only. These two groups together represent 42% of the core labour force population.



**Figure 8: Highest Level of Educational Attainment for Population Aged 25 to 64**

As Figure 9 indicates, some adults without high school have achieved formal certification from the trades training and apprenticeship systems or from college/CEGEP programs.

It is important to note, however, that 2.7 million adults who have not completed high school — 82% of the population aged 25 to 64 — have not benefited from such training and certification. This speaks to the extent to which access to further education and training is constrained by lack of high school education, but also to the limited success of the major institutional training programs in serving adults with limited schooling.



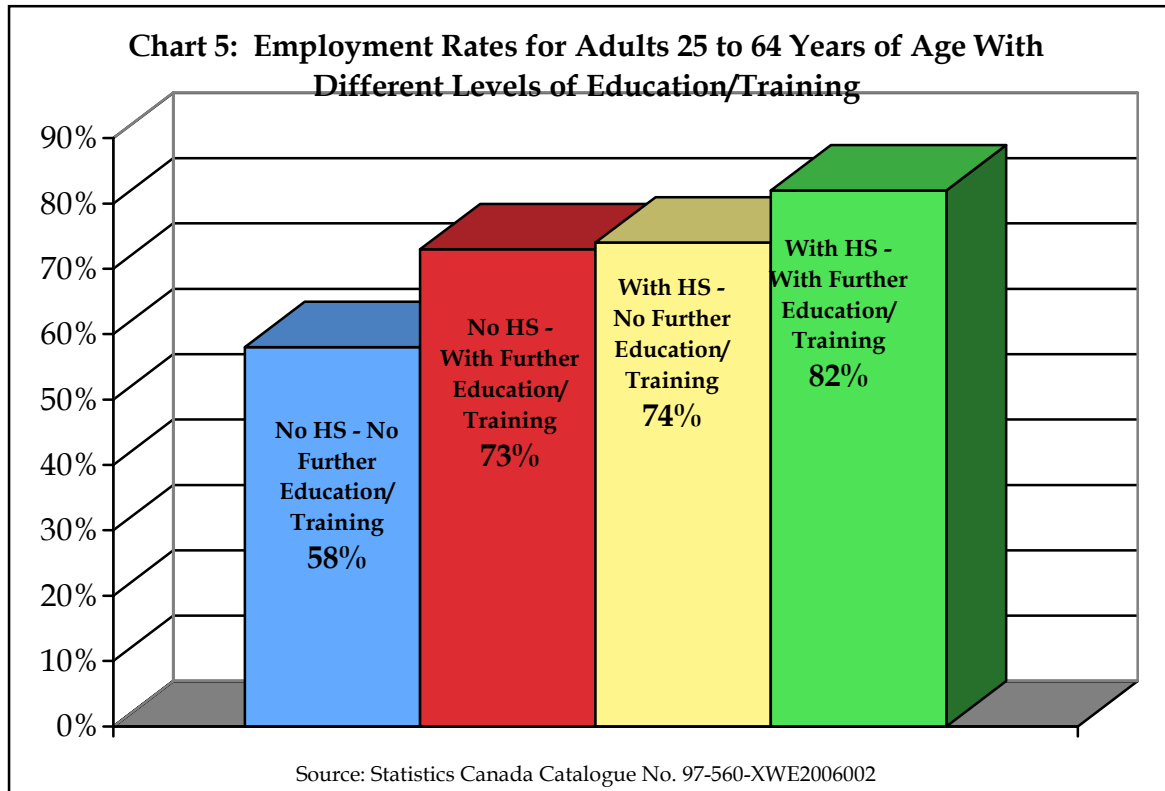
**Figure 9: Adults 25 to 54 With No High School – Per Cent With No Further Schooling and Types of Further Schooling**

The evidence is convincing that high school education and basic training are fundamental determinants of labour market outcomes. Figure 10 illustrates the employment rates (i.e., current employed as a percentage of total population) in 2006 for four sub-populations of adults aged 25 to 64:

- no high school and no further formal education or training (2.7 million adults);
- no high school but some further formal education or training (.6 million adults);
- with high school and no further formal education or training (4.2 million adults); and,
- with high school and some further formal education or training (10.0 million adults).

The employment rate for all Canadians aged 25 to 64 in 2006 was 76%. The rate for the 2.7 million adults without high school or any further education or training was 58%, while for those with some education or training it jumped to 73%. There is another big increment to 82% for adults with high school complete and any form of further formal

education or training. Interestingly, the data suggests that adults with no high school but some form of formal training have employment outcomes almost equal to those with high school completed but no further training.

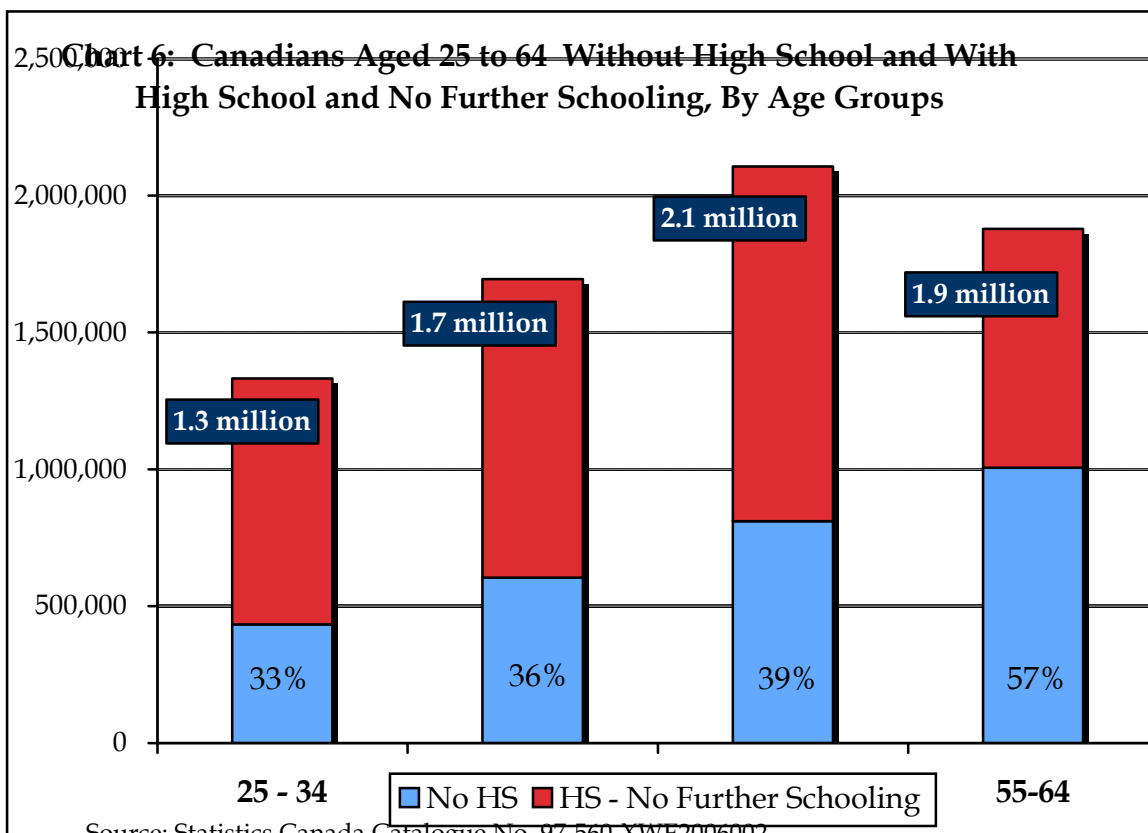


**Figure 10: Employment Rates for Adults 25 to 64 Years of Age With Different Levels of Education/Training**

Looking at the seven million adults in Canada who do not have high school completed or have high school and no further education or training, Figure 11 breaks down this population into four age groups.

This information tells us that the problem of inadequate basic education is more serious for older Canadians, but not dramatically so. Out of the seven million adults with high school only or less, four million (57%) are 45 to 64 years of age. However, there are still three million younger people (25 to 44 years) who face these same barriers. High school completion rates have clearly improved — 33% of the 25 to 34 age group did not

complete high school compared to 57% of the 55 to 64 age group — but the ratios do not shift dramatically for the three younger cohorts (from 33% to 39%).



**Figure 11: Canadians Aged 25 to 64 Without High School and With High School and No Further Schooling, By Age Groups**

In summary, this information from the 2006 Census confirms the importance of basic education and training to labour market success and provides an up-to-date picture of the numbers of working-age Canadians who might benefit from educational upgrading and training support. The data also suggests that our education and training institutions have not effectively addressed the needs of over seven million working-age people in Canada with limited basic education.

### **Adult participation in education and training**

This analysis begins with the understanding that if Canada is to meet current global competition and productivity challenges, and if workers are to cope with the industrial and occupational transitions that many now face, everyone — regardless of their prior



educational attainment and qualifications — will need to enhance their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. The information reviewed above confirms that a substantial portion of the population of working-age adults in Canada may lack the education and training foundations to participate effectively in lifelong learning activities.

In this section we review key research findings on participation by working-age adults in education and training activities.<sup>123</sup> Our purpose is to determine whether current levels of adult education and training provision in Canada are adequate to meet labour market needs now and in the future. In this discussion we consider adult participation in three broad fields of learning programs or activities:

- formal education — education and training programs, delivered by dedicated educational institutions, that result in widely recognized credits, certifications, degrees or other credentials, including adult high schools, community colleges, CEGEPS, universities and apprenticeship programs;
- non-formal education — organized education and training programs, delivered by professional educators, that do not normally result in widely recognized credits, certifications, degrees or other credentials, including many continuing education programs, essential skills training programs and some workplace education activities; and
- informal learning — learning activities that take place in settings or through programs where education and training are not primary purposes, including many forms of on-the-job mentoring and training, learning through involvement in voluntary sector and community activities, and self-directed learning activities.

The most substantial research now available, the 2003 ALL survey, suggests that an estimated 49% of Canadians aged 16 to 65 (excluding full-time students under 25 years of age) typically participate in formal courses, private lessons, correspondence courses, workshops, on-the-job-training, apprenticeship training, arts, crafts, recreation courses and other organized training or education programs.<sup>124</sup> The findings indicate that in 2002, some three million adults took courses as part of formal degree or certification programs, while 4.2 million participated in organized activities not leading to formal credentials. Another 2.2 million were involved in organized learning activities not fitting into the above two categories. By implication, half of working-age adult Canadians not already in school — nearly 10 million people — did not participate in any such formal or non-formal education and training activities.

The Statistics Canada 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey (AETS) revealed that about 4.8 million Canadians aged 25 to 64 participated in job-related training programs.<sup>125</sup> The survey found that close to half of such training did not result in formal certification, and only 15% was aimed at essential skills upgrading.<sup>126</sup> Over 40% of work-related training courses were provided by employers, 6% by universities and 4% by colleges. However, more than half of all workers who participated in work-related training were not supported by their employers.

Participation in job-related training appears to be greatest among the younger, better-educated and better-paid members of the workforce, and employer-supported training appears to be heavily skewed toward higher paid, better-educated workers. Participation rate for employee training is 50% in the public sector, compared to 38% in the private sector.

Table 1 summarizes findings from the AETS on job-related training in Canada.

<b>TABLE 1: PARTICIPATION IN JOB-RELATED TRAINING BY AGE, EDUCATION AND INCOME, 2002</b>		
	<b>Participation Rate: Overall</b>	<b>Participation Rate: Employer-supported</b>
<b>Age</b>		
25–34	41.5%	29.0%
35–44	34.6%	25.9%
45–54	33.8%	24.5%
55–64	22.9%	15.6%
<b>Education</b>		
High school or less	17.9%	13.0%
Some post-secondary	38.3%	25.8%
Post-secondary certificate or diploma	38.1%	28.1%
University degree	51.7%	36.7%
<b>Income</b>		
\$15–30,000	14.4%	8.9%
\$30–50,000	20.1%	19.0%
Over \$50,000	57.1%	65.5%

Working with the AETS data, Zhang and Palameta also found that younger workers (17 to 34) and single workers are more likely than older, married or divorced workers to

participate in adult education programs leading to formal credentials.<sup>127</sup> Workers with less than high school education are less likely to take part than workers with high school or higher education.

Estimates of overall participation rates in formal work-related training range from 35% (AETS survey, 2003) to 50% (WALL survey, 2004<sup>128</sup>) to 55% (WES survey, 2004<sup>129</sup>). WES found that 100% of large firms (500 or more employees) provided training compared to just half of firms with fewer than 20 employees.

Another important form of formal work-related training is apprenticeship. There are issues here with the extent to which the system is meeting needs for qualified trades persons and other skilled technical workers. Over the 1994–2004 period, the number of registered apprentices in Canada grew by 60%, but the number who completed their journeyman certification was up only 17%.<sup>130</sup> The evidence suggests that while industry supports apprenticeship as perhaps the most effective way to train workers in many trades occupations, the system is simply not generating the numbers of qualified workers needed. Innovations are required to make apprenticeship more accessible and sustainable for much larger numbers of employers and trainees.

As discussed above, some four million Canadians between 25 and 64 do not have a high school diploma. The evidence suggests that only limited numbers from this population currently engage in adult education programs aimed at achieving high school credentials. Table 2 provides the following estimates of participation levels in such programs.<sup>131</sup>

<b>TABLE 2: ADULT HIGH SCHOOL PARTICIPATION</b>	
<b>Option</b>	<b>Participants</b>
Regular or adult high school diplomas or college academic upgrading	172,835
Literacy and basic skills upgrading	48,344
GED programs	8,617
Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES)	5,851
<b>Total</b>	<b>235,647</b>

Source: Myers and de Broucker

From this data it can be estimated that only about 6.5% of the 25 to 64 age group lacking a high school education participated in such programs.

Regarding non-formal education, the 2004 WALL survey found that about 17% of adults 18 and over took non-credit courses in the previous 12 months, while another 6% took both credit and non-credit courses.<sup>132</sup> This estimate would suggest that about four million Canadian adults took non-credit courses in 2003. Given that community colleges served only about 500,000 non-credit students, and universities a much smaller number, it is clear that most non-credit adult learning took place outside the major post-secondary institutions.

### **Informal learning**

The research findings on informal learning paint a very different picture from what has been described thus far. Estimates of adult participation rates for adults in all forms of informal learning activities — in the workplace, the community and at home — exceed 90% (ALL and WALL). The 2004 WALL survey found that 87% of the employed labour force participated in job-related informal training, and some 94% initiated other concerted learning activities on their own or with family or community members. Most of the same people who reported not having taken courses or participated in organized educational activities of any kind were able to identify other activities with significant learning impacts.

The important implication of these findings is that the non-participation of many adults in formal and non-formal education and training is not due to a lack of interest or motivation to learn. The evidence is clear that nearly all adults are active learners in certain settings and under particular circumstances. By the same token, the deficits (lack of high school, limited literacy skills, etc.) that may block them from access to organized education and training activities do not appear to constrain their learning in other settings where they are perhaps more comfortable and experience greater confidence and control.

Seen from this perspective, the core requirements to improve participation in organized education and training in the workplace and elsewhere are to provide attractive and relevant opportunities, to remove barriers, and to offer encouragement and respect for the capacities and prior accomplishments of the learners. It is, in effect, the opposite of the traditional deficit-based approach, which focuses primarily on remediation of a lack of credentials and limited literacy and essential skills.

## **International comparisons**

It is clear that while many industrialized nations face similar challenges as Canada in terms of low adult literacy levels and inadequate work-related training, some are doing better than others in addressing these issues. Some experts suggest that Canada is, in fact, falling behind in the use of education and training to support improvements in competitiveness and productivity. In a 2007 report, Rubenson, Desjardins and Yoon use the 2003 ALL survey data to compare Canada's performance in training with Switzerland, Norway and the United States, and raise concerns about the inclusiveness of the Canadian adult learning system, participation rates among vulnerable groups, and the need to strengthen public policy on adult learning.

*First, ... not only do Canadians report a somewhat lower participation rate than citizens in the three other ALL countries that were included in this study, but they also spend less time on their studies. Second, the Canadian figures on participation in courses and/or programmes have not improved between the 1994 IALS and 2003 ALL survey periods. We can therefore conclude that despite concerns about skill shortages in an evolving knowledge-based economy, there has been very little expansion in organized forms of adult learning in Canada.<sup>133</sup>*

The authors emphasize strongly the importance of targeting new interventions in adult education and training on populations with weak educational foundations, and point to the relative successes of other countries in meeting this particular challenge.

*While all countries have problems recruiting adults with weak foundation skills (e.g., low literacy skills) into organized forms of adult learning, it is important to note that there are significant differences in participation patterns among countries. It is therefore important to reflect on why vulnerable groups like immigrants, the unemployed and those with a low educational attainment are doing substantially better in Norway, for example, than similar groups in Canada. The comparatively successful recruitment of the low educated in Norway, as well as in other Nordic countries, could be a result of having made targeted public funding available for recruiting disadvantaged groups.<sup>134</sup>*

The general lesson drawn by these authors is that significant success in the expansion of adult learning and participation will come only when such outcomes become public policy priorities and appropriate investments follow.

### **Post-secondary education enrolment trends**

One important implication of the demographic trends discussed above is that demand for access to PSE (university and college) programs may begin to decline in the foreseeable future. Figure 12 describes actual and projected changes in the size of that population over the 1991–2031 period.<sup>135</sup>

The sustained growth of the 17 to 29 cohort in Canada since 1996 will reach its peak in 2014, to be followed by up to 12 years of gradual decline. Hango and de Broucker generate three scenarios for post-secondary enrolment in Canada.

- Current participation rates remain more or less constant and total full-time post-secondary enrolment grows steadily until 2012/2013 to reach close to 1.3 million students, up about 50,000 over current levels. After that, total PSE student population will decline by 9% by 2025/2026. The peak year for new entrants to PSE will be 2009/2010. Since participation rates are higher in university than in college, the fall in enrolment numbers will be higher at the university level but colleges will follow the same overall pattern.<sup>136</sup>
- Assuming continuing increases in PSE participation rates, the fall in the size of the core PSE age group will be somewhat offset by larger proportions of this population enrolling. The analysis would mean growth in PSE enrolment until 2016/2017, and then a gradual decline in enrolment levels across the population.
- If the participation rate for males (currently 11.4% in university, 8% in colleges) catches up with females (currently 15.3% in university, 9.2% in colleges), total PSE enrolments may increase to approximately 1.65 million in 2016/2017 and then level off, declining by 90,000 by 2030/2031. The decline would be more pronounced for university enrolment.<sup>137</sup>

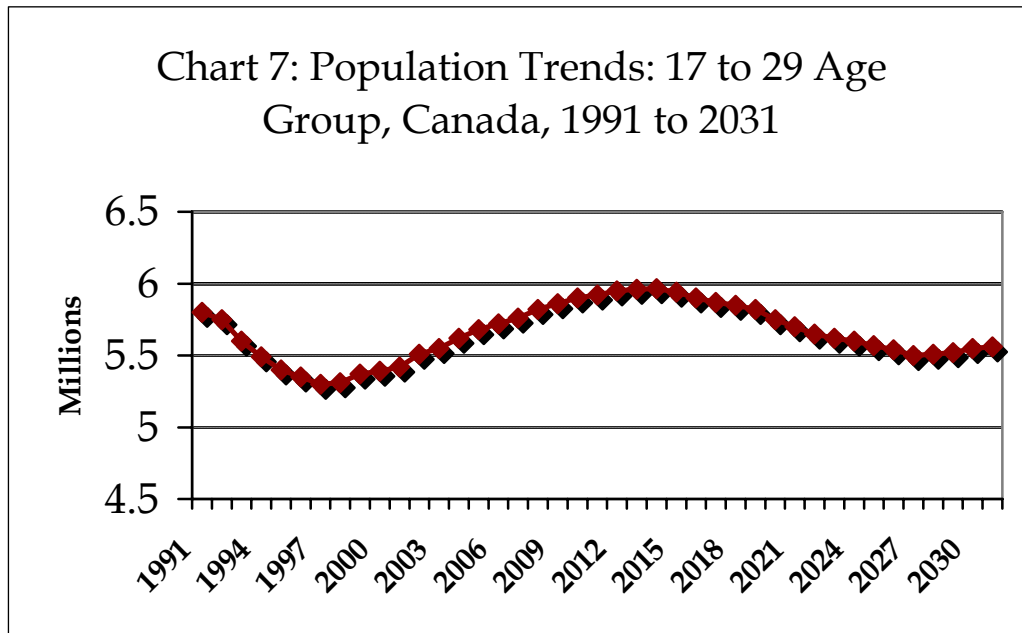


Figure 12: Population Trends; 17 to 29 Age Group, Canada, 1991 to 2031

All three scenarios anticipate a levelling off in demand for access to university and college education from the core population of young adults who currently make up more than 90% of the full-time PSE student population.

In light of these trends, Hango and de Broucker point to possibilities for innovative approaches to address the needs of workplace education and to draw non-traditional learner populations into PSE programs.

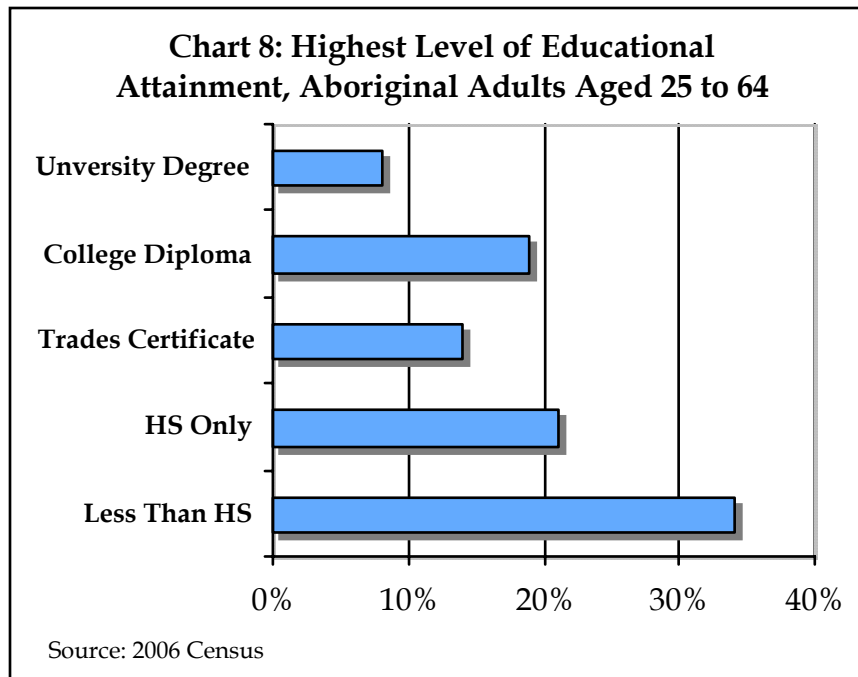
*New post-secondary educational opportunities, likely as a result of added pressure on the system, may be created. For example, new institutions may be opened in response to labour market demands, while distance learning may become a more attractive option for populations separated geographically from conventional educational institutions. Moreover, the importance of additional levels of training may lead to a greater number of Canadians participating in lifelong learning. These potential factors would affect future educational demand and supply as well as reshape the age profile of future populations of Canadian students.<sup>138</sup>*

Despite predictions to the contrary, however, the median age of university undergraduates has risen only slightly over the past 10 years or more, and provision for part-time and continuing education has diminished at the university level. There do seem to be indications, given current labour market trends, that the community college is appealing to increasing numbers of high school graduates as a more direct route to

employment opportunities. In fact, more university graduates seem to be utilizing community college programs as well.<sup>139</sup>

### Aboriginal learners

In the 2006 Census, over half-a-million adults aged 25 to 64 identified themselves as Aboriginal. Figure 13 describes levels of educational attainment in this population.<sup>140</sup>



**Figure 13: Highest Level of Educational Attainment, Aboriginal Adults Aged 25 to 64**

There are indications of real progress in educational attainment for Aboriginal peoples in Canada. However, in 2006 just over one-third of this population had completed high school — a significant decrease from the 45% reported in the 1996 Census. Over 40% had post-secondary qualifications in 2006.

Reflecting to some extent these educational levels, the employment rate among Aboriginal Canadians aged 25 to 54 in 2006 was 66%, compared to 82% for their non-Aboriginal peers.

Essential skills are a critical issue for Aboriginal peoples. The 2003 ALL survey found that more than 60% of the urban Aboriginal population in Manitoba and Saskatchewan scored below Level 3, compared to 45% of the non-Aboriginal population in Manitoba



and 39% in Saskatchewan. Over 50% of the Aboriginal population in Yukon, 69% in the Northwest Territories and 88% in Nunavut were below Level 3.

Compared to the Canadian population as a whole, the Aboriginal population is significantly younger. Figure 14 compares age groups for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

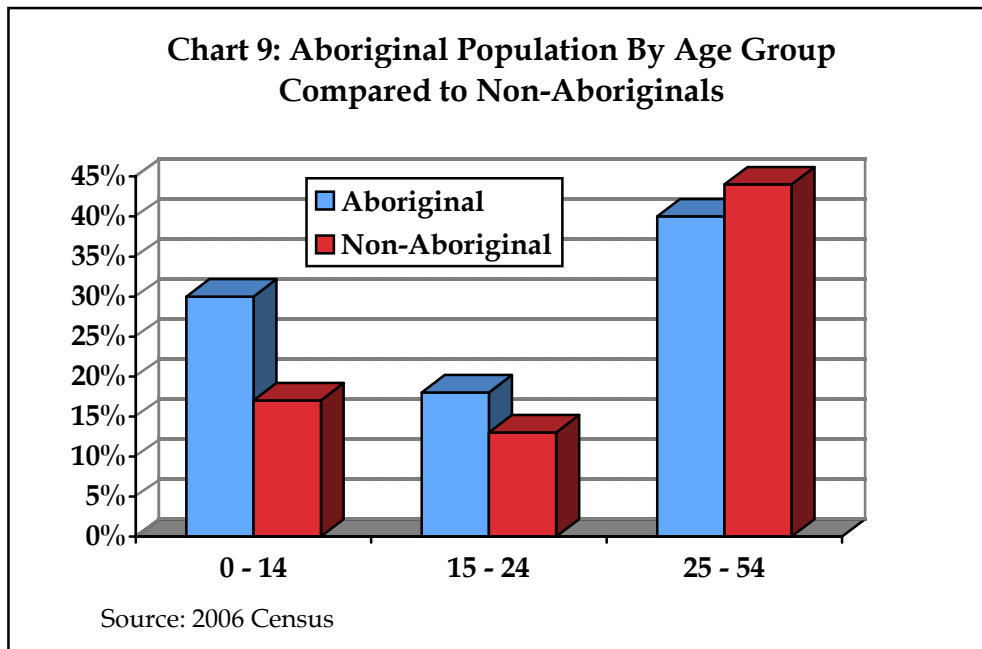


Figure 14: Aboriginal Population By Age Group Compared to Non-Aboriginals

In 2006, some 48% of the nearly 1.2 million Aboriginal Canadians were under the age of 25 as compared to 30% for non-Aboriginals.

A recent report by the Centre for the Study of Living Standards presents that improvements in education for Aboriginal peoples is of great importance for enhanced productivity and labour growth in Canada.<sup>141</sup> It points to the potential for an additional \$71 billion in GDP by 2017 if education achievement for Aboriginal Canadians is to be brought up to the same levels as the rest of the population. The authors conclude that this is an economic and social development opportunity that Canada cannot afford to pass by.

*Investing in disadvantaged young people is one of the rare public policies with no equity–efficiency trade-off. This report estimates the potential*

*benefit for the Canadian economy of increasing the educational attainment level of Aboriginal Canadians. We find that increasing the number of Aboriginals who complete high school is a low-hanging fruit with significant and far-reaching economic and social benefits for Canadians. Not only would it significantly contribute to increasing the personal well-being of Aboriginal Canadians, but it would also contribute somewhat to alleviating two of the most pressing challenges facing the Canadian economy: slower labour force growth and lackluster labour productivity growth.<sup>142</sup>*

We suggest that this same argument would apply to the potential benefits of expanded educational participation by adult Aboriginals.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this section we have reviewed information on the major demographic and labour supply challenges facing Canada, including the education-level characteristics of the labour force, and have looked at current rates for participation in education and training by working-age Canadians.

In terms of population and labour supply trends, the following basic factors emerge:

- Demographic trends will lead to serious tightening of the labour supply in Canada.
- The labour force will be progressively older.
- The labour market is demanding enhanced qualifications and higher skill levels in many sectors to support productivity gains and to make occupations more attractive to new entrants.
- Wage levels will trend upward in response to labour supply pressures and the increasing emphasis on skills.
- There will be greater “churning” in the labour market as increasing numbers of workers make changes in industry sectors, occupations and geographical location in response to macro-level economic trends.

In short, to maintain our current standard of living and meet the challenges of global economic competition, Canada will need to both find more workers and increase the skills of all workers. The population and labour force data suggests that there are a limited number of available options to accomplish these two goals. The main ones are:

- the “import” of upwards of 350,000 workers a year through immigration, and the more effective integration of these workers into Canadian labour markets;
- continuing improvements in employment rates for groups that have previously been under-represented or under-employed in the labour market, including the relatively fast-growing Aboriginal population, persons with disabilities, women returning to the labour market after periods of working at home, and others;
- encouragement of older workers to remain longer in the labour force, combined with adjustments and support programs to allow them to remain productive;
- an expansion of education and training programs to enhance essential skill levels and promote the “trainability” of the seven million adult Canadians with limited educational foundations; and
- a general expansion of educational and training opportunities and supports across the entire labour force, with a particular focus on workers who are making transitions in terms of industry sectors, occupational fields and geographical locations.

Close consideration of each of these five strategic options for labour force expansion leads to the recognition of the critical importance of PLAR as a means to facilitate the different kinds of transitions that are required on a large scale:

- The labour market integration of people who lack foundation education and formal credentials and need to build their confidence as adult learners.
- The mobilization of discouraged learners, focusing on the 50% of adult Canadians who report not having participated in organized educational activities of any kind.
- The more effective integration of foreign-born workers in terms of both their formal credentials and their competencies acquired through life experience.
- Facilitation of transitions across industry sectors and occupations, including carrying over relevant credentials and acquired competencies from one field to the other.
- Facilitation of transitions across jurisdictions in both regulated and unregulated occupations.
- The more efficient targeting of education and training on the employed labour force through the rigorous assessment and identification of knowledge and skills acquired through informal learning and the greater ability to focus on knowledge and skills gaps.

In short, in an economy that can no longer rely on a continuing supply of young new entrants to meet current and future labour market requirements, this analysis suggests that new strategies are needed to enhance participation in education and training by adult Canadians and to mobilize special populations who are currently under-represented and/or under-utilized in the labour force. The research literature presents a strong consensus view on three major barriers to the achievement of these goals:

- a lack of confidence and motivation among many adults to participate in organized education and training as a result of largely negative early experiences in formal education;
- a lack of foundation essential skills, both to qualify for education and training programs and to succeed in them; and
- the perceived high costs of participation in education and training programs in terms of both direct financial outlays and the impacts on work and family responsibilities.

This report proposes that PLAR is a powerful policy and program instrument to overcome the first of these three barriers, and to facilitate more efficient and cost-effective linkages between adult learners, the labour market and a wide array of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities and processes.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS — DEVELOPMENT OF PLAR POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the current state of development of PLAR in Canada and in comparably developed nations. Detailed international case studies and descriptions of policies and programs in different jurisdictions across Canada are presented in the appendices. This chapter summarizes the principal issues identified and lessons learned from Canadian and international experience to date.

### **PLAR IN CANADA**

#### **The policy infrastructure in Canada**

With a few notable exceptions, the practice of recognizing non-formal and informal learning in Canada has developed from government funding of pilot projects at the local level. No province or territory has enacted legislation to mandate the delivery of PLAR services. The federal government is limited in its ability to pass legislation based on the distribution of powers provided in the *Canadian Constitution Act*. Most of the policy development has therefore taken place at the provincial level.

Detailed descriptions of government policies on PLAR are presented in the appendices. Most of the identifiable provincial policies centre on general statements of support and encouragement. Some of these policies establish principles or standards for PLAR implementation, while others have initiatives directly associated with them.

In practice, Canadian governments most often support the use of PLAR to increase access to community colleges. This is followed by policy support for awarding college academic credit, increasing educational mobility, labour force development and access to regulated occupations. The least policy support is given in the areas of awarding university academic credit and engagement in portfolio learning.

Three provinces have established provincial PLAR policy frameworks: Quebec, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. These frameworks express government support for PLAR services in education, employment and regulated occupations, and this support has been demonstrated by funding commitments toward organizational capacity-building and multi-stakeholder initiatives.

PLAR is not formally mandated by provincial governments except in Manitoba, where designated adult learning centres are responsible for providing PLAR for secondary school credit, and in Ontario, where colleges are required to offer services to adult learners. In Quebec, the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* emphasizes and promotes the “official recognition of prior learning and skills.” Similarly, the *Quebec Action Plan for Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* is structured around four priorities, including a global objective directly related to the recognition of prior skills and learning. This policy puts into place a set of structural mechanisms to ensure access to prior skills and learning recognition in every region of Quebec.

Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan have PLAR policies in the greatest number of areas. Although British Columbia has had provincial policies in the past, it currently has no policies in place, along with the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Yukon. However, a number of provincial/territorial governments have stated intentions to include PLAR in future policy developments.

The current patchwork of provincial policies reflects significant differences in the areas and levels of government support. However, there clearly are areas of strength and identified common interests, and these can be used as a foundation for future policy development initiatives.

### **Funding**

HRSDC has been a major supporter of PLAR through contribution funding to support projects related to labour force development. From 2000 to 2005, HRSDC funded about 30 PLAR-related projects through its Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills program. It also provides funding through its Foreign Credential Recognition Program — \$73 million in project funding over seven years — to improve recognition of the knowledge and skills of immigrants. HRSDC has also supported networking initiatives such as local, regional and national conferences. As demographic, labour market adjustment and human resources development issues have become increasingly evident, other federal government departments and agencies have become involved in PLAR activities and projects, though usually on a project-by-project or contract-by-contract

basis rather than through any long-term strategic commitment. These include the Department of National Defence, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Canada Revenue Agency, Industry Canada, Service Canada and Corrections Canada (CORCAN).

Nearly all provincial and territorial governments have at one time provided PLAR start-up funding on a multi-year or pilot project basis. Today, however, it appears that only one province provides ongoing targeted funding to educational institutions: Ontario provides nominal support to community colleges for the costs of conducting assessments. In two provinces — Nova Scotia and New Brunswick — the department responsible for community and family services has established multi-year commitments to PLAR programs aimed at supporting transitions for social assistance recipients into employment and/or further education and training.

Manitoba funds PLAR activities through all of its post-secondary providers on a limited basis, largely through support for a part-time PLAR practitioner in each institution as part of regular budget arrangements. The province also provides ongoing funding for the operation of community-based adult learning centres. Two provinces (Manitoba and Prince Edward Island) provide operational funding to employment centres, and Workplace Learning PEI Inc. allocates resources for portfolio learning.

The Centre for Work and Education (CEW), located in Winnipeg, is another vital component of the PLAR scene, both in Manitoba and Canada. Like the PLA Centre in Nova Scotia, it is an independent collaborative agency, associated with the University of Winnipeg but relying on project-based contract initiatives with a range of educational and workplace-based partners. Included among its projects over the past five years are the following:

- the first Canadian study (2003–2006) on portfolio learning for dislocated workers in transition;
- a variety of workplace PLAR initiatives to develop work-based credentials for community justice workers, Aboriginal court workers, adult literacy practitioners, and immigrants with management experience; and
- development of the Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM) as an effective validation process for workers, based on their informal and on-the-job learning.

Saskatchewan provides funding for PLAR capacity building in post-secondary education and for PLAR development in apprenticeship. Nova Scotia financially supports the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, which provides PLAR assessments at no cost to learners — and the Nova Scotia Community College has a well-developed portfolio element built into its core programs. The PLA Centre in Halifax has also received both federal and provincial project funding to carry out its portfolio learning activities.

We were unable to find evidence that the governments of Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Northwest Territories, Nunavut and Yukon provide direct targeted funding for PLAR services in any context. Most costs for development, infrastructure and delivery of PLAR and portfolio learning services are borne by delivery organizations and individual participants.

The sustainability of PLAR programs and services has been an ongoing concern for most stakeholders in Canada. The substantial costs associated with the development of assessment methods and tools; delivery; advising and support; promotion of public awareness; and professional development for assessors, advisors and facilitators have been a burden for post-secondary institutions and other delivery agents. Cost is likely to continue to pose a challenge to future developments and will need to be a key element in any new pan-Canadian initiatives.

Interprovincial and intergovernmental collaboration in PLAR are uncommon. However, three federal–provincial labour market partnership agreements (Manitoba, Ontario and Saskatchewan) currently include PLAR as key elements of future labour market development strategies. These agreements present a promising public policy basis for sustainable PLAR funding, particularly in services related to employment.

Table 3 identifies areas where federal and provincial government policy explicitly targets the development and delivery of PLAR programs and services in Canada.



**TABLE 3: IDENTIFIABLE GOVERNMENT POLICIES SUPPORTING PLAR\***

Province/ Territory	Portfolio Learning	Secondary School Credit	Educational Mobility	College Access	University Access	College Credit	University Credit	Employment	Immigrant Recognition	Labour Force Development Mobility	Access To Regulated Professions & Trades
Alberta			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
British Columbia											
Manitoba**		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
New Brunswick			✓	✓		✓		✓			✓
N&L				✓		✓					✓
Nova Scotia	✓	✓								✓	
Ontario		✓		✓		✓					
Quebec**		✓		✓		✓			✓	✓	
PEI				✓	✓					✓	✓
Saskatchewan**	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>HRSDC</b>			✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>CMEC</b>				✓	✓						

Prepared by Joy Van Kleef

\* Government policy is defined as written statements of government support for PLAR, either in PLAR-specific written policies or in other written statements of government policy (e.g., New Brunswick policy statement on adult learning).

\*\* Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan are the only jurisdictions with provincial PLAR policy frameworks currently in place.

Under development:

- Alberta is developing a provincial strategy for PLAR.
- Nova Scotia has plans for development and implementation of PLAR policy and tools in post-secondary education (access and academic credit), employment, apprenticeship and professional development.
- Nunavut is working on the development of a PLAR framework.
- Northwest Territories Department of Education, Culture and Employment has included PLAR in its strategic plan for 2005–2015.
- British Columbia had policies in the 1990s but withdrew its involvement in PLAR in 2002.

The patchwork of provincial policies shown in Table 3 reflects significant differences in the areas and levels of government support. It is clear, however, that there exist areas of strength and jurisdictions with common interests; these developments could be used as a basis for future policy initiatives within a wider pan-Canadian strategy.

### **Monitoring and evaluation**

Most provincial/territorial governments do not monitor PLAR activities related to education, employment or regulated occupations. The exceptions are:

- Ontario collects data for funding purposes on the number of assessments conducted by the province's public community colleges and secondary schools.
- New Brunswick collects data in four areas on the number of persons who receive assessments: the Community Adult Learning Program (grade level of registration and gender), apprenticeship, GED and the Adult High School Diploma Program.
- Manitoba and Quebec collect data on the number of college and university assessments.

No national monitoring, and only limited provincial monitoring, is currently conducted for quality assurance in PLAR programs and services. Most post-secondary institutions do not systematically collect PLAR data. The exceptions include colleges in British Columbia and Ontario, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) and Red River College in Manitoba. Statistics are generally not reported publicly. Some institutions collect qualitative data on their PLAR activities — particularly institutions that have assigned staff to perform PLAR-related functions.

Some regulatory bodies collect data on their PLAR activities (e.g., the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators), but this information is generally not reported publicly.

Research on the results of pilot projects for the use of PLAR in education, employment and regulated occupations generally includes quantitative and qualitative data that is reported to funding organizations, and may be publicly available on a case-by-case basis. There is no central repository in any province or territory where this information is stored or evaluated and so data is difficult to obtain.

The general lack of comprehensive data on PLAR programs and practices makes it difficult to establish activity levels. In some cases, the available data is not collected systematically or monitored for quality assurance, so this leads to concerns about the credibility of program reports and evaluations. Gaps in provincial/territorial policies, combined with low levels of monitoring, raise questions about the consistency, transparency and quality of current activities.

There are some recent developments in PLAR quality assurance in post-secondary education. Several provinces have established quality councils for higher education. For example, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is a research and advisory body with the mandate to advise the provincial government on all aspects of higher education. The Council has identified PLAR as an area requiring its attention.

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission is another example of an organization with responsibilities associated with PLAR. The Commission's policy on quality assurance states that new programs should include several admission routes, including prior learning assessment, but it does not refer to strategies on how quality assurance should be achieved. Other provinces have similar councils.

These bodies represent untapped opportunities to promote and improve quality-assured PLAR in post-secondary institutions.

### **PLAR activities within formal education**

There are various PLAR activities taking place in K–12 programs, as well as in post-secondary institutions in Canada. Primary and secondary school activities are governed by provincial and school district policies and procedures, and most colleges have institutional PLAR policies and procedures. While many colleges have developed PLAR programs and delivery infrastructure (i.e., trained staff, ongoing professional development, funds for development of assessment methods and tools, integrated information and reporting systems), most operate quite independently, and reliable data on the numbers and types of programs is not readily available.

There are, however, significantly fewer PLAR activities in Canadian universities than in the community colleges. Table 4 lists Canadian universities with institution-wide PLAR

policies.<sup>143</sup> For example, two of Alberta’s four universities have institution-wide policies, which relate to PLAR for admissions and academic credit. Since most universities have admission policies pertaining to mature students, these have been excluded from the table so that other forms of assessment can be identified. Unfortunately, data on Ontario universities is not readily available. There are no universities in Nunavut, Northwest Territories or Yukon.

<b>TABLE 4: NUMBER OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES WITH INSTITUTION-WIDE PLAR POLICIES (OTHER THAN MATURE STUDENT POLICIES)</b>		
<b>PROVINCE/TERRITORY</b>	<b>TOTAL NO. UNIVERSITIES IN PROVINCE</b>	<b>NO. UNIVERSITIES WITH PLAR POLICIES</b>
Alberta	4	2
British Columbia	6	2
Manitoba**	3	2
New Brunswick	4	4
N&L	1	0
Nova Scotia	11	2
Ontario	N/A	N/A
PEI	1	1
Saskatchewan	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>14</b>

Some university policies make specific commitments to recognizing prior learning, including Athabasca University, Mount St. Vincent University, Royal Roads University and University of Toronto. Others have provisions that actually restrict or discourage PLAR. For example, the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) PLAR policy authorizes the transfer of credits from other universities but does not mandate UBC departments to offer PLAR. The University of Calgary’s PLAR policy requires unsuccessful PLAR assessments to be recorded as failures on student transcripts.

**Learning outcomes/competency assessments**

The terms “learning outcomes” and “competency assessments” are used broadly in this report to include both academic/theoretical knowledge and demonstrable skills.

Proponents of PLAR tend to promote learning outcomes as effective criteria for assessment, and they are used by many Canadian community colleges to assess in-school and prior learning. A learning outcomes approach to formal education is also promoted by the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. However, the use of learning outcomes poses a challenge to universities, many of which use more traditional forms of learning indicators.

At the secondary school level, PLAR competency assessments for academic credit are course-based and generally take the form of written examinations (e.g., Ontario) or portfolio assessment and other demonstrations of learning (e.g., Manitoba and Nova Scotia).

At college and university levels, competency assessments are mostly course-based. Assessors are normally faculty who teach the course for which academic credit is being sought. A wide range of competency assessment methods and tools are used, including written examinations, situation-based problem-solving, oral tests, structured interviews, simulations, presentations, skills demonstrations, role plays, observation, work samples, portfolios and self-evaluation. Assessments for program admission are often standardized tests but can take other forms of learning demonstrations, including portfolio assessment (e.g., at Red River College).

### **Portfolio learning**

Portfolio learning in formal and non-formal educational settings is normally provided through facilitated portfolio development programs or courses that may or may not be for credit.

Portfolios are used to support learner personal growth and career development, and in some cases, to obtain program admission and/or advanced standing. There are a few instances in which portfolio learning applications are being developed at the primary and secondary school levels (e.g., Nova Scotia, British Columbia and Saskatchewan).

Table 5 presents post-secondary institutions that offer portfolio learning in one or more programs. The table is not a total inventory of all initiatives in Canada, but it begins to provide a sense of the types of activities that are currently in place and the potential areas for development.

**TABLE 5: EXAMPLES OF INSTITUTION-BASED PORTFOLIO LEARNING ACTIVITIES ACROSS CANADA**

<b>PROVINCE</b>	<b>PERSONAL/ CAREER DEVELOPMENT: TRADITIONAL</b>	<b>PERSONAL/ CAREER DEVELOPMENT: E-PORTFOLIO</b>	<b>PROGRAM ADMISSION</b>	<b>K-12</b>
<b>Alberta</b>	Athabasca University Bow Valley College Mount Royal College	Bow Valley College		
<b>British Columbia</b>	All university faculties of education BC Institute of Technology	BC campus research on central repository for graduate portfolios UBC 3-year pilot project University College of the Fraser Valley Douglas College Thompson Rivers University	Royal Roads University	Secondary schools throughout the province Surrey primary schools
<b>Manitoba</b>	Red River College		Red River College	
<b>New Brunswick</b>	University of New Brunswick			
<b>Nova Scotia</b>	Cape Breton University Mount Saint Vincent University Nova Scotia Community College	Nova Scotia Community College	Dalhousie University Cape Breton University	
<b>Nunavut</b>	Nunavut Arctic College (pilot under way)			
<b>Ontario</b>	four colleges Chang School, Ryerson University			
<b>Prince Edward Island</b>	University of Prince Edward Island		University of Prince Edward Island	

<b>TABLE 5: EXAMPLES OF INSTITUTION-BASED PORTFOLIO LEARNING ACTIVITIES ACROSS CANADA</b>				
<b>PROVINCE</b>	<b>PERSONAL/ CAREER DEVELOPMENT: TRADITIONAL</b>	<b>PERSONAL/ CAREER DEVELOPMENT: E-PORTFOLIO</b>	<b>PROGRAM ADMISSION</b>	<b>K-12</b>
<b>Saskatchewan</b>	SIAST Regional colleges (pilot) University of Saskatchewan University faculties of education	13 school divisions		13 school divisions

“Traditional” portfolio learning activities are structured either as courses or counselling programs with individuals or groups. “E-portfolio” programs are delivered through distance education processes, including web-based interactive programs. Portfolio admission programs involve submission of evidence of ability to undertake formal education programs in the absence of standard entrance qualifications. K–12 programs are built into school curricula, usually at the high school level.

A key example of the use of portfolio learning in a wide variety of settings other than post-secondary education institutions is the work carried out at the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Initially established through funding from what is now HRSDC, the Centre has been sustained for over a decade by development, project and action research contracts with a range of federal and provincial departments and agencies. Its core product is a 30-hour, comprehensive, systematic and rigorous portfolio development facilitated small group process (8 to 12 participants). The program includes life histories; analytical learning narratives; the identification of formal, non-formal and informal learning; the development of goals and objectives; the formulation of employment, career advancement and/or further education and training strategies; and résumés. The results are presented in a well-organized and documented portfolio format (usually a three-ring binder, but increasingly in CD/DVD versions).

This program has been adapted and delivered on site and via distance to a wide variety of adults in transition in Nova Scotia and across the country. These include:

- adult learners facing literacy challenges;
- unemployed and social assistance recipients;
- public and private sector workers facing restructuring and dislocation;
- male and female inmates of correctional institutions;
- women seeking labour market re-entry;
- newcomers facing settlement transitions and seeking labour market opportunities;
- para-professional groups seeking upgrading and certification; and
- mid-career professionals seeking career advancement and higher qualifications.

The Centre also provides leadership training and capacity building support through its PLAR Practitioner Certificate program for organizations that wish to provide PLAR/portfolio learning programs and services on an ongoing, in-house basis.

### **Employment-related PLAR activities**

Employment-related PLAR activities across Canada involve a range of stakeholder groups, including employment service agencies, regulatory bodies, educational institutions and immigrant service agencies. Initiatives tend to be partnership-based. PLAR is often one of several components designed to improve basic employability or to promote employment, promotion or job transitions.

The provincial and territorial summaries, found in this report's appendices, describe 36 recently completed or currently active initiatives that use PLAR to enhance individual employment status. Some of these are employment-specific, while others have multiple applications.

Several of these initiatives are bridging programs, including training and orientation programs for immigrants who require a range of supports to integrate within the Canadian workforce. PLAR is used to determine eligibility for bridging training, to help program managers to individualize training, to exempt individuals from training, or to



develop educational and employment plans. The G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University is particularly active in this area.

Portfolio learning is an important component of employment-related PLAR initiatives. Of the 36 activities reported in the provincial and territorial summaries, 16 involve portfolio development. The most active provinces are Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Saskatchewan.

Lack of data on the outcomes of these and the many other employment-related PLAR initiatives makes it difficult to assess their long-term impact.

### **Occupational PLAR assessment activities**

The use of PLAR in occupational licensing and registration processes has increased in recent years. One reason is the inadequacy of academic credential assessments to provide an adequate picture of the breadth and depth of an international candidate's knowledge and skills. This is likely to be an area of continued growth for PLAR, particularly in light of recent legislative developments that have increased pressure on regulatory bodies to provide fair access to the professions in jurisdictions including Ontario, Manitoba and Nova Scotia.

Occupational PLAR assessment activities involve regulatory or other occupational bodies, educational institutions and, in some cases, employers. These PLAR activities are conducted to determine an individual's eligibility for licensure or registration in a particular occupation. They are often undertaken in conjunction with academic credential assessment.

Our research revealed six provinces in which occupational bodies use PLAR as an assessment practice: British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Saskatchewan. In addition, eight national regulatory organizations were identified that currently use, or are in the planning stages to use, PLAR as part of their licensing and registration processes. They are:

- BioTalent Canada;
- Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators;
- Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council;

- Canadian Council of Professional Engineers;
- Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science;
- Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council;
- Information and Communications Technology Council; and
- National Alliance of Respiratory Therapy Regulatory Bodies.

Two national organizations — the Canadian Nurses Association and the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board — have developed self-assessment tools to assist candidates for licensing or registration.

### **Apprenticeship**

Advocates of apprenticeship will argue that this system has utilized a PLAR approach longer and more extensively than any other formal education or training sector. They point to the fact that in most jurisdictions and for most trades, a person with a required amount of time working in the field, and with an employer who will vouch for them, can challenge the final exam and, if they pass, be certified or licensed without regard to how they acquired their knowledge and skills. One limitation is that the principal means to assess the candidate's acquired competencies is through the standard qualifying examination. In some cases, however, the exam can include oral presentations or demonstrations of competencies.

Apprenticeship is a critically important and expanding component of labour force development. In 2004, there were 267,775 registered apprentices in Canada, 60% more than in 1994.<sup>144</sup> A major issue in apprenticeship, however, is that many young people who start out in the program never complete their full journeyman qualifications. In contrast to the growth of registrations, the number of completions increased by only 17%, from 16,800 in 1994 to 19,705 in 2004. In 2004, the ratio of registrations to completions was less than one in 10.

The reasons for this trend are largely self-evident. In a labour market increasingly driven by skills shortages, many employers are less willing to release workers for their training blocks because they need them on the job. Employers may also fear that once workers are

trade-qualified, they will demand higher wages and will more likely be “poached” by other employers.

From the apprentice’s point of view, in many trades they reach close to the highest wage levels after one or two years of apprenticeship training and work experience and thereafter see less incentive to carry on their studies. Two-thirds of apprentices are over 25 years of age, so many have families and financial pressures. The time away from the jobs for training can become more burdensome as apprentices grow older.

Whatever the reasons, it can be concluded that there are significant numbers of people in trades occupations who have started but not completed apprenticeship training. They represent a potential target group for PLAR outreach programming to help them complete their trade qualifications.

On a wider scale, the 2006 Census indicates that there are about two million adults in the labour force in Canada who have completed apprenticeship or trades certificates or diplomas.<sup>145</sup> However, there are over 7.5 million labour force participants who lack any formal occupational qualifications. The great majority of this latter group have extensive competencies gained through on-the-job experience, informal mentoring and self-directed learning. Given the increasing demand for skilled trades workers, more extensive use of PLAR approaches related to apprenticeship might be an important strategy for upgrading many of those who are skilled but non-credentialed.

### **Multi-purpose PLAR activities**

There are a number of organizations currently engaged in multi-purpose adult learning and PLAR activities on a regional, provincial or pan-Canadian basis, and many are leaders in promoting PLAR and developing good PLAR practice and research. They include:

- Adult Learning Centres (Manitoba);
- Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC);
- Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada (AAAC);
- Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC – Ottawa);

- Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA);
- Canadian Council on Learning (CCL – Ottawa);
- Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC);
- Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL);
- Centre for Education and Work (CEW – Winnipeg, Manitoba);
- Conference Board of Canada;
- Academic Credentials Assessment Service (Manitoba);
- Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN);
- PLA Centre (Halifax, Nova Scotia);
- The Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC – Ottawa); and
- Workplace Learning PEI Inc.

These organizations are centres of leadership and expertise with significant potential to support pan-Canadian initiatives in PLAR. Some of these organizations, including the adult learning centres in Manitoba and the PLA Centre in Halifax, provide useful models for replication in multiple jurisdictions.

### **THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

The evolution of PLAR policies and programs in most developed countries demonstrates many of the same tensions and characteristics evident in its development in Canada. Some countries have established explicit policy and funding strategies; some have displayed a more decentralized and “bottom-up” approach. What is clear, however, is that in response to many of the same economic and social pressures facing Canada, more and more of them see the recognition of experiential learning (which they commonly refer to as non-formal and informal learning) as increasingly important and as an area requiring more focused, coherent policy and investment attention.<sup>146</sup>

In the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, government policies have played a crucial role in establishing infrastructure to integrate PLAR into existing assessment, delivery and accountability mechanisms in both workplace and learning environments.

South Africa has integrated PLAR into its higher and further education access strategies through legislation, policies and guidelines at the national, provincial and local levels.

A number of countries have put extensive effort into the development of national and international principles and guidelines for PLAR, and have allocated substantial funds to create capacity. They have also undertaken national and transnational initiatives to add greater coherence among the many PLAR mechanisms under development. Although recognition systems are very different, these countries all share a common assumption that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning for a variety of purposes will contribute significantly to their efforts to promote economic and social development.

### **International PLAR policy examples**

As indicated above, the development of PLAR programs and practices in a number of countries has been driven by social and economic challenges similar to those facing Canada. The policy responses and objectives, however, vary considerably from country to country.

In Australia and the Netherlands, the main goal for new PLAR initiatives has been to alleviate skill shortages. The latter country has also included PLAR within strategies to become more competitive internationally and to enhance labour market mobility. In France, New Zealand and Scotland, there has been strong emphasis on promoting access to formal education qualifications and, along with Norway, on facilitating participation in lifelong learning.

France and Norway have policies to facilitate the use of PLAR mechanisms to recognize skills acquired on the job, and Norway and the Netherlands also emphasize the recognition of learning acquired through voluntary sector activities. The Netherlands and New Zealand include PLAR within wider policy initiatives aimed at raising basic education levels across the overall population, and in New Zealand's case, for the indigenous Maori population.

The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks are key drivers for the development of PLAR in several countries. Australia, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Norway, New Zealand and Scotland have set out PLAR policies and

programs specifically to enhance the effectiveness of their respective national qualifications frameworks.<sup>147</sup> New Zealand uses its qualifications framework to award occupational credentials that are independent of academic credentials, while other countries translate occupational competencies into academic equivalencies in terms of credits or full credentials.

### **PLAR programs and services**

Standards of practice for PLAR are set out in legislation in France and Norway, while Australia uses specific policy instruments for this purpose, and Scotland focuses on the facilitation of institutional collaboration.

In several countries PLAR is available as a means to gain access to academic programs or to be awarded academic credit for prior learning at different levels in the education systems. It operates at the secondary level in Norway and the Netherlands; at the college level in Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands and South Africa; and at the university level in France, Ireland, Norway, Scotland and South Africa. Two countries offer PLAR for academic credit at the post-graduate level: France and Ireland.

The international research and evaluation literature suggests that multi-stakeholder PLAR initiatives, such as those in Australia, Norway, Scotland and the Netherlands, appear to be most effective in developing recognition statements that have wider value and credibility. Some have value in more than one sector; for example, New Zealand's record of achievement (ROA) is used by employers for assessing the competencies of job candidates, and by academic institutions to award academic credit based on occupational credit standards as defined by the national qualifications framework. Australia uses PLAR mechanisms to assess technical knowledge and skills as part of their targeted strategies to recruit immigrant workers.

In France and New Zealand, it has been found that PLAR assessment strategies that require the person being assessed to set out a career and education plan have been more effective in positioning PLAR within an institutional learning context, and have therefore been more acceptable to universities and colleges.

Some of these countries make substantial financial investments in PLAR: €14 million annually in the Netherlands and €15 million annually in France (from the European Social Fund after 2002). Large projects have been funded to support inter-university collaboration to standardize and mainstream policies and procedures and support mentor training and piloting (e.g., €2.1 million in Ireland in 2006–2007). Employers have been provided with incentives of up to €150,000 to offer PLAR in the Netherlands. Tax benefits to employers and individuals are also available in that country.

Learner responsibilities for the cost of PLAR services vary widely and data is often difficult to come by. In France, it appears that the government largely covers the costs and most learners do not pay for assessments. In Ireland, learners bear a significant portion of this cost, and in Australia, immigrant applicants pay substantial assessment fees. In Norway, there is no cost to individuals for assessments in higher education and for many individuals seeking secondary school credit.

Qualifications frameworks and national occupational profiles or standards are used as the basis for assessing employment-related skills and knowledge in most of these countries. A variety of assessment methods and tools are employed:

- portfolios and other documented evidence supported by interviews by juries (France);
- self-assessment, paper-based assessments and demonstrations (Australia);
- portfolios and other documented evidence supported by assessor panels and other methods of demonstration (Ireland and the Netherlands);
- a variety of methods involving demonstrations, case studies and documentary evidence (New Zealand); and
- general emphasis on non-traditional assessment methods (Norway).

Different parties conduct assessments in different countries:

- government (Australia);
- educational institutions (France and New Zealand);
- industry training organizations (New Zealand);

- higher education councils (Ireland);
- local assessment centres (Norway);
- employers (Norway);
- sectors in conjunction with government (the Netherlands); and
- private contractors (Australia and South Africa).

These assessments result in a range of different outcomes:

- admission to college and university (Norway);
- secondary school credentials (Norway);
- academic credit (United States);
- exemption (Norway);
- competence certification (New Zealand, Norway);
- occupational certification (Australia);
- granting of complete academic degrees (France and Ireland); and
- certification for employment (New Zealand and Norway).

***Pan-European developments in PLAR: 2002–2008***<sup>148</sup>

While many countries have internal regional tensions, few encompass such a diverse range of culturally, economically and constitutionally distinct jurisdictions as does Canada. This makes it more than ordinarily difficult to compare developments in any field — and certainly in relation to approaches to learning — to countries that are more unitary and centralized in nature. For this reason, the approaches being taken to PLAR on a pan-European basis seem to have particular relevance to the realities of Canada.

Certainly the progress being made in this regard over the course of the past few years is remarkable. On the one hand, the individual member states of the European Union continue to develop a variety of distinctive approaches to PLAR within each of their jurisdictions; on the other, they have also been moving forward on a pan-European basis in many important ways. In 2002, for example, the Ministers of Education and Training



and the Ministers of Employment passed a number of resolutions culminating in an invitation to the member states to develop a:

*... set of common principles regarding validation of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater compatibility between approaches in different countries and at different levels.*<sup>149</sup>

Development work at both the national and European levels has proceeded since that time, taking a wide-angle perspective on learning that includes not only formal education and training, but also acknowledges — in explicit and detailed terms — the legitimacy and value of learning gained through life and work experience. These efforts see the recognition/validation of such learning, no matter where and how it happens, as generally good for the individuals who have their learning validated, and for their families and communities. In addition, they emphasize that firms that employ people can also benefit from knowing the full potential of people and using their learning to support the development of work practices (and therefore further learning) and productivity.<sup>150</sup>

It is in that context that four fundamental principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning have been developed. These principles echo and elaborate — though in somewhat different combination and style — a number of the same issues and concerns that were addressed in the initial 1997 formulations of the Canadian Labour Force Development Board and other such statements referred to previously in this report. The four pan-European principles, which were formally adopted in 2004, are:

1. that the process of making visible the full range of knowledge, skills and experiences held by an individual is carried out in a way that remains voluntary, and the results of validation remain the property of the individual;
2. that stakeholders should establish systems and approaches that include appropriate quality assurance mechanisms and provision of guidance, counselling and information about these systems;
3. that the roots of trust in the process of validation depend on fairness, transparency and the choice of robust methodologies; and

4. that there is a need for credibility and legitimacy based on participation of relevant stakeholders, avoidance of conflict of interest, and clear professional standards of those carrying out the validation.<sup>151</sup>

Since 2004, these core principles have been used as the basis for continuing consultation and interpretation, involving over 20 countries in the European Union. Those efforts are now culminating in the development and consideration of a comprehensive and detailed set of draft guidelines that emphasize the increasing importance and significant potential of PLAR in the context of lifelong and life-wide learning. These guidelines are now under active consideration for formal adoption by the member states.

A number of aspects of this work are of particular interest from a Canadian viewpoint. First, the guidelines explicitly emphasize the legitimacy and value of the entire spectrum of adult learning activities — experiential as well as formal. They identify distinctive characteristics and outcomes of each, and focus upon ways to both enhance their complementarity and to provide improved consistency and comparability of outcomes of the two different assessment and validation approaches.<sup>152</sup>

The draft guidelines document also articulates the key distinctions between two major types of assessment methodologies — the formative and the summative.

1. Formative Assessment

*Formative approaches to assessment will not aim at formal certification of the learning outcomes, but will provide feedback to the learning process or learning career, indicating strengths and weaknesses and providing a basis for personal and organizational improvements. Formative assessments fulfill a very important role and are (sic) used in a variety of settings, ranging from guidance and counselling to human resources management in enterprises.*<sup>153</sup>

In terms of the Canadian experience and application of PLAR methodologies, this developmental approach to the recognition and evaluation of experiential learning is most fully embodied in portfolio learning approaches and its self-assessment, confidence and motivation-building impacts, and its multi-faceted outcomes in terms of further education and training, employment and workforce development and community engagement. This

approach is also enhanced and supported by appropriate information, advising and counselling services.

## 2. Summative Assessment

*Summative approaches to assessment and validation aim explicitly at the formalization and certification of learning outcomes and are thus linked to and integrated with institutions and bodies authorized to award qualifications.*<sup>154</sup>

In this context, of course, the assessment of an individual's skills and knowledge shifts to the external evaluations and decision regarding admission and advanced standing in formal education and training settings, as well as of hiring and career advancement requirements. This is necessary, of course, in situations where individuals wish to translate and validate their experiential non-formal and informal learning into formal and accredited terms, and/or for labour market and career development purposes.

It is also a fundamental aspect of the validation, recognition and exchange of the myriad jurisdictional, institutional and occupational certificates, diplomas, degrees and licenses that attest to the skills and knowledge gained through formal education and training.

Accordingly, the guidelines acknowledge that formative and summative approaches to the assessment and validation of adult learning have both distinctive and interrelated characteristics. They warn, for example, that while improving PLAR quality and standards is essential, "adopting a too narrow standard of learning assessment, based on the latter, can clash with the non-standardized, but in many cases, highly relevant learning taking place outside schools."<sup>155</sup> At the same time, the guidelines insist that the "key to success" in utilizing the full array of Europe's human resources is "the mainstreaming of validation and the establishment of non-formal and informal learning as normal routes to qualification."<sup>156</sup>

The draft document also notes a number of the challenges that the development of PLAR has often encountered, including the facts that formal learning systems traditionally focus more on input standards than on learning outcomes, and that higher education institutions "largely operate validation on an autonomous basis in relation to their internal standards."<sup>157</sup>

Whereas the earlier European principles were concerned with comparability, compatibility and transparency across national boundaries, the primary purpose of the guidelines is to foster and facilitate increased exchange of practice and policy learning that has developed in the member states over the past several years.<sup>158</sup>

Interestingly, the document links the evaluation emphasis — formative or summative — with the characteristics of the policies and systems that have been established to carry them out. Formative approaches seem to be carried out in a “bottom-up” decentralized system where developments are based on local, regional and sectoral initiatives addressing particular target groups and needs.<sup>159</sup> Sweden is cited as a particular example of this approach.

The document makes a further observation in this regard that seems especially relevant to the Canadian PLAR experience.

As noted earlier in this report, the British National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) system, however, might be seen as an example of a summative “top-down” approach, which is now shifting toward incorporating more formative characteristics in its new revised format. At any rate, the European Guidelines clearly favour integrative systems, where appropriate formative approaches to validation can proceed on a parallel past and, where appropriate, can be linked to summative, certification-oriented processes.<sup>160</sup> The Netherlands, Norway, France and Switzerland are cited as examples of such systems.

In addition, there are a number of European level tools that are part of a process of modernization across countries and post-secondary systems. From an EU perspective, these reforms are part of the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs, which also encompasses reinforced cooperation in vocational education and training, as launched by the Copenhagen Process. To establish synergies between the Copenhagen Process and the Bologna Process, which calls for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area, the European Commission has proposed the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (known as EQF) — with targets of 2010 for countries to relate their qualifications systems to the EQF. This is linked to and supported by other initiatives in the fields of transparency of qualifications (e.g., EUROPASS),<sup>161</sup> credit transfer (e.g.,

European Credit Transfer System) and quality assurance (e.g., European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training).<sup>162</sup>

The EQF is a voluntary process that will serve as a central reference point for a network of related national systems. It responds directly to the requests from member states and social partners for an instrument of transparency of qualifications to facilitate workers' and learners' mobility, and has been put into place in less than four years.

Most countries are already developing national qualifications frameworks (NQF), which will be linked to the EQF. The fact that NQFs are growing demonstrates that countries recognized their advantages — in particular, in lifelong learning, including facilitating the recognition of experiential and informal learning. The EQF aims to facilitate the development of sectoral processes and act as an overarching lifelong learning reference point, incorporating vocational and other qualifications, as well as more academic qualifications.

At present, the EUROPASS includes a portfolio of documents used by individuals to describe their qualifications and competencies. It does not ensure the comparability of levels of qualifications. The EUROPASS will be further developed to reflect the establishment of the EQF in that in the future, all relevant EUROPASS documents will contain a clear reference to the EQF level.

These pan-European development initiatives are not yet complete but are nonetheless of great interest and relevance to efforts in Canada toward advancing adult learning development and recognition. The aim is that such development and recognition will meet — holistically and at several levels — individual, local and regional needs and circumstances and, at the same time, improve access, portability and mobility across a number of jurisdictions.

## **SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS CONCLUSIONS**

It is clear from the background reports in Appendices A and C that survey PLAR across Canada and internationally that a number of trends and pressures are prompting most jurisdictions and countries to reconsider how they think about learning and its relationship to economic prosperity and social vitality. Generally speaking, the increasing

interest in PLAR in all its forms, as a response to these circumstances, implies a wider-angled view of what constitutes learning and its various purposes and outcomes. This, in turn, leads to a greater appreciation and focus on all the ways in which, and places where, learning takes place, including but not restricted to formal and structured education and training, systems and institutions.

At the same time, this perspective presents challenges to the structures and compartments that have been traditionally established to deal with learning. No longer, for example, are learning issues and initiatives solely the concern of ministries of education, but also of ministries of labour, industry, immigration and environment; no longer solely the concern of systems and institutions of instruction and training, but also of employer groups, labour unions, sectoral bodies and voluntary and community-based organizations.

In response — country-by-country, internationally and province-by-province in Canada — groups are struggling to incorporate into their approaches to learning broader and more inclusive conceptions of how and where people learn across the length and breadth of their life spans, and more effective and efficient ways of recognizing, supporting and incorporating that learning into economies and societies.

In the United Kingdom, the European Union, Scandinavia, New Zealand and Australia, PLAR has in the recent past emerged as a focus of public policy at the national and — in the EU — multi-national level. New policy instruments are driving the development of programs and services for adult learners, innovations in methodologies and tools, and the elaboration of quality standards and professional development for practitioners. More importantly, perhaps, PLAR policies and programs are being used effectively to overcome longstanding disjunctures between education and training systems, the labour market and the community. PLAR systems are still relatively young in these countries but increases in demand for services are beginning to become evident in response to growing public awareness and more effective marketing and promotion.

In Canada, the United States and some of the Nordic countries, the development of PLAR policies and programs has been very much a “bottom-up” process with a diverse range of education and training institutions, industry bodies and voluntary sector organizations

taking initiatives in their respective settings. Very recently, provincial governments have begun to respond more positively to these initiatives — Quebec and Manitoba being notable examples — but most are still playing “catch-up” in the elaboration of policy development, funding arrangements and program commitments that will build on the remarkable range of the grass-roots and voluntary PLAR base created over the past 30 years across the country.

The federal government has contributed significantly to the development of PLAR programs and service expertise by investing in pilot projects and other forms of research and development. PLAR advocacy groups — often with federal government support — have played a key role in promoting awareness of PLAR among policy makers and the general public, and in linking institutional, business and community leaders, program developers and PLAR practitioners within supportive networks and an emerging pan-Canadian PLAR community.

This situational analysis suggests that this “bottom-up” development process in Canada has reached a point where further progress is impeded by uneven and uncertain investment levels and by a general lack of contact, communication and collaboration across jurisdictions and institutional systems. Furthermore, in the absence of a shared vision and coherent policy support, the multiplicity of independent actors, approaches and objectives for PLAR in Canada may soon begin to generate negative outcomes in terms of stakeholder competition, uneven standards and systemic and conceptual complexity. At a time when the foundations for effective PLAR are well in place in many regions and institutional sectors in Canada, there is a growing risk that the general public, along with decision-makers in government and industry, may come to see PLAR as confusing, fragmented, excessively bureaucratic and irrelevant to practical circumstances.

What is particularly striking in the policy and research literature is that countries and jurisdictions that are moving forward to put in place coherent, comprehensive and coordinated policy and program commitments in order to foster and strengthen existing PLAR activities and initiatives, are doing so explicitly to address the same human resource and economic development issues that are common to virtually all developed countries.

All these countries are grappling with competitive challenges from newly industrialized nations with huge advantages in labour costs. The Europeans, in particular, see the need to upgrade their labour forces to support ongoing productivity increases in the face of global competition.

In all these countries, the skills challenge is complicated by demographic trends with aging populations of skilled workers, falling birth rates and young people shifting away from trades and industrial occupations. Most countries are also grappling with the need to attract and integrate increasing numbers of immigrants to meet labour supply needs.

While no one is claiming that PLAR in itself is a panacea for the economic and human resource challenges facing advanced industrialized nations, it has been clearly identified in many countries as a critical element within a concerted strategy to upgrade workforce knowledge and skills, integrate marginalized populations, and create a new culture of lifelong learning in the workplace and the community.

Of course, the future development of PLAR in Canada will reflect our unique constitutional makeup as a decentralizing federal state, as well as our highly developed — but still somewhat fragmented — infrastructure for post-secondary education, work-related training and adult education. The pattern of “bottom-up” development of PLAR has supported great initiative, creativity and entrepreneurship at the local level in many educational, workplace and community settings across Canada. The evidence strongly suggests that it is time to make strategic commitments to a more coherent and coordinated approach, if for no other reason than to keep pace with developments in many of the nations with which we most directly compete in world markets.

It is this challenge that makes the pan-European progress in PLAR of such compelling interest to Canada. That over 20 national states with diverse cultures, traditions and circumstances could manage, over the course of less than a decade, to formulate, negotiate and articulate a set of principles and guidelines to support a coherent and flexible pan-European approach to the recognition of prior learning — especially in regard to its experiential (informal and non-formal) manifestations — is remarkable.



The PLAR development in Europe has not been easy, and has required commitment, investment and patience — but it will continue to move forward. It is an example of combining diversity within commonly agreed purposes and objectives — surely an approach worth close and continued attention in Canada. Moreover, it is in this context of common purpose within diversity (rather than in comparison with any particular country), that Canada, without proper resources, is in danger of falling well behind in recognizing, enabling and utilizing the full capacity of its human resources, skills and learning.

## CHAPTER SIX: A PLAR STRATEGY

The preceding chapters trace two lines of inquiry in analyzing the current situation regarding the future of PLAR in Canada: the potential and the challenges. The first explores the case for PLAR on the basis of the new demographic and labour market imperatives; the second provides a comprehensive overview of institutional and policy responses — both domestically and internationally. This chapter synthesizes some of the insights gained along the way, and offers options and 24 recommendations for building a more integrated and effective approach to PLAR.

We start with some fundamental questions about what we have learned and why we think a more integrated strategy is worth pursuing:

- What purpose will such a strategy serve, and for whom?
- What lessons have we learned from the Canadian experience and from international models that would assist us in more fully recognizing prior learning in Canada, given this country's unique cultural and jurisdictional circumstances?
- What vision of the future would the evidence support, and what actions/measures would need to be put in place to realize this vision?

The chapter ends with a set of viable options and specific action recommendations for building a more integrated and comprehensive multi-sectoral strategy. It acknowledges the need for both “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches in order to build, sustain and optimize activity over the short and long term in the interest of individual citizens, the economy and Canadian society.

### **WHY A STRATEGY?**

#### **The purpose of a more collaborative approach**

As pointed out in this report, the impetus for developing a strategy for a more integrated approach to PLAR in Canada arises from many of the same motivating factors as those experienced by other countries. An analysis of the Canadian situation indicates that a good deal of the energy spent in developing the field has emanated from the bottom up. There are also examples in several provinces (and growing responses in others) of more

comprehensive and cohesive policy frameworks being developed and put into place in support of PLAR initiatives (Manitoba, Quebec, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia among them). International practices contain examples of “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches, some with increasingly deliberate strategies to target both economic and social purposes. In any case, it is evident from a review of domestic and international models that the goals driving the development of the field are remarkably similar around the world.

In most countries, as in Canada, changing demographics and labour supply challenges are generating new policy interest in PLAR as a means to gain access to education and training as well as labour force and occupational development. Other drivers have also been noted, such as the desire to create a “lifelong learning culture” that has inspired program initiatives in the Nordic countries. The eight international case studies undertaken for this report demonstrate commitment to the development of PLAR in relation to the following goals:

- becoming more competitive internationally;
- alleviating skill shortages and increasing labour market mobility;
- facilitating lifelong and life-wide learning, recognizing skills acquired on the job and learning acquired in the community and the voluntary sector;
- raising the basic education level of the overall population and promoting access to formal education qualifications; and
- contributing to the effectiveness of national qualifications frameworks.

Given the new challenges Canadians are facing in the workforce and at home, we add two more items to the list of Canadian PLAR goals:

- managing industrial dislocation; and
- revitalizing communities.

These reflect the experience of practitioners in the field, and a growing awareness of the effects that global social, environmental and economic turbulence have on the quality of life for individual Canadians, their families and their communities.

### **The need for pan-Canadian collaboration**

As pointed out in this report, it is evident that current demographic trends will lead to serious tightening of the labour supply in Canada and that the labour force is becoming progressively older. The labour market is already demanding enhanced qualifications and higher skill levels in many sectors to support productivity gains and make occupations more attractive to new entrants. Wage levels have been and will continue to trend upward over the next 10 years in response to labour supply pressures and increasing emphasis on skills. There will also be even greater “churning” in the labour market as increasing numbers of workers make changes in industry sectors, occupations and geographical location in response to macro-economic trends.

These challenges cannot be solved at the local level alone, and the usual economic remedies will not be sufficient to overcome the scale of future labour shortages. This suggests the need for more integrated and innovative strategies to support increased mobility of labour, to integrate larger numbers of immigrant workers more fairly and efficiently, to expand the reach and effectiveness of the education and training system, and to provide a reliable system for assessing prior learning.

Commenting on the need for a new approach during the PLAR Expert Consultation in Ottawa in February 2008, Dr. Paul Cappon, President and CEO of the Canadian Council on Learning, emphasized that our fundamentally ad hoc and incoherent approach to immigration, to adult education and to the paradox of unmet educational need within a context of over-qualification, threatens to make the problem (of unrecognized learning) even more severe at the national level:

*We have increased dependence on immigration — not because we are “immigrationists,” but because we have no national strategy to meet human resource demand.*

*We have unmet educational need and demand — and 1.7 million overqualified workers. This presents a serious paradox and a national issue for learners, workers and employers — that is, the need to enhance the mobility of human capital.*

*We have no national system for adult education and our public and private systems are incoherent — yet if we do not move forward in training adults, we will be outstripped by other societies.<sup>163</sup>*

In essence, Dr. Cappon suggests that Canada requires a new approach to recognizing learning, because dealing with the challenges in people's lives is no longer a local or isolated problem but one that affects all citizens — particularly those who are displaced and marginalized because of economic events beyond their control. A pan-Canadian approach offers the possibility of a networked system rather than a fragmented one, a system that would allow all citizens to recognize, access and use their learning within an increasingly globalized economy.

This report contends that to maintain its quality of life and be globally competitive, Canada will not only need to find new workers and provide them with access to greater mobility — it will need to engage the full range of learning and skills of those who are already in the workforce as well as those who are not, and to make the most of the knowledge and skills of all of its citizens. This will require strategies that reach beyond provincial and territorial boundaries and embrace a wider-angled view of learning than has been previously imagined by policy makers and educators.

## **THE CANADIAN SITUATION**

### **PLAR and the labour force**

As suggested earlier in this report, the potential use of PLAR in workforce development has not yet been fully and effectively explored. PLAR is readily identified in the literature as an untapped resource of considerable value to the workplace. This study further reconfirms the central role PLAR can play in assisting individuals, employers and governments in workplace transitions within and between provinces as well as across the country.

The evidence suggests that despite positive expectations for economic growth over the next few years, Canada faces a tsunami of labour supply/labour market challenges that extend well into the future, and raise social and community concerns as well as economic ones. This report makes the argument that PLAR provides important tools to support the different kinds of transitions necessary to meet these challenges on a large scale. In fact, PLAR's standing as a first-order solution to the approaching labour market crisis is supported by research that suggests that the sheer scale of the problem cannot be met

solely by the traditional responses of increased immigration and technological advancement.

Research also suggests that other options for labour force expansion will need to be developed and employed: improving employment rates for groups previously under-represented or under-employed; encouraging older workers to remain longer in the workforce; expanding programming and promoting the “trainability” of the seven million adult Canadians with limited educational foundations; and generally expanding opportunities and supports across the entire labour force, with a particular focus on workers who are making transitions across industry sectors, occupational fields and geographical locations.

Research further suggests that PLAR can be used to facilitate labour force development through:

- enhancing the efficiency of training systems by focusing training investments on identified knowledge and skills gaps (i.e., not teaching again what the learners already know);
- enhancing and accelerating credentialing processes (i.e., awarding of occupational/professional credential based on proven competencies as well as on completion of formal education/training);
- providing for more fair and efficient integration of new Canadians through PLAR processes;
- mobilizing adult learners who have been inactive in organized education and training due to low literacy levels, inability to meet program entrance requirements, lack of self-confidence and negative experiences with schooling; and
- assisting wide numbers of individuals in various stages of life in making personal/family/community and career transitions.

In short, in an economy that can no longer rely on a continuing supply of formally qualified young, new entrants to meet current and future labour market requirements, PLAR is seen as a powerful tool for enhancing participation in education and training by adult Canadians, and mobilizing special populations who are currently under-represented and/or under-utilized in the labour market. PLAR can facilitate more efficient and cost-

effective linkages between adult learners, the labour market and a wide array of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities and processes.

### **PLAR and the education and training systems**

This report demonstrates that, despite increased activity by colleges, the current education and training system falls short in reaching out to the adult learners who constitute the greatest potential source of renewed labour supply. For example, the employment rate for those aged 25 to 64 with no high school and no further education and training is 58%, as opposed to 82% for those with high school and further education and training. As illustrated in Chapter Three, the number of people in target populations who could benefit from access to PLAR represents a substantial proportion of the total labour force — and in many cases, individuals in these groups lack the education and training foundations to access opportunities, even if they were available.

To include the targeted groups in the established systems means addressing the particular challenges they face in their readiness to undertake formal education and training. As labour shortages become more critical in many sectors of the economy, employers will be looking for more workers in general, and for workers with more specialized skills. They will, out of necessity, look to the specific target populations identified in this report, especially:

- current employees with inadequate skill levels in the face of new job requirements, and limited “trainability” due to attitudinal issues and essential skills deficits;
- highly skilled and experienced workers who are displaced due to international competition, re-structuring or technological change (e.g., forestry and manufacturing sectors);
- newcomers to Canada, with and without formal qualifications;
- people retiring from careers who want to continue working in positions more appropriate to their age and circumstances;
- under-employed or marginally attached workers, many with low levels of formal education and lack of qualifications;
- well-qualified and credentialed groups (e.g., recent university graduates) who find themselves in low-skill/low-paid jobs; and

- people whose labour force participation has been constrained by particular economic, social, geographic and cultural factors (e.g., Aboriginal peoples, populations in less developed regions of the country, persons with disabilities and linguistic minorities).

We know that demographic trends will generate substantial pressures on the established education systems to address the needs of learner populations that have not had sufficient access in the past. Such populations will not readily present themselves at the door as eager young learners with the time and financial resources to be full-time students over extended periods.

Employers will also feel these pressures. Although real progress has been made, the research evidence is convincing that Canada lags behind competitor nations in terms of employer investment in training and the provision of informal learning opportunities in the workplace. We are far from the vision of every workplace being a learning place — but there are important indications that on their own, and through sector councils and other industry organizations, employers are taking up the challenge of developing their human resources and making their job sites more attractive in an environment of growing competition for workers. Taking up this challenge effectively is of particular concern to small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Canada.

### **PLAR and the community**

There is substantial research evidence that *every community is a learning place*, yet much of this learning goes unrecognized and under-utilized. Despite their huge contributions on many fronts, there is uneven and faltering support for community and voluntary sector organizations as sources of education, training and mobilization of adult learners. The voluntary sector provides many essential services and social benefits for Canadian society as a whole on an extremely cost-effective basis, and it employs large numbers of both paid and unpaid workers. In fact, research on demographics predicts a trend toward encore careers in the non-profit and voluntary sector among healthy and active boomers, thus pointing to a potential increase in the human resource base of the sector.

There is a growing need to develop much more effective linkages between peoples' experience, work and learning activity, the education and training system, the community and the labour market generally. In fact, as this study suggests, it is time to build on the



great initiative, creativity and entrepreneurship provided by the current “bottom–up” approach and make strategic commitments to a more coherent and coordinated pan-Canadian strategy — if for no other reason than to keep pace with developments in many of the nations with which we most directly compete in world markets.

### **Institutional and policy response**

In its analysis of the current situation, this report concludes that the development of PLAR policies and programs in Canada is much decentralized, with a diverse range of education and training institutions, industry bodies and voluntary sector organizations taking initiatives in their respective settings. It further suggests that, although a number of provincial governments are active in program development, others are still “playing catch-up” in the elaboration of policy initiatives and program commitments.

There is evidence that the federal government has contributed significantly to the development of PLAR programs and services. Further evidence shows that it can play an important role in facilitating collaboration among provinces and between governments, employers, labour organizations and communities, and in directly addressing certain labour force development challenges that fall within its jurisdiction. PLAR advocacy groups — often with federal government support — have played a key role in promoting awareness of PLAR among policy makers and the general public, and in linking institutional, business and community leaders, program developers and PLAR practitioners within supportive networks and an emerging pan-Canadian PLAR community.

As laudable and creative as these “green shoots” may be, the report observes that this “bottom–up” development process has reached a point where further progress is impeded by uneven and uncertain investment levels and by a general lack of coordination and collaboration across jurisdictions and institutional systems. It further states that in the absence of a shared vision and coherent policy support, the multiplicity of independent actors, approaches and objectives for PLAR in Canada may soon begin to generate negative outcomes in terms of stakeholder competition, uneven standards and unnecessary conceptual complexity.

The report is clear in its conclusions that the foundations for effective PLAR are well in place in many regions and institutional sectors in Canada. It is equally adamant in its assertion that without proper framing of PLAR as a first-order solution to current transitional challenges, the risk is growing that the general public, along with decision-makers in government and industry, may come to see PLAR as confusing, costly, excessively bureaucratic and irrelevant to practical circumstances.

While the report does not claim PLAR as a panacea for the economic and human resource challenges facing advanced industrialized nations, it provides evidence from other countries where PLAR has been clearly identified as a critically important component of any concerted strategy to upgrade workforce knowledge and skills, to integrate marginalized populations, and to create a new culture of lifelong and life-wide learning in the workplace and in the community.

## **INTERNATIONAL MODELS**

### **Lessons from international case studies**

As indicated in Chapter Five, the international case studies raise a number of insights and observations and provide important lessons for the development of a more integrated approach — not least of which is the realization that PLAR arrangements reflect the unique cultures, demographics, politics and economic conditions of each country. Methods and arrangements are by necessity designed to meet specific purposes, and although there may be great commonality in the overall goals, the practices vary and are not easily or readily transferable from country to country.

It should be noted, however, that there are some common elements. A number of countries have established national qualifications frameworks as a means to deal with labour force development issues. Certification for employment in national qualification frameworks have been drivers for the development of PLAR — and national occupational profiles/standards are used as the basis for assessing employment-related skills and knowledge in most of the countries profiled.

As also noted in the report, countries use a wide combination of assessment methods and tools, and assessments are conducted by many different parties for a wide variety of

outcomes. The outcomes include competence assessment and occupational certification, as well as the recognition of learning for credit, admission and exemption at the secondary, post-secondary and graduate levels. In the case of France and Ireland, recognition of prior learning can result in the granting of whole degrees.

With its focus on the community as well as educational and labour market development systems, of particular interest to this study is the observation that in the international arena, initiatives involving multi-stakeholders appear to do the best job in developing recognition statements that have societal value (e.g., Australia, Norway, Scotland and the Netherlands). Some have value in more than one sector, such as in New Zealand, where the record of achievement is used by employers for employment and by academic institutions to cross-credit achievement of occupational credit standards with academic credit.

Chapter Three outlines the processes used for establishing PLAR practices, which include collaborative as well as more centralized public policy measures. A set of principles is usually the foundation for PLAR implementation at the public policy level. In France and Norway, practices are based on legislation; on policy in Australia; and on institutional collaboration in Scotland. And in a number of countries, PLAR also exists as a right at different levels of education for the purpose of access and/or academic credit.

Although funding mechanisms vary as do learner responsibilities for the costs of PLAR, the governments of some countries have made substantial financial investments in the development and implementation of PLAR programs. Finally, it should be noted that leadership in other countries has come from a variety of sources, including the creation of new organizations as well as the building on of existing ones.

### **Issues in the international experience with PLAR**

We have also learned that many of the same systemic and institutional concerns and issues that exist in Canada also exist in other countries. For example, quality assurance is a common source of concern and internationally recognized as needing development. There are also concerns with operational resources such as cost, time, training and

infrastructure, as well as fear of standardization of knowledge and the commoditization of learning.

There is a general lack of quantitative data on the use and impacts of PLAR programs and services and, despite much activity, limited uptake of assessments is still reported in most countries. There is also a general lack of awareness among institutions, learners and employers about the purposes, availability and efficacy of PLAR programs and services. To date, only limited resources have been invested to promote programs and increase activity levels.

In some cases, a complex bureaucracy has created a cumbersome system: inflexible, divisive, and incomprehensible. Nonetheless, there have also been some interesting systemic successes in, for example, New Zealand, where new approaches to credit and qualifications processes have either culminated in credentials that have a currency valued separately from academic credentials and/or that accumulate for transfer to academic credentials.<sup>164</sup>

Despite some interesting initiatives and large-scale strategic developments, it needs to be said however, that no country has established a large lead in the development of PLAR. Nor, as yet, has any country put into place a fully functioning and comprehensive PLAR system.

### **Lessons from the pan-European context**

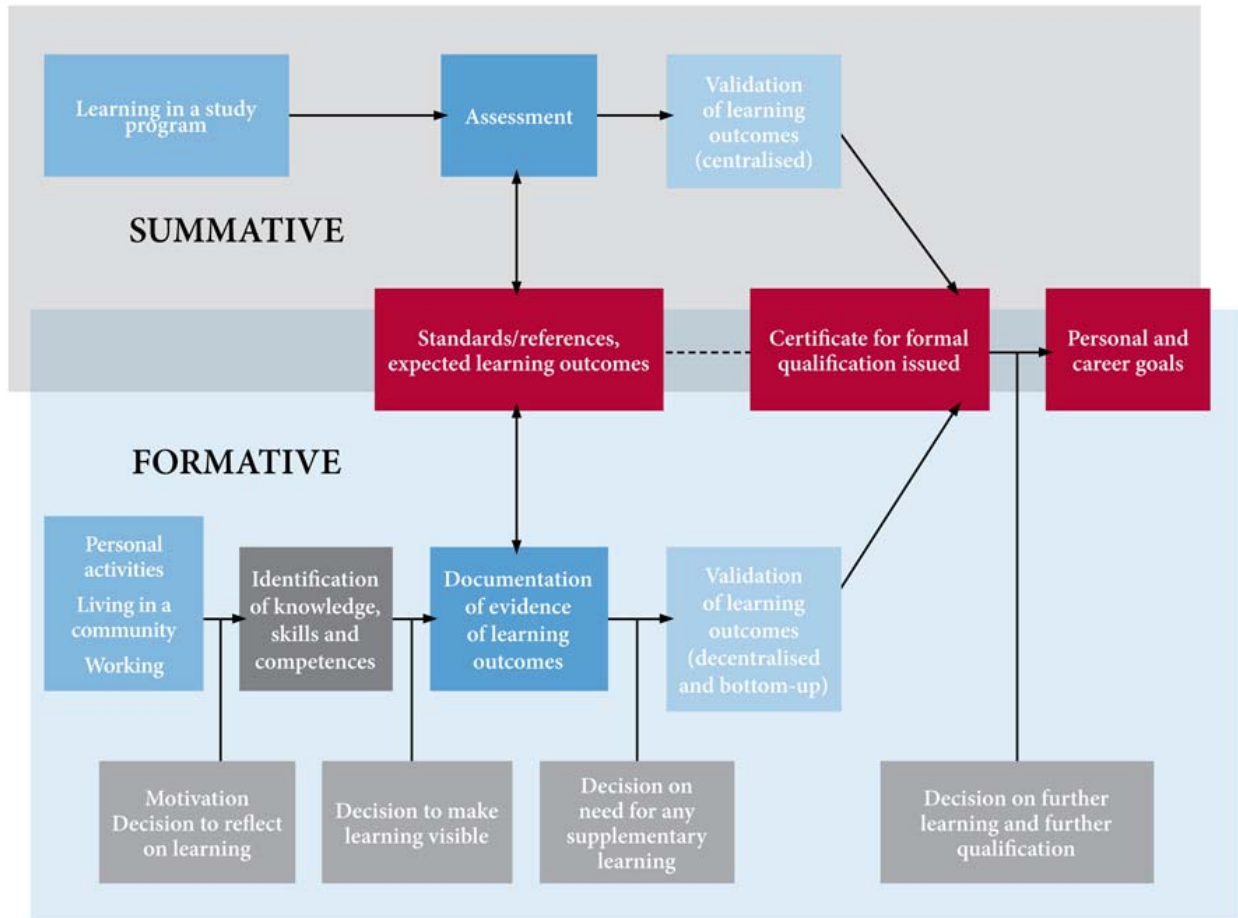
Although no single country can be cited as having established a substantial lead in developing a comprehensive PLAR system, indications from the research literature, project evaluations and the second international review commissioned by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training suggest that the validation of non-formal and informal learning is of increasing importance in member states of the EU. Furthermore, the commitment of large numbers of countries to the OECD activity in the field, and the European Commission's peer learning cluster, indicate that validation is seen as an important element at the pan-European level.

A review of the background of the draft *European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning* offers some insight into processes, products, tools and

mind sets that have underlined the development of a pan-European approach. For example, some important elements in moving forward on a pan-European basis have included engaging key ministries across EU member states in passing resolutions supporting the philosophy and initiatives of RPL/PLAR, and in establishing European principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The principles are acknowledged as an important reference point in the growth and development of national initiatives. They are recognized as having provided a virtual checklist for the development of high-quality, credible validation approaches in many member states, and as the basis from which countries have decided to move forward together in developing more detailed guidelines.

The draft guidelines provide a useful conceptual structure for creating a mind set regarding the legitimacy of informal learning. Using formative and summative assessment processes, as described in Chapter Five, Figure 15 sets the validation of informal learning against the process of the formal system. This demonstrates, in the broadest terms, how the formal and informal systems align with each other, thereby confirming not only the existence of the validation process for informal learning, but its legitimacy through the use of standards or benchmarks that are common within the formal process.

## Parallel Pathways: Validation of Formal and Informal Learning<sup>165</sup>



As described above, we can see the formal evaluation and system as an example of *summative* assessment, and validation processes for non-formal learning as *formative* assessment. The use of formative approaches often implies a “bottom-up” or more decentralized system of validation. Various countries such as Norway and France use formative methods in parallel with summative, certification-oriented approaches to validate non-formal and informal learning. Similarly, this suggests that the systems for validating learning (“top-down” and “bottom-up;” centralized and decentralized) can run in parallel — given that the standards are identical on which assessment is based.

What we draw from the European example is that the conceptual model for validating learning, together with a policy context for supporting its development, are essential parts of an integrated approach. Further, in neither case are the summative or formative approaches mutually exclusive, but rather, the pan-European example would suggest that they are interdependent and necessary to building a cohesive and comprehensive approach for assessing and recognizing learning in all its forms: formal, non-formal and informal.

The European approach, in general, relies on wide-scale dialogue and respects the broad range of models for validation that already exist in the member states. The guidelines are based on pulling together and evaluating the full range of experiences of the many projects undertaken at the local, regional and national levels since the establishment of the principles in 2004. The purpose is to support quality improvements in validation processes and enhance compatibility and comparability of processes across institutional, regional and national borders. This is accomplished through the exchange of practice and policy learning across member states. Benefits accrue to the member states and to the wider pan-European community — in national developments, in finding ways for avoiding replication between projects and in ensuring that new issues can be tested.

### **A PLAR PROPOSAL**

It would appear that there is much to be learned from the European experience; however, it is important to remember that PLAR arrangements reflect the unique culture, demographics, politics and economic conditions of the country (or countries) in which they exist. This report asserts that the future development of PLAR in Canada will be supported and constrained by our distinctive constitutional makeup, the strength of our current developments, and the nature of our highly developed but fragmented infrastructure for post-secondary education, work-related training and adult education.

A number of options or steps are put forward as a means to begin the process of building a uniquely Canadian approach to RPL. They are drawn from the reality of the current situation in Canada, lessons from the international and pan-European experience, and advice from the PLAR Expert Consultation.

## **Developing a vision**

As this report demonstrates, a number of elements need to be taken into consideration in developing an appropriate vision for PLAR in Canada. These include:

- funding — financing the costs of such a system;
- function — developing the primary purpose and focus of the system; and
- comprehensiveness — determining the breadth and depth of the system's reach.

A more integrated approach to PLAR needs to be based on a realistic appraisal of the current system's gaps as well as its strengths and opportunities — including the role of policy and the capacity of leadership to implement and sustain changes.

Within this context, it is important to note that the development of a PLAR strategy is one of three initiatives proposed by the Canadian Council on Learning to assist the Canadian education and learning system to meet the social and economic challenges of today's turbulent and increasingly globalized world. The other two relate to credit transfer, and quality assurance and accreditation. This report would argue that it is in the integration of the three initiatives that a whole, more comprehensive system of learning emerges — and that, while the first two deal with the formal education system, it is only PLAR processes that can provide the vital connections needed between experiential/informal learning and the workplace, the community, and the formal systems of education and learning.

This report also shows that issues of quality assurance are as important to PLAR as they are to the systems of higher education, credit transfer and accreditation. Any vision of a new approach for PLAR must include the development of quality assurance mechanisms and find ways to deal with questions regarding the legitimacy of experiential and informal learning.

The vision must directly confront the issue of purpose. In this report, it is clear that demographic changes and labour market challenges are driving the need for expanded PLAR programs and services. It is equally clear that to achieve and sustain improved participation and the purposeful engagement of adult learners in society, we need to



develop a culture of life-wide, as well as lifelong, learning. This suggests a vision that is larger than simply providing greater access to workplace training or post-secondary education, but one that — as illustrated in the next sections — includes relevant support measures that assure improved access to a wider range of opportunities across and among learning systems for a broader group of people than have previously had access to the developmental systems, enabling them to move seamlessly among and between these opportunities as appropriate to their individual needs.

### **Clarifying assumptions/addressing mythology**

However, in moving forward some key assumptions need to be clarified, and mythology demystified, regarding experiential and informal learning in Canada. In other words, we need to make the invisible visible and confront inaccurate perceptions and outdated approaches to learning. We also need to acknowledge that we are building on a fragile and fragmented base that lacks a number of foundational elements. It is only in addressing the invisible and missing pieces that we can develop a vision for the whole and thus propose some practical options for moving forward.

A first assumption pertains to the inclusion of adult learning in a larger system of holistic learning. As cited many times in this report, Canada has neither a comprehensive adult education and training system, nor a national strategy for lifelong learning. But in most other industrialized countries, adult education and learning are increasingly perceived as part of a holistic or integrated system of learning.

A second assumption involves human resource development (HRD) learning as an increasingly important component of adult learning and one for which the current post-secondary system alone is not designed to handle. In Canada we have a well-structured and comprehensive formal education system in place, and it works. Arguably, it can be improved by, for example, making it more seamless and accessible to adult learners. Access to that system could expand to include credit transfer and articulation, institutional quality assurance and accreditation — all visible methods for integrating and improving the education system. What the education system cannot handle is the increasing demand for HRD learning that occurs outside the education system — in the

workplace and the community. This experiential learning is part of a larger and more nuanced vision of lifelong and life-wide learning.

To accept a wider-angled view — in fact, a more holistic view— of learning would be to accept informal/experiential learning on an equal footing with the formal system. Herein lies the third element — the mythology that informal/experiential learning is not “real” learning and cannot be adequately measured against the formal system. This report argues that, in order to meet the demand for skilled workers, or to assist social learning in communities, it is crucial that experiential learning is translated into *learning outcomes* that can be measured across the board — and that simply investing more in the current education system will not be sufficient. There is a significant challenge to make the invisible areas of learning more visible, and to normalize, connect and validate processes of informal and experiential learning.

Fundamental questions that emerge are: Do we agree that there is a broader need to articulate a more holistic approach to learning than currently exists? If so, then what needs to be done to normalize and validate informal and experiential learning and establish links between the two systems in ways that support such a holistic approach? While this is not an attempt to apply all learning to certification processes, it is a cry for a wider recognition of learning as appropriate to the developmental circumstances of the individual and the society in which she or he lives.

This report suggests that it is only in posing these questions — and addressing the concerns they raise — that we can determine the appropriate action to take and build on a base of increased collective understanding and commitment.

### **Bridging the river**

This report points to the fact that vast numbers of Canadians are not able to take advantage of learning opportunities presented by the formal education and training system, the workplace or the community. Although the impediments to participation are individual and institutional, the literature concedes that there are three major barriers:

- a lack of confidence and motivation, largely as a result of negative early experiences in formal education;
- a lack of foundational skills to qualify for, and succeed in, education and training programs; and
- the perceived high costs of participation in programs, both in relation to direct financial outlays and the impacts on work and family responsibilities.

Despite the fact that countless demonstrations of positive outcomes by those participating in PLAR pilots, programs and services show that PLAR, as it currently exists, is effective in addressing the first two of these barriers, those who stand to benefit the most are those who are currently under-represented or under-employed in the economy. There is still low uptake by learners of traditional PLAR methods and services<sup>166</sup> in Canada and internationally.

What seem to be missing are the basic policy supports at the foundational level that would allow individuals to bridge the barriers and impediments to participation. This refers to the foundational elements needed to *precede* the mentoring, counselling and advising services necessary to support an individual after he or she has decided to embark on a journey through the current system.

This report proposes that, in addition to PLAR in its portfolio learning role (i.e., self-recognition to confidence to individual personal planning), there are two other interventions — or complementary policy supports — that must be put into place if we are to ensure that the adult learners who are part of the target groups have access to the “escalators” of the learning and development systems. The three key policy supports, including PLAR in its portfolio learning role, and as illustrated in Figure 16, are:

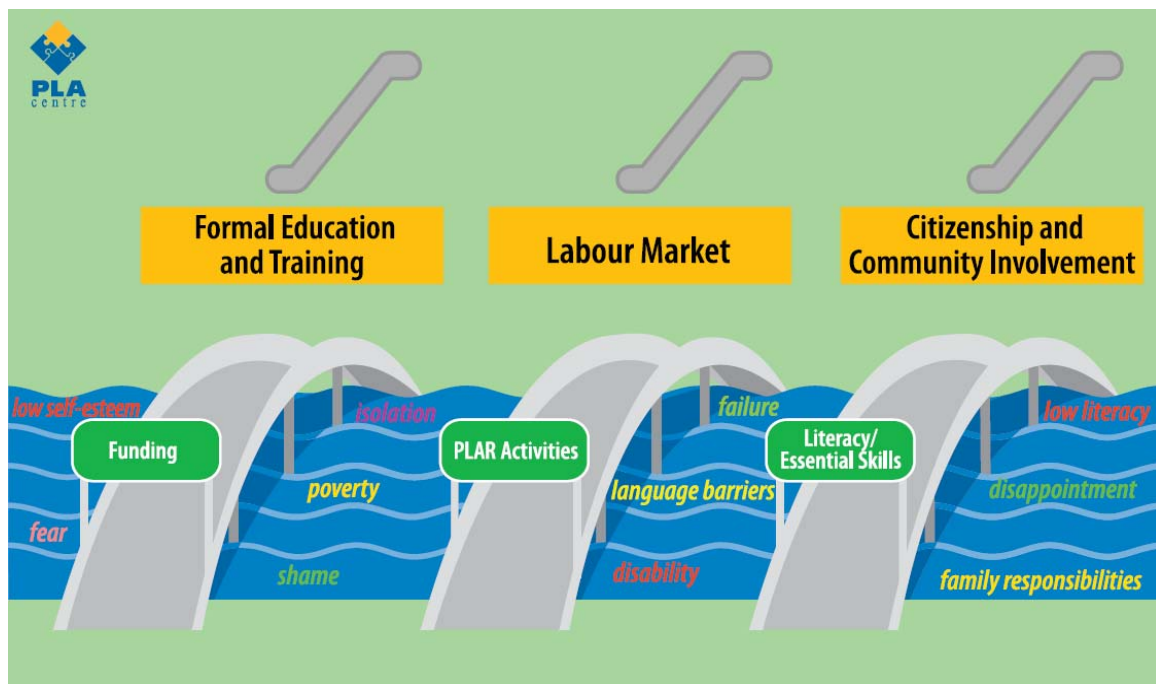
- Essential skills and literacy training — essential skills upgrading up to and including the achievement of Grade 12 equivalency, universally available and free of cost.
- Funding — enhanced financial support through the tax system, the Employment Insurance system and other mechanisms for participation in portfolio programs and organized adult education activities. There is growing interest in this regard in asset-based approaches.

- PLAR — access to PLAR and especially portfolio learning programs that will allow individuals to first recognize their own learning and build the confidence and a plan for moving forward.

**Figure 16: Three key policy supports**

Graphics: Ross Illustration

It is suggested that implementing these program interventions would give the seven million Canadians who do not currently have the foundation to participate in adult learning a basis on which they can participate. Not all individuals from the target groups need all three forms of support, and some need none at all. Nonetheless, the evidence strongly demonstrates that support beyond the usual program structure is needed if we are to include the vast numbers of Canadians who are experiencing exclusion, dislocation and under-utilization — or simply life transitions — on the escalators of learning and



societal advancement.

### Visualizing the future

Having established the need for the three foundational policy supports, the vision that emerges is one of a more integrated and seamless process for lifelong and life-wide learning and development. In this vision, PLAR programs and services perform a number of critical bridging functions. They start with the essential link of assisting individuals to assess their particular circumstances and gain confidence motivation to bridge the

barriers that separate them from participating in the larger systems of learning and development, and move toward actualizing PLAR in its various forms and functions.

The proposed approach visualizes PLAR as the connective tissue into the system as well as between and among systems. As already mentioned, PLAR has been well known as a “pathway to the institution,” yet its potential is increasingly expanding in individual and workplace development (e.g., apprenticeship, occupational licensing and registration); in enhancing the efficiency of training systems; and in community social, individual and career development.

While this visualization may seem dauntingly complex — as is, indeed, life and the times we live in — there are two things that it is definitely not. It is not, on the one hand, a “Snakes and Ladders” diagram in which a transition from part way up or even the top of one ladder means that you have to start all over again at the bottom of another — a metaphor that, for many, too often characterizes our current educational and training arrangements. Nor is it, on the other hand, a version of those famous and ingenious Escher drawings in which all sorts of up and down stairs lead one precisely nowhere — again, a not infrequent experience for adults-in-transition, including many internationally educated newcomers to Canada.



Figure 17: Achieving personal and career aspirations

Graphics: Ross Illustration

The challenge is to link the pathways in and among the various systems, allowing individuals to enter and exit the systems (e.g., workplace, education) as necessary and carry with them recognition for achievement of knowledge and skills from one setting to another. This vision for PLAR sets as goals the individual's personal and career aspirations and suggests that integrated learning processes and pathways should be designed to accommodate these goals.

### **Developing options, recommending action**

Much is happening in Canada in relation to education, employment, occupational assessment and multi-purpose PLAR activities. Examples of “green shoots” abound in all the provinces and territories. This section identifies some of the options, processes and tools that could contribute to strengthening the base and policy context for a more integrated and comprehensive approach to PLAR in Canada.

#### ***Option: The status quo***

One option is, of course, the status quo. Some might argue that, because we are not starting from scratch, it may be sufficient to allow matters to take their course, especially in the context of the strong demographic, economic and social forces driving these processes — and to let all the jurisdictions, sectors and players involved continue to develop at their own pace and direction until, simply by continuing to muddle through, we find ourselves in a more integrated situation across the country.

This is not a position that can be easily dismissed. We certainly should not ignore or fail to build upon the myriad of exemplary and innovative responses that continue to appear. We can and do see progress all around us in terms of broadening concepts of learning, efforts to include more groups in formal and informal learning, and the emergence of articulation agreements and improved connectivity. At the same time, there are even stronger indications that the pace of these developments is too slow and uneven, that too many remain excluded or fall through the cracks in the system, and that many creative and exemplary practices wither rather than flourish through lack of scale and sustainability.

### ***Option: Collaborative leadership and joint action***

The fact that such external forces as lack of scale and sustainability are more and more apparent and recognized provides an unprecedented opportunity for collaborative leadership and joint action — or a second option toward an integrative approach to PLAR.

Perhaps the most difficult remaining hurdle to such leadership and action remains conceptual. We must determine whether there is sufficient agreement that our current and almost exclusive focus on formal learning is inadequate to the challenges we face — and whether the task before us is indeed, as defined by the Canadian Council on Learning, to:

*... foster a learning culture that goes beyond formal education to encompass all forms of structured and unstructured learning — in the workplace, the community and the home.*<sup>167</sup>

and by the European Guidelines as:

*... the mainstreaming of validation and the establishment of non-formal and informal learning as normal routes to qualifications.*<sup>168</sup>

If so, there is compelling evidence that a more concerted, collaborative and coordinated effort is required than is currently underway, and that Canada is in real danger of falling behind not only other countries individually, but of European countries collectively.

This report endorses this latter option: supporting and continuing to build on the leadership already established, and promoting deliberative action and collaborative processes for recognizing and validating informal and experiential learning within the context of a new paradigm of lifelong and life-wide learning. The following reaffirms this position and offers sequenced, conceptual and practical pathways for proceeding.

### ***Moving forward***

It is important to note that, although changing demographics and imperatives of the labour market define and energize priorities for the global development of PLAR policies and processes — as they should in Canada — the new paradigm of lifelong and life-wide learning leads us to recognize that we must incorporate individual, community and social aspects of learning, as well as economic purpose, into our approach. Research supports

the view that an effective lifelong learning strategy includes learning for citizenship and individual and community development, as well as workplace training. These areas are not only mutually beneficial, they are synergistic and systemic: what affects one affects all others and determines quality of life for the whole of society — including the level of economic development and the capacity to live together effectively.

The degree to which we create an effective lifelong learning strategy will be shaped by our capacity to understand the relationships between and among these various components, and to be socially innovative and economically astute. Given our distinctive constitutional arrangements and governance models, we need to be willing to do things differently — to develop the relationships, political will and leadership necessary for building and sustaining both a long-term vision and collaborative action — if we are to realize more effective outcomes.

Moving forward means dealing with the absence of a shared vision and coherent policy on RPL/PLAR in Canada. Strategies to do so must attend to the uneven and uncertain levels of investment, and the general lack of contact, communication and collaboration across jurisdictions and institutional systems. They must also:

- clarify overall goals and definitions regarding RPL/PLAR;
- build consensus with regard to principles and an acceptable conceptual model for recognizing experiential/informal learning;
- integrate the importance of quality assurance into PLAR practices and methodology;
- identify priorities and develop innovative, sustained initiatives across the country that link PLAR methodology to specific target groups;
- build on the foundations, mechanisms and tools that support current efforts;
- identify new platforms and protocols for building Canada-wide relationships and networks that facilitate life-wide and lifelong learning, labour mobility and development;
- expand commitment and build long-term sustainable vision and leadership across the country; and



- orchestrate a large-scale messaging campaign that establishes PLAR as a first-order solution to the growing labour/human resource development crisis.

These strategies find practical expression in the recommendations below, which include general and specific actions to be taken over the short and long term. In particular, the recommendations focus on strengthening the basic conceptual and practical foundations and overall policy supports necessary for building a more integrated response; identifying sources of community and labour market action; building newer and stronger information/communication and infrastructure platforms, as well as innovative sustained initiatives; promoting the engagement of a wider group of stakeholders; and encouraging greater inter-sectoral/institutional collaboration.

### ***Recommendations***

In Canada, principles regarding the practice of PLAR have been well articulated in the past. They have not, however, been reviewed in light of a new learning paradigm, nor has consensus been found regarding an acceptable conceptual model or operational guidelines for the validation of experiential learning. It is now time to review these principles in the light of current experience, and to develop a renewed consensus on what stakeholders hold as essential to guiding the practice of PLAR in Canada today. It is also the right time for examining assumptions underlying our approach and the conceptual questions that guide it.

***Recommendation 1*** — **The existing fundamental principles for validating informal/experiential learning in support of PLAR in Canada should be reviewed and refined, and an updated platform of principles should be articulated for adoption. This process should include input from a wide range of stakeholders. The aim of the new principles is to act as an essential component of long-term direction, establish connections with new partners, and ensure confidence and compatibility between approaches and across levels throughout the system and across the country.**

***Recommendation 2*** — **Stakeholder input on the new principles should be held in an ongoing, Canada-wide conversation designed to:**

- **confirm the need to develop a more holistic approach to learning and human resource development than currently exists;**

- **articulate the actions that need to occur to normalize and validate informal and experiential learning, including the conceptual model and quality assurance practices;**
- **identify the goals of a more integrated strategy; and**
- **review and confirm the fundamental principles and operational guidelines for validating informal/experiential learning.**

***Recommendation 3* — The Canada-wide conversation on principles should be designed as a dialogue process. A broad range of stakeholders should include employers; voluntary, social and labour partners; politicians; and senior bureaucrats, government departments and organizations engaged in industry and trade, economic development and labour market adjustment, immigration and human resources, and regional and community development.**

### ***Policy and funding supports***

Research shows that the sustainability of PLAR programs and services has been an ongoing concern for most stakeholders in Canada. PLAR activities are primarily undertaken as short-term projects or contracts. Funding for the development, infrastructure and delivery of PLAR programs and portfolio services are most often borne by organizations and the recipients. In addition, the substantial costs associated with the development of assessment methods and tools, which include delivery, advising and support; promotion of public awareness; and professional development for assessors, advisors and facilitators, have been a burden for post-secondary institutions and other delivery agents. As in many other countries, substantial investment has accompanied commitment to specific PLAR goals and the establishment of leadership capacity. In Canada increased funding is needed to sustain long-term development of PLAR, to support participation by members of target groups, and to support leadership efforts.

***Recommendation 4* — A review of funding for PLAR should be undertaken with an eye to establishing methods appropriate to the goals of a more integrated approach and to the needs of targeted groups. Enhanced financial support through the tax system, the Employment Insurance system, and other mechanisms should be considered as part of an asset-based approach to supporting individual participation in lifelong learning.**

***Recommendation 5* — As part of basic policy support, provincial and territorial governments should be encouraged to make essential skills and**

**literacy training universally available and free of charge, and to provide upgrading up to and including Grade 12 equivalency.**

***Recommendation 6* — As a means to establish a base for a common language among stakeholders, a glossary of definitions and terminology should be developed that relates to RPL/PLAR, and experiential and informal learning, as used in this report and by institutions, governments, PLAR practitioners and associated organizations.**<sup>169</sup>

***A “made-in-Canada” approach to building a qualifications framework***

The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks have served as key drivers for the development of PLAR in several countries. This report profiles a number of these — Australia, Norway, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands and New Zealand — and demonstrates the wide use of such frameworks in serving multi-stakeholder objectives and in providing value and credibility across academic, occupational and community sectors. Many of these frameworks embody an integrated vision of academic credit and occupational certification.

The new EQF is an example of incorporating vocational, academic and other qualifications into a multi-sectoral system. Tools such as New Zealand’s ROA and the EUROPASS are designed to be used by employers to assess the competencies of job candidates, and by academic institutions to award academic credit based on occupational achievement. It is also interesting to note that in France and New Zealand, PLAR assessment strategies that require the person being assessed to set out a career and education plan have been found to be more effective in positioning PLAR within an institutional learning context and have, therefore, been more acceptable to universities and colleges.

Alternatively, in Canada existing bodies and processes include:

- a vibrant post-secondary system, especially at the community college level, with an impressive track record in leading and supporting national PLAR initiatives;
- innovative policy and program initiatives from provincial governments;
- higher education quality assurance councils with an interest in broadening admission routes, including PLAR;

- sector councils and regulatory bodies already engaged in PLAR activities for new and developing occupations;
- a National Occupational Classification system; and
- a number of Canada-wide organizations offering leadership in the fields of education and learning, and human resource development and labour (e.g., CMEC, CCL, and the Forum of Labour Market Ministers).

What is missing are the databases or coordinated strategies for achieving quality assurance, the integration of learning systems according to a Canadian qualifications framework, and access to PLAR activities in both colleges and universities so as to develop a more seamless and integrated system of learning.

***Recommendation 7*** — Since we do not have many of the bodies and processes as do other countries with national qualifications frameworks, Canada should use its existing bodies and processes to build PLAR systems and supportive tools.

***Recommendation 8*** — A primary online database should be developed to contain all quality assured educational credentials (e.g., degrees, diplomas and certificates) offered by Canada's public colleges and universities. The database should explicitly indicate the academic credentials available for PLAR on a systemic rather than ad hoc basis.

***Recommendation 9*** — Data from this report should be used to develop and augment the new online database and to provide a comprehensive online source of all PLAR programs and services available to the public, including occupational/work-related and multi-purpose PLAR programs and activities as they exist across Canada, as well as academic credentials available for PLAR.<sup>170</sup>

***Recommendation 10*** — Pan-Canadian collaboration among universities interested in PLAR should be encouraged. Colleges — given the consistent leadership they have demonstrated in the field — should be targeted for increased public policy support and government investment.

***Recommendation 11*** — Increased effort should be directed toward developing quality assurance practices for PLAR. Provinces with quality assurance councils should be asked to add PLAR as a key quality assurance indicator for existing and new programs in public colleges and universities.

***Recommendation 12*** — Colleges and universities should be encouraged to translate their existing course and program offerings into learning outcomes to make them more amenable to qualification processes. All new degree and

**certificate programs should be required to contain measurable learning outcomes.**

***Recommendation 13* — In addition to academic recognition, PLAR should be positioned as a central component of career and life planning.**

Turning our attention to the recognition and certification of experiential learning in the workplace, it is acknowledged that there exist — in addition to international integrated systems — a number of databases in Canada, including occupational profiles and classification systems like the interprovincial Red Seal Program for the trades, sector council competencies and the National Occupational Classification.

A number of initiatives have been undertaken by the Government of Canada in response to the need for labour market mobility and the integration of new Canadians. Sector councils are already active in human resource development in the regions and provinces and their members represent industries that are experiencing labour shortages and job dislocation. Some are identifying skills and knowledge levels necessary for new occupations, and are working with community colleges in developing courses and using PLAR processes to validate individuals' experiential learning.

***Recommendation 14* — Occupational profiles and competency grids should be extended and strengthened, with particular emphasis on high priority skills areas and sectors experiencing severe dislocation and restructuring.**

This report shows that not only are qualification frameworks and national occupational profiles or standards used as the basis for assessing employment-related skills and knowledge in most other countries, but that a wide range of assessment processes are used. These include portfolio and other documented evidence, self assessment, demonstrations, interviews and case studies. Norway, for example, places general emphasis on non-traditional assessment. Other countries also demonstrate that they are not afraid to use non-traditional institutions or create new ones (e.g., private contractors, industry, higher education councils, local or government assessment centres) to conduct assessments for wide-ranging outcomes. In Canada an immediate and obvious opportunity exists to continue to strengthen relationships with employers and labour partners.

***Recommendation 15* — Employers, in concert with labour partners (where applicable), should be encouraged to develop their own certification processes, and to partner with sector councils and colleges to establish PLAR processes in order to recognize achievement of occupational competencies through use of the National Occupational Classification system or sector councils' competencies. Colleges should be contracted to deliver the assessments.**

There is an opportunity for continued growth of PLAR initiatives in regulated and non-regulated occupations where licensing and registration processes have increased in recent years (due to legislative pressure on regulatory bodies to provide fair access to the professions). This growth potential should be encouraged and its progress noted and included in the process of moving toward a more coherent and comprehensive approach to qualifications.

As mentioned earlier, although two million adults have completed apprenticeship or trade certificates or diplomas, 7.5 million labour force participants lack any formal accredited qualification. The great majority of these people possess on-the-job experience and engage in informal mentoring and self-directed learning.

***Recommendation 16* — Given the increased demand for skilled trades workers, more extensive use of PLAR approaches should be encouraged and employed as an important strategy for recognizing and upgrading un-credentialed workers.**

Recommendations 7 to 16 are intended to help build a foundation for the development of a more comprehensive and coherent approach to recognizing, assessing and certifying work-related informal and experiential learning in Canada. Clearly the basis of this approach is the legitimization of parallel pathways for recognizing learning — formal and informal, each with its own established integrity. The longer-term challenge is the expansion and creation of new links and connections between and among formal education and training and informal workplace and community learning. The choices for how this is to be accomplished depend on a number of factors — as outlined in Recommendations 1 to 6 — and also include such critical elements as Canada-wide and sectoral leadership and political will.

Before moving forward to address such concerns, it is worth taking into consideration the opportunity for building tools and methodology along the way that can serve to strengthen an individual adult's confidence, motivation and mobility, as well as employers' access to workers.

***Recommendation 17* — As more links are made between systems and recognition processes are created, development of a Canadian record of achievement — modeled on the New Zealand example — should be considered. A single record would be created for each learner and held in a national database. All credits attained by learners would be recorded and available to them through the Internet. Until a qualification is completed, accumulated credits from all accredited providers would be recorded (to allow individuals to accumulate and demonstrate their learning achievements) and made available to employers (with the individual's consent).**

### *Leadership in a federal state*

One of the great challenges in attempting to move forward on adult education in Canada has long been the divided jurisdiction for learning. Provinces are clearly dominant in the field of education but they rely on the federal government for coordination and leadership on shared priorities, and for investment in strategic priorities such as research and development, adult literacy and labour force development.

In managing the economy and the national labour market, promoting research and development, dealing with citizenship and immigration, pursuing health and environmental objectives and enhancing culture and heritage, the federal government pursues a variety of important Canada-wide objectives with significant learning dimensions. Federal taxation rules, the Employment Insurance system and other income policies are also critically important to education and learning in Canada.

But the development of a coherent adult learning system beyond the formal education and training institutions often seems to fall between the cracks. In its reports on learning, the CCL points out the consequences of the uneven and uncoordinated performance across Canada in critical areas such as adult literacy and workplace training. This report points to the field of RPL/PLAR, in particular, as another area where the huge potential

for mobilizing adult learners is missed or minimized by a lack of leadership, shared objectives, stable investment and program coherence.

Leadership at the pan-Canadian level, as well as the individual sectoral level (public, private, community and non-profit/voluntary) is critical to the success of a coherent adult learning system and subsequent integrated approach to PLAR. The role of these individual sectors in developing strategy for recognizing prior learning is discussed below.

### ***Public sector***

There are opportunities for broad, multiple leadership roles for public sector players to facilitate cooperation and partnership among the wide number of stakeholders. As noted, governments have a strong role to play in shaping the policy context, providing basic bridging programs (e.g., literacy, essential skills, and PLAR/portfolio learning) for linking individuals in transition to the systems of learning and development, and ensuring new investments and ongoing financing arrangements for the sustained implementation and development of PLAR initiatives. Using examples from other countries, governments could also build on current initiatives to strengthen the use of PLAR assessments in recruiting immigrant workers.

In addition, post-secondary institutions have a role to play in addressing issues of credit transfer, accreditation and quality assurance as important links to PLAR. Their capacity and willingness to work with business, trade and professional associations and the community sector in building, enhancing and accelerating credentialing processes is critical to the social and labour force development of targeted groups.

Both groups hold responsibility for positioning PLAR within a context of sustained support and commitment. This can be assisted in some cases by supportive/legislative action, as well as through awareness raising and relationship-building among stakeholders.

***Recommendation 18*** — **As a means of raising the profile and level of commitment to PLAR among key stakeholders across provinces and jurisdictions, government organizations should consider passing statements and/or resolutions supporting PLAR as a learning priority. Additionally, the**



**Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, the Association of Canadian Community Colleges and other educational governing bodies, sector councils and employer/employee groups should be asked to issue support statements on PLAR. Provincial jurisdictional efforts where the right to have learning assessed is now legislated (such as those in Manitoba and Quebec) should also be highlighted and supported.**

A remarkable example of interprovincial and intergovernmental collaboration is demonstrated in three federal–provincial labour market agreements, which include PLAR as a key element in the future of labour market development.

***Recommendation 19* — Governments and labour partners should highlight and support labour market agreement models that include PLAR as integral to human resource development and as examples of progressive and promising public policy for dealing with human capital challenges.**

#### ***Private sector***

Although sector councils, professional associations, trades groups, unions and other business and occupational organizations have been active in the field of PLAR and have made important steps forward, there is still a serious lack of recognition by employers of the informal learning of their current or potential employees. Many employers are not familiar as yet with the theory and practice of RPL/PLAR, do not know how to assess employees or job applicants who present them with their informal learning as a basis for employment or promotion, and are sometimes hesitant to link their on-the-job training activities to external credentialing and the formal education system. In addition, employers (especially small- and medium-sized) do not as yet see or fully anticipate the effects of demographics and the impending labour crisis.

Employer and employee organizations have great potential for leadership in educating their peers about RPL/PLAR and in developing programs and processes that are mutually beneficial. Closer linkages with post-secondary educational institutions would help to improve the quality of on-the-job training and skills assessment and promote greater collaboration and partnership in addressing skills development challenges.

RPL/PLAR has great potential to help build a lifelong learning culture in the workplace by bridging between formal education and training, workplace-based learning, and informal learning on the job and in the community.

***Recommendation 20* — An education and messaging campaign should be developed for the business sector (employers and employee groups) providing full demographic and labour market information and raising the profile of PLAR as a first-order solution to the wide implications of the labour skills/shortage crisis. Special attention should be paid to the particular needs and concerns of small- and medium-sized businesses.**

***Non-profit and voluntary sector***

The voluntary sector in Canada can be thought of as a huge driver of knowledge and skill development for adults — parallel to the formal education and training system but having an impact on many millions more people of all ages, stages and walks of life. While most NGOs do not define themselves primarily in terms of educational objectives, their learning impacts are extensive. The following are just a few examples of these impacts:

- experiential skills acquisition and organized training for volunteer workers, often providing a springboard to paying jobs in the labour market;
- public education activities carried out by NGOs involved in a wide range of fields, such as health promotion, public safety, arts and culture, environmental enhancement and protection, urban planning and crime prevention; and
- participation in community development activities and community activism on local issues.

The capacities of voluntary sector organizations to mobilize, educate and train adult Canadians can be greatly enhanced by public policy interventions to recognize and enhance these roles and functions.<sup>171</sup> In particular, PLAR/RPL mechanisms within NGOs (such as portfolio learning) and more developed competency assessment and recognition processes within formal education institutions could help to integrate the informal learning taking place in the voluntary sector with both the formal education and labour market sector.

The voluntary sector also plays a strong role as an employer, and in that role stands to experience greater demand for its services. It also stands to increase its human resource base through the emerging trend toward encore careers (e.g., extended employment, part-time post-retirement employment, voluntary engagement and entirely new directions). New programs can aim to attract mature and older workers back to the workplace using

the lure of individual purpose and meaning to magnetize their involvement in community programs.

***Recommendation 21* — Voluntary sector organizations should be more widely recognized as “learning organizations” and funded as primary delivery agents of literacy, essential skills and PLAR foundational programs.**

***Recommendation 22* — A strategy of targeting older workers for encore careers should be developed on a Canada-wide basis for portfolio learning in a manner similar to programs in the United States.**

***Recommendation 23* — A PLAR strategy for youth-at-risk and Aboriginal Canadians should be developed and recognized as a priority for implementation, and the voluntary sector should be considered as the primary delivery agent. The voluntary sector should also be the primary delivery agent for other targeted community programs and services, including the settlement and integration of new Canadians.**

***Lifelong and life-wide learning leadership: a new conversation***

The 23 recommendations and suggestions identified above constitute an action agenda that would significantly move PLAR in Canada forward as a key component of a new wide-angle perspective on skills and learning. These initiatives would result in a much more effective recognition and utilization of human resources across the country in order to meet demographic, economic and social challenges. It is clear that there are many players involved, and that much can be done by each of them independently and without waiting for a grand pan-Canadian strategy to emerge or be put in place.

Nonetheless, the questions remain: Will these initiatives be enough to meet those challenges? Is there something more required?

Canadians are well versed in what has been described as the quintessential national essay topic: *The Camel* [or any other topic]: *a provincial or federal responsibility?* This game, however, seems inadequate when it comes to considering what processes and commitments would be required to build a new lifelong and life-wide learning culture in Canada.

Such a major social innovation is, of course, *both* a provincial and federal responsibility. Nor is it adequately encompassed by any single ministry, agency, sector or association. In

Europe, the lead ministries in pan-European PLAR initiatives have been the national departments of education and labour. In Canada, however, many other government departments and agencies have been involved as well. In several provinces, for example, departments of community and family services have played a lead role. At the federal level, in addition to HRSDC, the departments of National Defence, Industry, and Citizenship and Immigration, as well Canada Revenue Agency and Corrections Canada, have taken an active interest in PLAR applications. Finally, as previously noted, there are many other institutional, sectoral, voluntary and community-based partners that also need to be brought into active participation.

The logic of this report and its findings strongly suggest that something more creative and dynamic is needed on a pan-Canadian basis than currently exists — and that a new conversation about mobilizing the full potential of adult learning through RPL in its various forms and methodologies is urgently needed. When lifelong and life-wide learning is seen outside as well as inside, the context of formal education and training, and responsibility for its development and nurture, must be widely shared. At the same time, the hazard of “everybody’s responsibility becoming nobody’s” must be avoided.

For these reasons, a new and ongoing Pan-Canadian PLAR Learning Forum is both necessary and appropriate to our current circumstances, in order to help foster a broader and more innovative approach to adult learning and human resources development in Canada. This Forum would represent provincial and federal jurisdictions with responsibilities in this area, and would bring many more interested sectors, agencies, associations and institutions into active participation. In particular, it would reflect, articulate and communicate a long-term vision and a set of principles and objectives related to the options and suggestions catalogued above. Most importantly, it would provide sustained and coordinated attention over time, and encourage contact and cross-jurisdictional, multi-sector collaboration essential to the strategic, sequenced and deliberative action that will build a new lifelong and life-wide learning culture in Canada.

The European approach, in general, relies on wide-scale consultation and dialogue in order to develop voluntary participation and non-binding agreements that respect the broad range of models for validation that exist in the member states. While its leadership

is drawn primarily from ministries of education and labour across the member states, its purpose is to exchange practice and policy learning based on the full range of experience of the many projects undertaken at the local, regional and national level, and to identify key milestones and collective strategies for moving forward together on a voluntary and collaborative basis.

Similarly, the purposes of a Pan Canadian PLAR Learning Forum would be to learn from current practice; to identify exemplary practices, common themes and concerns; to establish dialogue processes; and to formulate declarations in order to “sign-post” milestones (such as the establishment of foundational principles and operational guidelines) of the ongoing progress and development of a Canada-wide PLAR framework. It would also serve as the impetus for developing a comprehensive data repository for evaluative research on RPL/PLAR in Canada.

It follows, from the mandate and tasks outlined above, that a Pan-Canadian PLAR Learning Forum would require a Secretariat body with adequate resources, and a strong mandate to convene, facilitate and lead such an initiative. Effective leadership of such a Forum would require great commitment, skill and patience over a significant time period.<sup>172</sup> It would have to build credibility, establish relationships and attract voluntary participation and support across a wide range of stakeholders. It would also have to enjoy sufficient independence to act as a catalyst on priority issues and themes.

The prospects of creating such a Forum and Secretariat are daunting, but the opportunities, external pressures and potential benefits for a more coherent and comprehensive approach to PLAR and adult learning are significant and increasingly apparent to the wide range of stakeholders involved. With all the complexities, jurisdictions, interests and tensions characteristic of this country, it is worth noting again that if a group of nations across Europe — a number of whom have actually engaged in bitter armed conflict with each other within living memory — have nonetheless been able to find sufficient common interest and political will to make significant collaborative progress in recognizing and utilizing the skills, knowledge and learning capacities of its citizens, surely such a collaborative pan-Canadian vision and objective, enriched by all our diversity and creativity, should not be beyond our reach.

***Recommendation 24*** — A Pan-Canadian PLAR Learning Forum should be established, along the lines of the pan-European initiative, on the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. A Secretariat with a strong mandate and appropriate resources to enable it to both lead and serve such an initiative should also be established.

The initial core membership of the Forum would consist of representatives of those various sectors with formal and jurisdictional responsibilities for education and training, and the many forms of human resources and development.

The Forum would engage the active involvement and support of employer and labour groups and community-based organizations and agencies that provide learning and related support and services to the marginalized and excluded target groups highlighted in this report.

## ENDNOTES

1. See list of PLA Board Members in Appendix G.
2. See *Handbook for the Professionalization of APEL Practitioners* (2007). Available at [www.euroguideval.org](http://www.euroguideval.org).
3. Canadian Association of Prior Learning (CAPLA), *2007 Fall Focus Workshop: Tools, Training and Trends* (Nov. 25–27, 2007). Available at [www.capla.ca](http://www.capla.ca).
4. See list of Expert Consultation participants in Appendix G.
5. Dr. Michael Bloom, Vice-President, Organizational Effectiveness and Learning, The Conference Board of Canada.
6. A one-day workshop, “Recognizing adult & experiential learning: Mapping the field in Canada,” was organized by the University-College of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, B.C., on February 28, 2008. This session was attended by 40 participants representing six universities and university-colleges (three in British Columbia, two in Alberta and one in Saskatchewan), two community colleges and five provincial government departments. “Non-institutional” participants included a private sector Human Resources manager, a community development professional and an Aboriginal community representative.
7. Campbell, Murray, “Skilled workers a retiring species,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 4, 2008).
8. Seguin, Rheal, “Quebec pledges nearly \$1-billion to boost workforce,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 19, 2008); and Howlett, Karen and Elizabeth Church, “Cash infusion expected for skills training,” *The Globe and Mail* (March 24, 2008).
9. Canadian Council on Learning, *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency* (Ottawa: 2007), p. 6.
10. See Livingstone, D. W., “Exploring the icebergs of adult learning; findings of the first Canadian survey of informal learning practices,” *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education* 13, no. 2 (1999).
11. The recent losses of manufacturing jobs involving tens of thousands of highly skilled workers, and many administrative and professional personnel in Ontario, is a particularly striking example — but the trend and impact is evident across the country.
12. Bloom, Michael, “Broadening the skilled workforce: Recognizing learning competencies and credentials,” presented at the *Fall Forum of the Canadian*

- Association for Prior Learning Assessment*, Toronto, November 26, 2007.  
Available at [www.capla.ca/Past.php](http://www.capla.ca/Past.php).
13. *European Guidelines for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft) (Cedefop: April 2008), p. 4. Cedefop is the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. The *European Guidelines* are published on behalf of the Director General, Education and Culture of the European Commission.
  14. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 18.
  15. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 15. They note another characteristic also evident in Canada: that there is a diversity of methodologies and schemes not necessarily related to each other.
  16. Gwyn, Richard, *John A. The Man Who Made Us* (Vol. 1, 1815–1867) (Random House Canada: 2007), pp. 1–2.
  17. Graves, Frank, “Canada: The next generation,” *The Globe and Mail* (May 6, 2008).
  18. Cappon, P., *Post-Secondary Education in Canada: Strategies for Success, 2007 Report* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).
  19. Canadian Council on Learning, *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency*, p. 65.
  20. Williams, R., “Spheres of adult learning” (June 2007). A chart for the Adult Learning Knowledge Center at the Canadian Council on Learning, and part of the Praxis Research and Consulting symposium *Mapping the Field: A Framework for Measuring, Monitoring and Reporting on Adult Learning in Canada*, Halifax, 2007.
  21. Note that all of these processes require various types of informational, advising, counselling and facilitating support and services in order to function in an effective and supportive manner for the adult learner.
  22. For example, the United Kingdom has developed National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).
  23. See, for example, the discussion of the practices of managed health care corporations in the United States on the professional judgment of physicians in Head, S., *The New Ruthless Economy: Work and Power in the Digital Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
  24. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), pp. 20, 22.



25. This may be what happened to the United Kingdom’s vaunted National Vocational Qualification system. A fuller account of the current reforms and the development of a new Qualifications and Credit Framework in the United Kingdom is discussed later in this section.
26. The public interest in the annual *Maclean’s Magazine* report on post-secondary institutions and programs in Canada, as well as the controversies within and outside those institutions regarding what should be included as, and the relative merits of, “learning input” factors (i.e., whether “learning input” factors outweigh “learning outcome” indicators), demonstrates the depth and volume of this ongoing debate.
27. Portfolio learning programs take various forms and are often accompanied by other additional advising and support services.
28. While the process and sequence of the portfolio learning process is generic, it can be adapted and varied for different participant groups, depending on their characteristics and objectives. The form, length and focus of a portfolio program for low literacy adult learners will differ from that for mid-career professionals seeking entry to advanced academic programs, but both groups will be engaged in very similar efforts to understand, document and present their skills and knowledge. Other variations include distance delivery versions (some on a one-on-one basis), and some that try to re-create the social learning dynamic that characterizes the process in face-to-face group settings.
29. The Canadian-born Stanford psychologist, Albert Bandura, has done extensive research on the importance of a sense of self-efficacy as a key determinant of effective and successful approaches to transition challenges, and on ways to develop and enhance that quality. “People,” he writes, “who regard themselves as highly efficacious, attribute their failures to insufficient effort or adverse situational conditions, whereas those who regard themselves as inefficacious tend to attribute their failures to low ability.” Bandura, A., ed. *Self-efficacy in Changing Societies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 7.
30. See Appendix D for the standards of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, and for the *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft).
31. Information following the bolded text is quoted from CLFDB materials. A more detailed consideration of the interpretation and implications of a number of the terms used by the CLFDB is provided in the section that follows, Key issues, tensions and opportunities.
32. Albert Bandura contends that over-confidence is often preferable to realism and is key to successful transition and development: “Under cautious self-appraisal,

- people rarely set aspirations beyond their immediate reach nor mount the extra effort needed to surpass their ordinary performances,” and “Realists may adapt well to existing realities. But those with tenacious self-efficacy are likely to change those realities.” Bandura, A., ed. *Self-efficacy in Changing Societies*, pp. 12–13.
33. Wilson, P., “Current developments in APEL: A (partly) UK perspective,” presented at the EuroguideVAL Conference on *The Professionalization of APEL Practitioners* (Edinburgh: September 10–11, 2007).
  34. Fidler, Morry et al., *Ten Standards for Assessing Learning. Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles and Procedures* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Chicago: Kendall Hunt, 2006).
  35. The most complete and detailed year-by-year listing of the initiatives and milestones that have marked both the PLAR and the Qualifications Recognition aspects of Canada’s RPL is available at [www.canadasportfolio.ca](http://www.canadasportfolio.ca).
  36. First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) Conference, Belleville, Ontario, May 22, 1997.
  37. Paul Zakos was one of those faculty members and a long-term leader in the field, both nationally and internationally. He provided background information to this report on the involvement and development of PLAR at and by FNTI.
  38. Dr. Morris Keeton, a distinguished research and development leader in the field of higher education and adult learning, is a former Chief Executive Officer of CAEL (established in the mid-1970s). He later headed the Institute for Research and Assessment in Higher Education at the University of Maryland. Dr. Keeton took a personal and supportive interest in the FNTI initiative and for many years attended the annual Belleville meetings and subsequent national conferences in Canada. Many PLAR practitioners in this country were mentored, advised and inspired by Morris Keeton.
  39. FNTI has provided professional development workshops and developed linkages across Canada with First Nations communities, and internationally with indigenous peoples in Latin America and South Africa. Paul Zakos, mentioned above, and his colleagues also played a lead role in developing principles and templates to enable institutions to develop policies and practices that will provide more welcoming and supportive arrangements for adult learners. See the ALFICan (Adult Learner Friendly Institutions) report, April 2007, available at [www.alfican.ca](http://www.alfican.ca).
  40. Commission d’étude sur la formation des adultes (Jean Commission), 1982.
  41. Livingstone, D. W., “Exploring the icebergs of adult learning,” pp. 49–72.

42. Aarts, S. et al., *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (Toronto: Cross-Canada Partnership on PLAR, 1999). See also Findings from Evaluation Studies in this report.
43. Human Resources Development Canada, *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians* (Ottawa: 2002).
44. The themes of the five national forums held between 1995 and 2003 provide a guide to the breadth and sequence of topics addressed: (1) “Assessing the future, crediting the past,” (2) “Learning has no boundaries: Bringing PLAR into the workplace,” (3) “Learning has no boundaries: PLAR as a tool for transition,” (4) “Recognizing learning: Building Canada’s future prosperity – A call to action,” and (5) “Recognizing learning: Building capacity in a knowledge economy.”
45. See *Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning 2001* in Appendix E.
46. See Findings from Evaluation Studies in Chapter Two of this report.
47. Coulombe, S. et al., *Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth Across 14 OECD Countries* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2004), Catalogue no. 89-552-MIE. See also “Counting heads: a breakthrough in measuring the knowledge economy,” *The Economist* (August 2004), and “Investing in people,” *The Globe and Mail* (New York: October 2006).
48. Livingstone, D. W., and D. Myers, ‘I might be overqualified’: Personal perspectives and national survey findings on prior learning assessment and recognition in Canada,” *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, Volume 13(1) (United Kingdom: Spring 2007).
49. CAPLA has continued to provide leadership, professional development support for its members and advocacy on important policy issues. Its website, [www.capla.ca](http://www.capla.ca), is an invaluable resource for all those interested in any aspect of the RPL field. CAPLA has also launched a number of initiatives in such areas as building an RPL “community of practice,” supporting immigrant transition through portfolio learning and other PLAR supports, and establishing national standards for PLAR practitioners.
50. Aarts, S. et al., *Feedback from Learners: A Second Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (Toronto: Cross-Canada Partnership on PLAR, 2003).
51. Wihak, C., *State of the Field Review: Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2005). Commissioned by CCL, this is a review of over 175 research sources from the years 2000 to 2005. It includes interviews with Canadian experts and focuses on identifying the major gaps of

- knowledge in the field, the most profitable lines of inquiry for the future, and generalizations that can reliably be drawn from the empirical evidence. The CMEC study is composed of two reports: (1) IBM Business Consulting Services, *Assessing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Systems and Practices Across Canada* (IBM: 2004), which focuses on assessing how PLAR systems and practices have performed in the past, how they are currently achieving their goals and their suitability for going forward; and (2) Kennedy, Bonnie, *A Spring 2003 Snapshot: The Current Status of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada's Public Postsecondary Institutions*, funded by HRSDC (2003), which provides an inventory of provincial and territorial legislative, regulatory and policy initiatives.
52. See Literacy and Education/Training Challenges in Chapter Four of this report.
  53. Livingstone, D. W., "Exploring the icebergs of adult learning."
  54. Livingstone, D. W., *Basic Findings of the 2004 Canadian Learning and Work Survey* (Toronto: OISE, 2005). Available at <http://lifelong.oise.utoronto.ca/papers/WALLBasicSummJune05.pdf>.
  55. Livingstone, D. W., and D. Myers, " 'I might be overqualified.' "
  56. Canadian Council on Learning, *Unlocking Canada's Potential, the State of Workplace and Adult Learning in Canada, Report on Learning in Canada 2007* (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).
  57. Sharpe, A., *Raising Canadian Living Standards: A Framework for Discussion*, No. 5 (Ottawa: Centre for the Study of Living Standards, 2002).
  58. Conference Board 2006, HRSDC 2004, and Statistics Canada 2005.
  59. There are 275 trades and occupations in Canada, including scores of apprenticeship trades. Forty-nine trades have Red Seal apprenticeships, a national designation that entitles a qualified person to practice that trade in any province. The training and requirements needed to practice trades and occupations fall under provincial jurisdiction and vary widely across the country. Many new economy trades and occupations do not have national designations, which hampers labour mobility and aggravates the demand–supply mismatch.
  60. Prasil, S., *Registered Apprentices: The Class of 1992, A Decade Later*, Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2005), Catalogue no. 81-595-MIE2005035
  61. Statistics Canada Registered Apprenticeship Information System. Note that the apprenticeships are undertaken over a four-year period and, although completion numbers are low, they may be skewed due to the fact that the cohort is a portion

- of the total. Nonetheless, recent statistics indicate completion rates of less than 50–60%.
62. Myers, K. and P. de Broucker, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System* (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2006), p. iii.
  63. Machin, S. and A. Vignoles A., *Unlocking Canada's Potential, the State of Workplace and Adult Learning in Canada*. (Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning, 2007).
  64. Coulombe, S. et al., *Literacy Scores, Human Capital and Growth Across Fourteen OECD Countries*.
  65. Statistics Canada and OECD, *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Ottawa, Paris: 2005).
  66. Although adults may engage in education independent of employers, most adult learning and education in Canada is work-related or job-related training. Job-related training has many objectives: to improve job performance, to address work challenges creatively, and to develop the ability to continuously learn on the job. Job-related training is referred to as employer-sponsored training when employers provide and pay for the training.
  67. Statistic Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, *Building on our Competencies. Citizenship and Immigration – Recent Immigrants in Metropolitan Areas Canada – A Comparative Profile Based on the 2001 Census* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2005).
  68. Grant, T. “Immigrant unemployment most acute in Quebec,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto: September 11, 2007). Statistics Canada Labour Force Study.
  69. Lifelong and life-wide learning refers to a process that develops human potential in a continuously supportive manner, and stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and understandings needed throughout their lifetimes — as individuals, citizens, parents and family members, partners, friends, neighbours and workers. It includes all forms of education taken for professional or personal reasons within a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective, including courses for work or pleasure, volunteering, community activities, interests and hobbies. “Adult learning” can be characterized as formal or informal learning.
  70. Rubenson, K., “Adult learning in Canada in an international perspective,” presented at *Learning in the Community*, an international conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) and the Adult Education Research Conference (AERC), June 6-9, 2007, Mount St. Vincent

- University, Halifax, N.S. Available at [www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2007/Proceedings-2007/AERC%20CASAE%20Rubenson-2007.pdf](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2007/Proceedings-2007/AERC%20CASAE%20Rubenson-2007.pdf) (accessed April 10, 2008).
71. Carnoy, M., "Foreword: How we should study adult education," in C.A. Torres, ed., *The Politics of Nonformal Education in Latin America* (New York: Praeger, 1999), pp. ix-xv. See also Desjardins, R., K. Rubenson and M. Milana, *Unequal Chances to Participate in Adult Learning: International Perspectives*, IIEP Fundamentals of Educational Planning Series 83 (Paris: UNESCO, 2006). Available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001488/148815e.pdf> (accessed April 19, 2008).
  72. Esping-Anderson, G., *Welfare States in Transition: National Adaptation in Global Economics* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996), p. 259.
  73. Rubenson, K., "Adult learning in Canada in an international perspective."
  74. Arscott, J., et al., *Producing Results in Prior Learning: A Report from the Gateways Project*, (Athabasca University: 2007).
  75. Not included in this figure are 40 or more EAS clients who completed the course after the April 2006 data collection cut-off date.
  76. The following are some of the federal/national projects that received support: National Recognizing Learning Conferences (1995–2006); National Credit Review Service Pilot Project (Conference Board of Canada); Portfolio Development for Inmates (Corrections Canada); Responsiveness: PLAR Inventory of Practices and Policies, and a Provincial/Territorial Perspective (Council of Ministers of Education Canada); Portfolio Development as a Transition Tool for Self-Assessment and Self-Recognition of Skills and Learning (Department of National Defence); and Improving Integration of Internal Medical Graduates and Increasing Availability of Evaluation Examination (Medical Council of Canada).
  77. IBM, *Final Report – Part 2, Assessing Prior Learning and Assessment Systems and Practices Across Canada*, prepared for Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (Ottawa: HRSDC, October 2004), p. 21. The IBM study suggests that one reason why colleges have been more successful than universities in establishing PLAR policies and programs may lie in the disposition of the institution toward adult learning. Where colleges have been more positive, universities tend consider that crediting prior learning experience can negatively impact the value of a degree as well as the reputation of the institution. The majority of respondents felt that a motivating factor behind institutional support for PLAR was a strong faculty-based commitment to adult learning, and that Red River College is such an institution.

78. In the two years before the CAPLA survey (2001/02), colleges indicated a small increase in numbers of assessments, while university assessments fell. PLAR was reported as not consistently available across institutions — and the actual PLAR processes varied considerably. In 2002, 70% of the institutions across Canada (24 colleges, 26 universities and five university–colleges) conducted 50 or fewer assessments, while 10% (six colleges and one university) conducted more than 300 assessments. Only three of the 29 universities (or 10%) conducted more than 50 PLAR assessments; however, 18 of 42 colleges (or 43%) conducted more than 50 assessments. This seemed to indicate a greater number of formal assessments occurring in colleges than in universities.
79. HR Council for the Voluntary and Non-profit Sector, *Toward a Labour Force Strategy for Canada's Voluntary and Non-profit Sector* (Ottawa: HR Council for the Voluntary and Non-profit Sector, 2008).
80. Castner-Lotto, J., *Boomers are Ready for Non-profits, but are Non-profits Ready for Them?* (New York: The Conference Board, Inc., 2007).
81. Morrissey, Mary C., *Shifting the Discourse: Mobilizing Adult Learning in Canada*, Report on the Expert Consultation, Feb. 18–19, 2008, Ottawa, ON, sponsored by the Canadian Council on Learning.
82. Livingstone, D. W. and D. Myers, “ ‘I might be overqualified.’ ”
83. For further details and commentaries, see [www.ignitingthepowerwithin.ca](http://www.ignitingthepowerwithin.ca).
84. Cote, J. and A. Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 5.
85. Cote, J. and A. Allahar, *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*, p. 5.
86. “Census 2006: the new household, still at home,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto: September 13, 2007). Based on data from Statistics Canada.
87. Bélanger, A., L. Martel and E. Caron-Malenfant, *Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories 2005–2031* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, December 2005), Catalogue no. 91-520-XIE, p. 64.
88. Bélanger, A., L. Martel and E. Caron-Malenfant, *Population Projections for Canada*.
89. Bélanger, A., L. Martel and E. Caron-Malenfant, *Population Projections for Canada*, p. 65.

90. Qiu, Hong “Immigration policy and its impact on demographic transition,” 2006 MPA Conference Student Papers, Pathways to a Sustainable Future, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S., Nova Scotia Regional Group Institute of Public Administration of Canada. Available at [www.ipac.ca/documents/Conference\\_Paper\\_Hong\\_Qiu\\_Immigration\\_Policy.doc](http://www.ipac.ca/documents/Conference_Paper_Hong_Qiu_Immigration_Policy.doc).
91. Qiu, Hong, “Immigration policy and its impact on demographic transition,” p. 7. This evidence is drawn from the Canadian Council of Technicians and Technologists ([www.cctt.ca](http://www.cctt.ca)).
92. Bloom, M., “Broadening the skilled workforce: Recognizing learning, competencies and credentials.”
93. Morrissey, Mary C., *Shifting the Discourse*, pp. 7–8
94. Statistics Canada, “2006 Census: Canada’s changing labour force,” *The Daily* (March 2008). [www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/](http://www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/).
95. Morrissey, Mary C., *Shifting the Discourse*.
96. Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, *Report Card: The Growing Importance of Older Workers in Atlantic Canada* (APEC: July 2007).
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98. Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, *Report Card: The Growing Importance of Older Workers in Atlantic Canada*.
99. Sanders Greer, S., “Good help is hard to find, but is bringing in foreign temp workers the way to fix a huge and growing skilled labour shortage?” *Toronto Star* (Toronto: September 8, 2007).
100. Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council, *Canada’s Driving Force: Phase II — Summary of Findings* (Ottawa: 2007), p. i.
101. Mussell, A. and K. Stiefelmeyer, *Environmental Scan and Literature Search of Agricultural Human Resource Issues*, prepared for the Steering Committee for the Investigation of an Agriculture Sector Council for Human Resources Issues, George Morris Centre (Guelph: February 2005), p. 9. Available at [www.cahrc-ccrha.ca/docs/Environmental%20Scan.pdf](http://www.cahrc-ccrha.ca/docs/Environmental%20Scan.pdf).
102. Canadian Automotive Repair and Service Council, *The Road Ahead: Human Resources and Training Challenges in the Motive Power Repair and Service Sector — Summary Report* (Nepean, ON: CARS, October 2005), p. 2. Available at [196](http://www.cars-council.ca/documents/Reports/English-</a></li>
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103. Wright, J., *Total Tourism Sector Employment in Canada: 2006 Update* (Ottawa: Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, 2006), p. 1. Executive Summary available at [www.cthrc.ca/eng/pdf/Eng\\_TTSE\\_2006\\_Executive\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.cthrc.ca/eng/pdf/Eng_TTSE_2006_Executive_Summary.pdf).
  104. Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, *Report Card: The Growing Importance of Older Workers in Atlantic Canada*.
  105. Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, *Report Card: The Growing Importance of Older Workers in Atlantic Canada*.
  106. [www.emerit.ca/eng/page.aspx?\\_id=certification.htm](http://www.emerit.ca/eng/page.aspx?_id=certification.htm)
  107. Construction Sector Council, and Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council, *Pan-Canadian Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Report* (Halifax: PLA Centre, 2005).
  108. [www.ccpfh-ccpp.org/cgi-bin%5Cfiles%5CSS-PhI-Situational-Analysis-Full-RPT-E.pdf](http://www.ccpfh-ccpp.org/cgi-bin%5Cfiles%5CSS-PhI-Situational-Analysis-Full-RPT-E.pdf)
  109. [www.cthrc.com](http://www.cthrc.com)
  110. [www.carsability.ca/info/occupations.aspx](http://www.carsability.ca/info/occupations.aspx)
  111. Statistics Canada, "2006 Census: Canada's changing labour force," p. 29.
  112. Statistics Canada, "2006 Census: Canada's changing labour force," p. 29.
  113. Qiu , H., "Immigration policy and its impact on demographic transition," p. 24.
  114. [www.csc-ca.org/english/whatsnew\\_4.html#anchor7](http://www.csc-ca.org/english/whatsnew_4.html#anchor7)
  115. Li, C., G. Gervais and A. Duval, *The Dynamics of Overqualification: Canada's Under-employed University Graduates* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2006). Catalogue no. 11-621-MIE, no. 039.
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  117. Statistics Canada, "Study: The dynamics of overqualification, 1993 to 2001," p. 2.
  118. Statistics Canada, "Study: The dynamics of overqualification, 1993 to 2001," p. 2.

119. Statistics Canada and OECD, *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Ottawa, Paris: 2005).
120. Myers, K. and P. de Broucker, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*.
121. Willms, J. D. and T. S. Murray, *Gaining and Losing Literacy Skills Over the Lifecourse* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, July 2007). Catalogue no. 89-552-X1E, no. 16.
122. In order to simplify the chart, one category was left out: the 867,000 people with university certificates or diplomas below the bachelor level.
123. Much of the information in this section is drawn from a parallel report produced by the PLA Centre for the Learning Branch of HRSDC in February 2008. The report is entitled *Adult Learning in Canada – Report I: Current Participation and Future Demand for Adult Learning Opportunities and Supports*.
124. The ALL study was carried out jointly by Statistics Canada, the U.S. National Centre for Educational Statistics, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). For Canadian results, see Lynn Barr-Telford, François Nault and Jean Pignal, *Building on our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2003* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada and HRSDC, November 30, 2005).
125. Statistics Canada, “Adult education and training study,” *The Daily* (April 30, 2004). [www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/](http://www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/). See also Peters, V., *Working and Training: First Results of the 2003 Adult Education and Training Survey* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2003), p. 45. Catalogue no. 81-595-MIE.
126. Myers, K. and P. de Broucker, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*.
127. Zhang, X. and B. Palameta, B., *Summary of: Participation in Adult Schooling and its Earnings Impact in Canada* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, March 2006). Catalogue no. 11F0019. Available at [www.statcan.ca/english/research/11F0019MIE/11F0019MIE2006277.pdf](http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/11F0019MIE/11F0019MIE2006277.pdf).
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129. Statistics Canada, *Workplace and Employee Survey Compendium* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, October 25, 2004), Catalogue no. 71-585.

130. Statistics Canada. *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007). Catalogue no. 81-582-XIE.
131. Myers, K. and P. de Broucker, *Too Many Left Behind: Canada's Adult Education and Training System*.
132. Livingstone, D. W. and A. Scholtz, *Work and Lifelong Learning in Canada: Basic Findings of the 2004 WALL Survey* (Toronto: Centre for the Study of Education and Work, December 2006). Available at [www.wallnetwork.ca/resources/WALLSurveyReportFINALMarch2007.pdf](http://www.wallnetwork.ca/resources/WALLSurveyReportFINALMarch2007.pdf).
133. Rubenson, K., R. Desjardins and E. Yoon, *Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2007), Catalogue no. 89-552-MIE, no. 17.
134. Rubenson, K., R. Desjardins and E. Yoon, *Adult Learning in Canada: A Comparative Perspective. Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, p. 77.
135. Hango, D. and P. de Broucker, *Postsecondary Enrolment Trends to 2031: Three Scenarios*, Culture, Tourism and the Centre for Education Statistics research papers no. 58 (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, November 2007), Catalogue no. 81-595-MIE, no. 058.
136. Hango, D. and P. de Broucker, *Postsecondary Enrolment Trends to 2031: Three Scenarios*, p. 47.
137. Hango, D. and P. de Broucker, *Postsecondary Enrolment Trends to 2031: Three Scenarios*, p. 83.
138. Hango, D. and P. de Broucker, *Postsecondary Enrolment Trends to 2031: Three Scenarios*, p. 100.
139. See further discussion of continuing university resistance, greater community college responsiveness and commitment to community access and adult learning, and to bridging programs and supports such as PLAR in the Institutional and Sectoral Responses section of in Chapter Two of this report.
140. Statistics Canada, *Educational Portrait of Canada, 2006 Census* (Ottawa: March 2008), Catalogue no. 97-560-XWE2006001.
141. Sharpe, A., J.-F. Arsenault, and S. Lapointe, *The Potential Contribution of Aboriginal Canadians to Labour Force, Employment, Productivity and Output Growth in Canada, 2001–2017*, CSLS Research Report No. 2007-04 (Ottawa:

- Centre for the Study of Living Standards, November 2007).  
[www.csls.ca/reports/csls2007-04.pdf](http://www.csls.ca/reports/csls2007-04.pdf).
142. Sharpe, A., J.-F. Arsenault, and S. Lapointe, *The Potential Contribution of Aboriginal Canadians*, p. 4.
  143. This information was generated by a review of university websites and calendars searching for key words: “PLAR,” “prior learning,” “advanced placement” and “challenge.”
  144. Statistics Canada, “Registered apprenticeship training programs,” *The Daily* (November 17, 2006). [www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/](http://www.statcan.ca/english/dai-quo/).
  145. Statistics Canada, *High School Certificate or Equivalent, Labour Force Activity, Age Groups and Sex for the Population 15 years and Older of Canada Provinces, Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations, 2006 Census – 20% Sample Data* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 2006), Catalogue no. 97-560-XCB2006022.
  146. As witnessed by new legislative initiatives in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands.
  147. As pointed out previously in this report, recent reforms of the NVQ system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland indicate a significant rethink and shift of emphasis of these system in order to respond more effectively to the needs of individuals, communities and employers.
  148. This section is based on the *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft). Further direct citations are noted in bracketed page references within this draft.
  149. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 3.
  150. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 3.
  151. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 4.
  152. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 4.
  153. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 7.
  154. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 14.
  155. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 14.
  156. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 16.

157. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 18.
158. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 17.
159. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 9.
160. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft), p. 7.
161. The EUROPASS portfolio includes: Europass CV, Mobilipass, Language Portfolio, Certification Supplement and Diploma Supplement.
162. Available at [www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna\\_en.html](http://www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna_en.html).
163. Morrissey, Mary C., *Shifting the Discourse*.
164. A full list of issues in the international experience with PLAR is included in Appendix C.
165. In both systems, the individual has choices about their learning and how it can be made visible. Generally, outside the formal system the nature of validation processes presents more choices because the process of validation and learning careers are more complex. Inside the formal system the learning and validation environment is likely to be simpler.
166. This refers primarily to PLAR in its *assessment* role as “pathway to the institution” — recognition of learning for the purpose of gaining access to, or acquiring a standing in, formal education and training programs. The reasons for low uptake are many and complicated and include evidence of a culture of scarcity in relation to the development of such programs, little strategic leadership, no marketing and few resources.
167. Canadian Council on Learning, *State of Learning in Canada: No Time for Complacency*, p. 6.
168. *European Guidelines* (1<sup>st</sup> Draft).
169. Definitions and terminology as used by governments and institutions are supplied in the body of this report and in Appendices A and B.
170. This report and its appendices provide a fairly comprehensive overview of the PLAR programs and services offered by Canada’s colleges and universities, as well as work-related and multi-purpose programs across the country.
171. NGOs and non-profit organizations provide a geographically diffuse and ready network of distributors. This sector will need more sustained support and

coordination — but it makes building a whole new system of delivery for essential skills training and other community learning programs unnecessary.

172. The pan-European initiative on PLAR has made remarkable progress since 2000, and it is now at the point of considering and ratifying operating guidelines for implementing more effective PLAR systems and processes.

**APPENDIX A**

**Recognition of  
Prior Learning Activities in Canada  
(12 Jurisdictions)**

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**January, 2008**





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## INTRODUCTION

As a supporting document for the PLAR Portfolio Pan-Canadian Project, this report describes recognition of prior learning activities in most jurisdictions of Canada. These activities involve a range of stakeholder organizations including governments, educational institutions, employers, regulators, sector councils, unions, employment services, community-based organizations and immigrant serving agencies.

Recognition activities are presented in two sections based on their scope. Section One describes federal, national and pan-Canadian policies and initiatives. Section Two describes activities in nine provinces and three territories. Each section is divided into four sub-sections which a) provide an overview of the public policy context, b) identify prior learning terminology used in that jurisdiction, c) identify sources of funding and d) describe assessment and recognition activities according to their purpose: education, employment, occupational assessment and multi-purpose initiatives. Many methods of assessment are cited ranging from reflective self-assessment through individual use of portfolios or other self-assessment tools, to evaluations conducted by institutions or other organizations through examinations, demonstrations, simulations, interviews, product assessments, etc.

This report is not a complete inventory of all prior learning recognition activities in Canada. A separate document presents activities in the province of Québec. In addition, this report captures the efforts of only some of the hundreds of Canadian community-based organizations that assist unemployed and under-employed individuals uncover their knowledge and skills. However, we have been able to identify many promising recognition initiatives that are helping individuals and organizations to find their place and plan their future. These initiatives are highlighted throughout the report with asterisks beside their titles.

In gathering this information, we had many conversations with recognition participants and accessed dozens of reports and websites. We would like to express our appreciation to all that have assisted in the completion of this task. A list of key resources is provided in Appendix A of this report.

## **KEY TERMINOLOGY**

In this report, recognition of prior learning refers to two main processes: credential recognition (CR) and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). We define both of these terms in this introduction and we use these definitions in our descriptions throughout the report. However, these definitions are not shared by all organizations in Canada.

Because definitions vary across and within provinces and territories, it is a challenge to present a clear picture of ongoing activities. To highlight the scope of this challenge, we present examples of the range of interpretations used in each jurisdiction.

### **Credential recognition (CR)**

CR involves an assessment to determine the comparability of different formal learning achievements expressed through academic course credits, certificates, degrees and diplomas. Four mechanisms are used to recognize academic credentials: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer, equivalency assessments and credential assessment.

#### **Articulation agreement**

Articulation agreements are credit transfer agreements negotiated between educational institutions. They are designed to promote student mobility and efficiencies in both time and money for students, institutions and governments. Transferable credits are predetermined and then automatically transferred when one student moves from one institution to another. Most post-secondary institutions in Canada have articulation agreements with other institutions in their province or in other parts of Canada.

#### **Individual credit transfer**

Individual course credit transfers occur when an institution reviews a student's course documentation from another institution and awards academic credit. Credit transfers are normally conducted by Registrar's offices, sometimes in consultation with program staff and sending institutions. Credit transfer can occur between public colleges and universities and between those institutions and private post-secondary institutions. Sometimes exemptions are granted instead of credit awards and this can result in advanced standing in a program.

**Equivalency assessment**

Equivalency assessment involves the evaluation of courses, programs, professional licenses or professional certificates awarded outside of the education system for the purpose of awarding academic credit or exemption. Following an equivalency assessment, subsequent graduates are automatically awarded the same credit or exemption. This process is sometimes known as “workplace training program review” and is a less common practice than articulation or credit transfer.

**Credential assessment**

There are several agencies in Canada that specialize in assessing academic credentials from other countries for their comparability to provincial credentials. In addition, most educational institutions conduct their own assessments of applicants’ academic credentials from other institutions.

**Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)**

PLAR is the assessment and recognition of learning acquired in non-formal and informal contexts such as the workplace, independent study and volunteering. Forms of recognition include program and course admission, academic credit and exemption, access to training, employment, promotion, occupational licensing/certification/registration, and self-recognition through portfolio learning.

Portfolio learning generally involves guided development of a portfolio or dossier which presents an individual’s learning achievements. Portfolios are used for educational and employment planning and for submission for academic credit in educational programs. In some instances, portfolio development is an independent activity supported to varying degrees by advising services; in others, portfolio development courses provide support for learning and assessment activities.

## **SECTION ONE – FEDERAL, NATIONAL AND PAN-CANADIAN INITIATIVES**

### **PUBLIC POLICY CONTEXT**

Federal policies, initiatives and programs support the recognition of prior learning in Canada as a means of promoting lifelong learning, economic development and positive citizenship. The federal government has focused attention on financially supporting recognition initiatives since the early 1990s. The federal departments most involved are Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC).

#### **Human Resources and Social Development Canada**

In 2002, HRSDC led the development of the Government of Canada's Innovation Strategy which sets out the government's position on skills and learning. The Strategy states that Canada's learning system must be strengthened if we are to meet the skills and labour force demands of the coming decades. The Strategy notes that insufficient PLAR capacity is an important gap in our learning infrastructure and that increased recognition of prior learning would motivate more adults to gain additional skills, and remove a significant barrier to full participation and mobility in the labour market.

Also in 2002, HRSDC published *Knowledge Matters*, a statement of the federal government's position on important policy issues facing the country. The report acknowledged that learning must be available to all Canadians throughout their lifetime, so that everyone has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. The report noted that many Canadians have skills and knowledge that are valuable, but often underused and undervalued because of a lack of formal recognition by employers or education institutions. One strategy highlighted as a means of filling the gap in our learning infrastructure is the provision of sufficient PLAR.

The programs in HRSDC that provide the greatest support for PLAR initiatives are the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program (formerly Learning Initiatives Program) and the Foreign Credential Recognition Program.

A goal of the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program is to support initiatives that contribute to the development of a results-oriented, accessible, relevant and accountable learning system in Canada. HRSDC offers contribution funding for up to three years to projects that develop and test original approaches to PLAR, develop best practices to encourage recognition of all types of learning for academic credit and build stakeholders' capacity to recognize learning. Between 2000 and 2005, HRSDC funded over 30 PLAR-related projects. The following are some of the federal/national projects that received support.

- National Recognizing Learning Conferences (1995-2006)
- Conference Board of Canada – National Credit Review Service Pilot Project
- Corrections Canada – Portfolio development for inmates
- Council of Ministers of Education Canada – Responsiveness: PLAR Inventory of Practices and Policies, and A Provincial/Territory Perspective
- Department of National Defence – Portfolio development as a transition tool for self-assessment and self-recognition of skills and learning
- Medical Council of Canada – Improving integration of international medical graduates, and increasing availability of Evaluation Examination

The Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR) Program is led by HRSDC but involves 15 federal departments. The key objectives of the Program are to work with government partners to ensure that CR processes across the country are fair, accessible, coherent, transparent and rigorous. The program provides financial and strategic support for initiatives to improve foreign credential recognition processes and increase immigrant integration into the labour market. At the same time, it assists Canadian employers in accessing a broader labour pool.

The Program supports initiatives undertaken by a wide range of organizations including sector councils, regulatory bodies, immigrant serving organizations and post-secondary educational institutions interested in doing a better job at assessing immigrants' qualifications. The Program targets both regulated and non-regulated occupations. It is

intended to promote a pan-Canadian approach to assessing and recognizing foreign credentials within targeted occupations and sectors of the economy. HRSDC is providing \$73 million over seven years to implement the FCR program and fund initiatives. To date, the Program has made investments in 19 out of the top 45 occupations identified by skilled immigrants entering Canada. Many FCR initiatives are included in this report.

### **Citizenship and Immigration Canada**

The second federal department involved in promoting the recognition of prior learning, primarily in the area of international credential recognition, is CIC. CIC has financially supported several initiatives cited later in this report.

In May 2007, CIC launched the Foreign Credentials Referral Office (FCRO). This new office is intended to help people navigate through the complex system of foreign credential recognition in Canada using in-person support at Service Canada Centres and a dedicated phone service. A key component of the FCRO is a website that helps individuals identify the occupations in Canada for which they may be qualified and the regulatory body appropriate for their needs. The site also provides individuals with detailed labour market information, based on where they live (or plan to live). The FCRO promotes employer awareness of the processes for and benefits of hiring internationally-trained and educated professionals.

The intention is that the combination of CIC's FCRO and HRSDC's FCR Program will improve the efficiency of Canada's labour market.

Across Canada, there are national and pan-Canadian initiatives that currently support both PLAR and CR or are actively engaged in exploring their potential. The following are examples.

### **EDUCATION-RELATED ACTIVITIES**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities include advocacy, networking, pan-Canadian agreements on mobility and collaborative policy making.

### **Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) Recognition of Learning Affinity Group (ROL AG)**

The ACCC ROL AG was established in 2003 to promote the recognition of prior learning among community colleges. It is a national network of college PLAR advocates and practitioners that focuses on six priority activities: advocacy; funding; PLAR training, standards and certification; increased learner awareness/access to PLAR; responding to the needs of the workplace; and PLAR research. The first three of these are considered top priority. The group finds opportunities to share information on the practices of member institutions.

### **Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits**

In 1995, Canada's universities engaged in a consultation that culminated in the adoption of a Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits. The Protocol states the importance of promoting student mobility across Canada at the university level. It acknowledges the evolving characteristics of the Canadian university student body where students are generally older, more mobile and more likely to be forced by work-related or personal reasons to register in more than one university to complete their undergraduate work.

As a result of the consultations, it was agreed that all course work satisfactorily completed in the first two years of university study will be considered for recognition of credit should they be granted admission at another university. This was to ensure that transferring to another university in Canada would not result in undue additional costs or in the need to repeat essentially equivalent previous learning experiences. Development of the Protocol was led by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC).

### **Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada**

In 2007, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada issued a statement to be used as a guideline in institutional decision-making regarding new degree programs and new degree-granting institutions in Canada. The statement contains procedures and standards for new degree program quality assessment. The standards state that institution should publish academic policies with respect to, among other things, credit transfer and prior learning



assessment as well as policies and procedures that outline the process by which transfer of academic credit is awarded.

The standards also state that institutions should have admission requirements for proposed programs that ensure appropriate forms of assessment of prior learning.

### **Mobility and Transferability Pan-Canadian Protocol (Colleges)**

All of Canada's publicly funded colleges are signatories to a Mobility and Transferability Pan-Canadian Protocol in which they agree to maximize the recognition and transfer of learning acquired through formal education, workplace training and work and life experience. Development of the protocol was led by the ACCC.

Specifically, the colleges agreed that course or program transfer credit will be based on an equivalency of educational achievement and of knowledge, skills, abilities and outcomes. It recognizes that effective learning can occur under a variety of arrangements and conditions including all forms of formal and informal learning such as self-study, workplace education, training and experience. Various methods of demonstrating or achieving equivalency may be employed such as program reviews of workplace training, competency tests, challenge examinations and other forms of prior learning assessment.

Essentially, this agreement supports the automatic transfer of credits acquired through PLAR across institutions. Institutions that deny the transfer of credit must state the reasons for the refusal. In addition, the colleges have agreed to make available current information that accurately describes course equivalencies, program prerequisites and levels of achievement on which admission to awarding of transfer credit at receiving institutions will be based.

### **EMPLOYMENT-RELATED ACTIVITIES**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities include inter-provincial mobility in apprenticeship, inter-provincial education/employer collaboration and inter-governmental collaboration on labour force development.

### **Apprenticeship Red Seal Program**

The Red Seal Program was established following agreement by all provinces and territories to provide greater mobility across Canada for skilled tradespersons. The program is administered in each province and territory and is guided by the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship (CCDA), which operates under the authority of the Forum of Labour Market Ministers (FLMM). Through the program, apprentices who have completed their training and certified journeypersons are able to obtain a "Red Seal" endorsement on their Certificate of Qualification, by successfully completing the Inter-provincial Examination. This enables the individual to practice their trade in any province or territory in Canada where the trade is designated. To date, there are 49 trades included in the Red Seal Program on a national basis.

### **On-site Degree Completion Program**

Humber College of Applied Arts and Technology in Toronto, the British Columbia Open University (BCOU, a division of the Open Learning Agency, now subsumed by Thompson Rivers University) and DaimlerChrysler Canada have joined forces to develop a new learning pathway for workers at DaimlerChrysler in Ontario. The project was generated by a company decision in the mid-1990s to require all middle managers/supervisors to have degrees. The company offered employees an educational allowance, and searched for educational partners who could offer a degree-completion program at the work site.

Today, three ladder credentials are offered: for 30 credits a Humber College General Arts Certificate, for 60 credits a Humber College General Arts Diploma and for 120 credits a Bachelor of General Studies from Thompson Rivers University. To accommodate students' diverse learning experiences, the educational partners allow students to meet up to 95% of the degree requirements through a combination of credit transfer, PLAR and trade certification.

DaimlerChrysler's inventory of workplace training courses has been analyzed and a total of 66 credits are considered course equivalent. Humber College conducts portfolio workshops and assists students in the preparation of their portfolios. Advisors from both BCOU and Humber College are accessible to students.

The project is considered highly successful. Approximately 150 students have graduated with a degree. Several hundred have been awarded college diplomas or certificates. The program has expanded geographically to allow employees from several other DaimlerChrysler operations to attend.

### **Labour Market Partnership Agreements**

Some Canada-provincial labour market partnership agreements include the recognition of prior learning as a priority. For example, the Canada-Ontario Labour Market Partnership Agreement (2005) identifies skills utilization as a priority and the facilitation of recognition through development of tools and pilot projects that encourage learning institutions and employers to participate in initiatives regarding the recognition of domestic and foreign credentials, and trade-specific essential skills. The agreement also prioritizes supporting Aboriginal Literacy and Essential Skills through PLAR that is culturally sensitive and relevant. The Labour Market Partnership Agreements of Manitoba and Saskatchewan also identify support for Aboriginal Literacy and Essential Skills through the use of assessment tools and PLAR processes that are culturally sensitive and relevant.

### **OCCUPATIONAL ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES**

There are several national occupational bodies and sector councils that conduct or promote PLAR and CR by employers and regulators. The following are some examples.

#### **Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council**

The Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council is the national sector council for the aviation and aerospace industrial sector. It has the mandate to develop, promote and administer a human resources strategy for the sector with a view to improving the quality of the Canadian aviation and aerospace labour force. The Council is in the early stages of a PLAR project designed to assess the knowledge and skills of individuals against industry standards. The process will involve self-assessments, interviews, technical and practical examinations, gap identification and referrals for training. Evaluation centres will be established in industrial settings across Canada. Part of the process will be web-based. The project is supported by the federal FCR program, Transport Canada, Industry Canada, CIC and participating educational institutions.

### **BioTalent Canada**

BioTalent Canada, the sector council for biotechnology, is building capacity within the sector so that foreign trained professionals can be assessed and linked with employers. The initiative includes development of an industry-led internship program, developing and testing national practical assessments, and developing a curriculum to "train the trainer" on soft skills that will assist in the assessment and integration of internationally-trained professionals into the labour market.

### **Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators**

The Alliance conducts credential assessments of internationally-educated physiotherapists followed by PLAR in cases where prior learning may have filled in small gaps between applicants' educational qualifications and the Alliance's registration requirements. The PLAR process is currently under review.

### **Canadian Council of Professional Engineers (CCPE)**

The CCPE is currently in the final phase of a three-phase project, "From Consideration to Integration" funded by HRSDC. The project's goal is to ensure the timely licensure and employment of international engineering graduates without lowering professional standards. The outcomes include an option of conducting interviews in place of exams to provide internationally-educated professionals with an alternative way of demonstrating qualifications. CCPE currently has ten sub-projects under way in order to implement the recommendations made in Phase 2 of the project. One of these is the development of a database of foreign engineering degree programs to be used by provincial regulatory bodies in their assessment of international engineering graduates.

### **Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS)**

The CSMLS uses PLAR and CR for all international applicants who request it. The process includes telephone interviews and reviews of dossiers that document applicants' training and work experience. Evidence of structured clinical education, any other relevant education and documented and verified work experience must be provided.

### **Canadian Technology Human Resources Board (CTHRB)**

CTHRB has developed a “PROfile” online self-assessment tool that enables technicians and technologists to assess their professional competencies against industry standards and/or best practices, and design their own career improvement paths.

### **Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council (CTHRC)**

CTHRC has a history of promoting credential recognition and fostering recognition of knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace. The Council’s most recent initiative focuses on developing foreign credential recognition capacity in the tourism sector based on competency assessment and recognition and credential assessment. The initiative has eight sub-projects, four of which relate to PLAR and CR. They:

- Explore reciprocity of credentials with organizations in other countries.
- Work towards agreement with the ACCC member colleges to articulate CTHRC assessments with institutional assessments.
- Assist potential immigrants to self-assess competencies for purposes of working in tourism jobs using assessment tools derived from CTHRC certification exams and generate awareness of the CTHRC assessment system and determine whether it can be adopted by credential assessment services in Canada.
- Continue to work with secondary and post-secondary systems to develop a credit transfer system for the tourism sector by matching institutions’ learning outcomes to occupational standards in the industry. Immigrants who are referred to the post-secondary system for workplace preparation who have used the self-assessment tools or challenged a certification exam would then have easier access to post-secondary training which meets their needs.

### **Information and Communications Technology Council**

The Information and Communications Technology Council is developing a sector-based, competency-based assessment and recognition tool for internationally-educated information and technology professionals. Activities also include developing and piloting a bridge-to-work and mentoring program, along with tools for small and medium-sized enterprises.

### **LeaRN Readiness Test, Canadian Nurses Association**

The LeaRN Readiness Test is a tool designed to assist internationally-educated nurses assess their own level of readiness to write the Canadian Registered Nurse Exam. For a fee they may take an online multiple choice and short answer exam designed in line with the format of the national exam. This tool is part of a strategy by the Canadian Nurses Association to improve immigrant professional integration. The Association has taken the position that there is a “need to develop a national, standardized approach to facilitate the integration of internationally-educated nurses (IENs) into the Canadian nursing workforce.”

### **National Alliance of Respiratory Therapy Regulatory Bodies**

The National Alliance of Respiratory Therapy Regulatory Bodies is investigating issues related to the entry of foreign-trained practitioners. The Alliance is developing an entry-to-practice examination for competency assessment of both foreign-trained and Canadian-educated individuals.

### **MULTI-PURPOSE ACTIVITIES**

Multi-purpose PLAR and CR activities involve the promotion of good practice and research.

### **Alliance of Credentialing Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC)**

ACESC is an association of Canada’s five publicly funded assessment agencies, which work collaboratively to promote quality in credential recognition. Its members include Academic Credential Assessment Service in Manitoba, International Credential Evaluation Service in British Columbia, International Qualifications Assessment Service in Alberta (which serves Saskatchewan and Northwest Territories), Service des évaluations comparatives d’études in Québec and World Education Services in Ontario.

### **Association of Accrediting Agencies of Canada (AAAC)**

AAAC is a national organization comprised of professional associations involved in promoting good practices by its members in accreditation of educational programs.

### **Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)**

CAPLA is a non-profit association that includes practitioners, advisors, assessors and other interested parties across Canada. It promotes the use of PLAR and CR by educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and employers and encourages flexible human resource strategies that respond to the changing needs and circumstances of adults.

### **Canadian Council on Learning (CCL)**

CCL is a non-profit organization that conducts research and promotes learning in Canada. The Council has supported a number of PLAR-focused initiatives including a state of the field review (2006), a Canadian university consultation (2006), research into quality assurance in PLAR (2006/07) and publication of peer-reviewed research (2007).

### **Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC)**

CICIC is an office founded by the Council of Ministers of Education Canada. It acts as a national clearing house for information on education in Canada including referral information on activities related to credential recognition. A goal of the Centre is to assist Canada to carry out its obligations under the terms of the UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education by supporting the recognition and portability of Canadian and international educational and occupational qualifications. CICIC provides information on PLAR and CR in Canada on its website and promotes their implementation internationally.

### **Conference Board of Canada**

The Conference Board of Canada is a not-for-profit organization that researches and analyzes economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues. The Conference Board has conducted research on the financial costs of not recognizing prior learning in Canada.

## SECTION TWO – PROVINCIAL AND TERRITORIAL INITIATIVES

### ALBERTA

#### Public policy context

There are a number of public policy initiatives linking the recognition of prior learning to Alberta's economic and labour force development.

In 2005, Alberta undertook a comprehensive review of its advanced education system. A policy recommendation from the review was to develop an action plan to recognize the international credentials and prior learning of immigrants. A second policy recommendation was to expand the ability of institutions and employers to recognize prior learning by developing a framework that supports assessment. The objective was to allow ease of movement throughout the system using PLAR and credit transfer.

In July 2005, Alberta established a new immigration policy, *Supporting Immigrants and Immigration to Alberta*, to help attract and retain immigrants. It states that immigrants are vital to sustaining the prosperity and continued development of Alberta's economy, now and in the future. Alberta's strong economy has placed high demands on the province's labour force resulting in skill shortages. The policy sets out specific strategies, which include expanding efforts to recognize and utilize foreign credentials and skills acquired abroad.

In October 2005, the Alberta Legislature passed the *Access to the Future Act* which gave the Minister of Advanced Education and Technology authority to enhance access to and affordability of advanced education including arrangements regarding recognition of prior learning.

Also in 2005, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) funded research on best practices of PLAR in Alberta. The Council has been a proactive participant in provincial policy development, institutional implementation, PLAR awareness projects and facilitation of professional networking. ACAT's *Principles and Standards for Recognition of Prior Learning* are endorsed by some post-secondary institutions (e.g., Athabasca



University) and not by others (e.g., University of Alberta). In 2006/07, the Council led an initiative to propose a PLAR framework to the provincial government.

Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce (2006) is a provincial initiative that includes a number of short, medium and long term strategies that aim to increase Alberta's education and skill levels. Under this strategy, working with partners to recognize the credentials, competencies, prior learning and work experience of immigrants and inter-provincial migrants, is highlighted as a priority activity to attract labour to the province.

In 2007, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology announced its decision to develop a provincial strategy for PLAR and CR. In Alberta's Budget 2007, ensuring that credentials, prior learning, skills and experience are valued and recognized, was identified as a priority. This work is ongoing.

### **Prior learning terminology**

Definitions for prior learning vary. For example, ACAT defines it as learning gained through experiences other than taking formal credit courses including work, self-directed study, community work, non-credit courses, on the job training, corporate training programs or life experience. Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) and Red Deer College define prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired at other post-secondary institutions, non-educational organizations and in the workplace. Athabasca University, Grant McEwan College and Grand Prairie College consider only learning acquired outside academic institutions to applicable to PLAR.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology
- Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT)
- International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)
- Athabasca University
- Institutes of technology

- Colleges

### **Provincial funding**

No targeted provincial funding is provided for post-secondary PLAR services. Credential recognition is financed through institutional budgets and student fees. Monitoring and evaluation are the responsibility of institutions. ACAT has received funding from the provincial government to support its research and policy development on PLAR.

IQAS receives operational funding from the provincial government to conduct credential recognition.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities involve direct delivery by post-secondary institutions, and collaborative projects between institutions in Alberta and other provinces.

### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in Alberta is provided by the province's four universities and 17 colleges and institutes. All institutions have discretion to decide whether to provide PLAR. Policies and practices vary. For example, Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) both have institution-wide PLAR policies. Red Deer College has an institution-wide policy but notes that most courses are not eligible for PLAR. Lethbridge Community College and Athabasca University have extensive PLAR policy frameworks. University of Alberta has limited offerings. Some institutions limit PLAR to the granting of academic credit; others also use it to grant admission to programs. University of Calgary considers prior learning for admission to its masters and doctoral programs in Education.

PLAR monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance measures are primarily the responsibility of individual institutions.

Institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four forms of credential recognition in Alberta’s institutions: articulation agreements, individual course credit transfer, equivalency assessment and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are in place between colleges and universities within Alberta, with other Canadian jurisdictions including Nunavut and Northwest Territories, and with institutions in other countries. ACAT manages the province’s credit transfer guide.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all Alberta post-secondary institutions. Transfers are normally determined by Registrars’ offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are charged fees on a per course basis. Some institutions consider professional certification for credit transfer.
- Equivalency assessment is conducted through evaluations of non-collegiate and/or non-credit programs, courses, certificates and designations. These are sometimes known as program reviews.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted by most institutions. Some institutions use the services of assessment agencies to provide information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. Fees are normally charged to student applicants.

*PLAR* – PLAR in Alberta’s post-secondary institutions is based on institutional policies and take a variety of forms. Common methods of assessment are written challenge examinations, standardized tests, oral exams, structured interviews, projects, auditions, demonstrations, performances, skills assessments, essays and assignments, and portfolio assessments. Assessments are mostly course-based and administered by faculty who teach the course which is the subject of the assessment or by an institution’s Prior Learning Assessment Office. Athabasca University also conducts competency assessments in relation to program learning outcomes. Fees are charged to candidates, at levels generally not more than the equivalent of course tuition.

Most of Alberta’s post-secondary institutions provide competency assessment but in most instances, the decision to offer services rests with individual program areas.

*Portfolio learning* – Athabasca University uses portfolio learning for personal and career development purposes. The use of portfolio learning at other institutions varies by program.

For example, Mount Royal College offers portfolio development as part of its Certificate of Leadership program. Bow Valley offers traditional and e-portfolio development courses in its Life Skills and Career Program Development Coach Diploma program.

*The Gateways Project (2006)*

The Gateways Project was designed to examine program-based PLAR activities of 124 adult learners at one university, three colleges, and one university-college in four jurisdictions across Canada. By October 2006, 60 of the participants had been awarded 1,861 credits representing about 620, three-credit courses at the college and university level. The awards represented a consistent savings of the equivalent of one year of full-time study and 4.3 years of part-time study for each participant. The credits saved participants an average of one year's tuition as well as attendant living costs and potential loss of income. Many of the learners reported that they would not have returned to education without having had their prior learning recognized. Researchers made several recommendations that encouraged further developments in PLAR.

*Primary/secondary school initiatives*

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

**Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities in Alberta include collaborations between educational institutions and immigrant serving agencies. Two examples are the following:

*Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (Ongoing)*

The Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers provides employment services that focus on PLAR through the use of self-assessments, validating interviews, confirmatory exams, competency-based assessments and portfolio-building to help immigrants see themselves as skilled workers. Self-assessment is an important part of this process.

*NAIT and the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (2007)*

NAIT and the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers have developed a partnership, now in its 11<sup>th</sup> year, for immigrant engineers and engineering technologists. Candidates undertake a PLAR self-assessment by completing a questionnaire based on competencies

from several areas of engineering technology profession. Based on their score, candidates are interviewed by a representative of the Alberta Association of Science and Engineering Technology and a representative of the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers. This preliminary assessment results on a rating for each applicant. Selected candidates receive English language training, introduction to computers, AutoCAD and technical writing training delivered by the Mennonite Centre over a period of four months.

Successful completion of this training is followed by enrollment at NAIT in a special training program that delivers the critical components of the two-year diploma program in engineering technology. The program is approximately 25% of the length of the regular engineering technology program. Graduating technologists are assisted by the Mennonite Centre, which works with the engineering firms to arrange employment – about 60 candidates each year. There are now employers on a wait list for graduates. NAIT has recently commenced a similar program for internationally-educated accountants.

#### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR and CR activities identified.

#### **Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose PLAR and CR activities include collaborative projects among post-secondary institutions and occupational bodies across Canada, as well as credential assessment agencies that evaluate individuals' formal academic credentials for recognition in employment, education and licensing/certification.

#### ***Assessing the Impact of PLAR on the Ease of Admissibility and Placement of Internationally-educated Nurses and Practical Nurses, Mount Royal College***

This project was established to develop PLAR in the field of nursing to improve access to related jobs and education programs. It focused on practical nurses (PNs) seeking improved access to the baccalaureate nursing program and internationally-educated nurses (IENs) requiring assessment for entry into the Canadian nursing profession.

The project also set out to develop best practice models. Several assessment tools were developed including:

- Preliminary diagnostic exam
- Modified objective structured clinical examinations (OSCE)
- Critical thinking assessment
- Clinical judgment assessment
- Testing physical assessment and psychomotor skills

Colleges and provincial nurse associations across Canada were key players in this project including New Brunswick Community College, University of New Brunswick, Ryerson University, Calgary Health Region, Douglas College, Langara College and the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta.

The success of the project has generated additional funding from Health Canada through the Alberta Department of Health and Wellness. The Bridge to Canadian Nursing (BCN) program also receives Alberta Advanced Education funding and is approved as a credit program until 2009 at which time the need/demand will be assessed.

### ***International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS)***

IQAS services are used by individuals, educational institutions, employers and occupational bodies in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories to assess formal academic credentials of internationally-educated individuals. IQAS is also used by at least one national regulatory body.

## **BRITISH COLUMBIA**

### **Public policy context**

Historically, the recognition of prior learning in British Columbia has been most prevalent in the education sector, with some project-based partnerships with employers and community organizations. In 1996, BC initiated a strategic plan for the future of BC's college, institute and agency system. As part of the plan, recognition of prior learning was set in the context of improving student-centeredness of delivery, facilitating student mobility and credit transfer, and improving access to education and training. PLAR was also highlighted as a strategy that would lead to enhancing learning efficiency.

In the early 1990s, PLAR was implemented as a joint initiative between the public post-secondary institutions, the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer, the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, and the Ministry of Advanced Education.

Small grants were made available to institutions to develop and implement PLAR and annual reports on progress were required. In 1999, the Ministry of Advanced Education recommended a set of implementation guidelines to all public post-secondary institutions. Following a Core Review by the BC government in 2001/02, responsibility for PLAR was assigned to individual institutions and the Ministry subsequently withdrew from specific PLAR activities and initiatives. Currently there is no provincial policy on PLAR.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The provincial government has not defined prior learning. BC's post-secondary institutions use one or more of the following terms: PLA, PLAR and PLFAR (prior learning, flexible assessment and recognition). Some institutions define prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired in non-academic contexts; others include credential recognition. Colleges and universities submit reports annually to the Ministry of Advanced Education on their PLAR activities as part of the province's annual audit process. However no provincial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance activities are conducted.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Ministry of Advanced Education
- BC Council on Admissions and Transfer
- Universities
- Colleges and institutes
- Primary/secondary schools
- International Credential Evaluation Services
- Community-based organization (re: employment and immigrant integration)

### **Provincial funding**

Targeted funding for PLAR and portfolio learning was allocated between 1996/97 and 2001/02 beginning with \$1 million and declining to \$771,000 during that period. In 2002/03, the provincial government switched to block funding. Targeted funds for PLAR were no longer provided to post-secondary institutions. Institutions currently finance PLAR and CR costs out of their general budgets. In most cases, student assessment fees are charged, most commonly calculated as a percentage of course fees.

The Ministry of Advanced Education funds the operation of the Province's credit transfer system operated by the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer. Provincial funding for PLAR and portfolio learning is occasionally allocated on a project basis. Of particular note, are projects recently conducted in the development of e-portfolio learning tools with primary and secondary schools, colleges, universities and BCcampus (the provincial distance and online learning agency). A number of community-based programs/projects are funded by the Ministry of Economic Development.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities focus on direct delivery by post-secondary institutions and collaborative partnerships.

### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in BC is provided by the province's six universities, three university-colleges, five institutes and 12 colleges. Most institutions have PLAR policies and procedures but they vary in their degree of openness to PLAR and activity levels vary. Institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer, equivalency assessment and academic credential assessment.



- BC's post-secondary institutions participate in several types of articulation agreements. There are currently about 70 articulation committees in specific subjects or program areas. BC's sophisticated credit transfer system and credit transfer guide contain hundreds of credit transfer agreements.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all BC post-secondary institutions. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are charged fees on a per course basis. At some institutions, unassigned credits can be awarded if receiving institutions do not offer equivalents for the courses being transferred.
- Equivalency assessments are conducted by some post-secondary institutions to evaluate training that occurs in non-academic contexts such as the workplace. This process is also known as program review.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted by most institutions and students are charged an administration fee. Some institutions use the services of an assessment agency to provide information on international credential equivalency and to document authenticity. The costs of these assessments are borne by student applicants.

*PLAR* – Almost all of BC's post-secondary institutions provide PLAR in at least one program. It is available more widely in colleges than in universities. In most instances, the decision to offer assessment rests with individual program areas.

PLAR assessment practices vary. Methods may include portfolio assessment, portfolio-assisted assessment, demonstrations, structured and unstructured interviews, oral exams, audition, product assessments, assignments, written examinations or workplace assessments. Assessment fees are charged to individual candidates. Portfolio courses designed to support learner preparation for the assessment process are available at some institutions.

*Portfolio learning* – The use of portfolios as learning tools also varies. All BC Faculties of Education now require their teachers-in-training to complete a portfolio during their undergraduate years. All Aircraft Maintenance Engineering students at the British Columbia Institute of Technology must complete a portfolio of their achievements.

Electronic portfolios are gaining popularity as distance and online learning expands.

- The University of British Columbia recently completed a three-year, campus-wide e-portfolio pilot project involving 12 projects, 2,000 students, 91 instructors and 37 staff.
- The University College of the Fraser Valley has developed an English for Career and Professional Integration course to help foreign-trained professionals develop career-oriented e-portfolios.
- Douglas College offers e-portfolio in its Classroom and Community Support program. Course learning outcomes have been matched to the occupational competencies of a classroom and community support worker. Practitioners complete the course and have the results “translated” into Douglas College course learning outcomes using three types of evidence: self-assessment, and two other types of evidence such as observation in the workplace, multiple choice test, simulation or a case study-based interview. Students can earn up to three-quarters of a Douglas College credential through the assessment of their portfolios. Faculty assessors are content and assessment experts. Advising and written support are provided on an as needed basis.

*Electronic Portfolio Initiative, BCcampus*

BCcampus (the province’s online program delivery service) and its partners are currently conducting research into a possible province-wide electronic portfolio repository that will enable students to preserve their graduation portfolios and expand them over time. The results could provide students with a means to maintain, enhance and transition their portfolio from secondary to post-secondary and into the workplace.

*Flexible Assessment, Royal Roads University*

Royal Roads University specializes in providing degree-completion programs. It does not offer courses at the first or second year undergraduate level. Through flexible assessment, the University provides program access to learners with non-traditional backgrounds by providing evaluations and recognition for their demonstrable skills and knowledge.

At Royal Roads, the term “flexible assessment” includes both PLA and “flexible admissions” (FA). PLA refers to formal credit granted toward a course and recorded on the learner’s transcript. This is a rarely used service. “Flexible admission” refers to the process of granting advanced standing into third year of undergraduate programs or admission into Master’s programs. Learners with two year diplomas, informal learning or combinations of

informal and formal learning are assessed against program learning outcomes and a “readiness to proceed” determination is made. Academic credit is not granted. Since Royal Roads’ inception, over 5,000 flexible assessment applications have been processed, with an approximate 50% success rate.

Royal Roads considers several types of evidence of prior learning such as, letters of reference, portfolios, demonstrations, challenge exams/tests, oral/phone interviews, résumés, transcripts, certificates and diplomas and employer documentation.

The University is in the final implementation stages of a new semi-automated process for all applicants including those with non-traditional backgrounds. Rubrics are used extensively in this process to bring quality assurance to the assessment process. It is anticipated that it will result in workload reductions, enhanced learner satisfaction and quicker acceptance for highly qualified learners.

*PLAR in Fire Service Education, Justice Institute of British Columbia (2003)*

The Justice Institute of British Columbia is a post-secondary organization providing education and training for the police, fire service, paramedics, courts, correction and other public safety functions. In co-operation with the fire service, the Justice Institute supports opportunities for flexible delivery of a continuous fire service learning system and recognizes learning acquired through relevant experience. The Institute provides assessment and recognition for candidates using an on-line, web-based system that maximizes flexibility and speedy assessments. Currently, only one course (Instructional Techniques) is available for assessment but this is about to be expanded. The process begins with an online self-assessment tool using 36 questions based on critical learning outcomes of the course. This is followed by an invigilated 60-question multiple-choice knowledge examination and a performance assessment by an approved referee based on 18 criteria and submission of products such as a lesson plan. This PLAR process has been operating successfully for six years and is accepted by the international fire service accreditation body.

### ***Primary/secondary school initiatives***

PLAR in primary schools is not widespread; it occurs province-wide in secondary school education usually in the form of portfolio learning.

Portfolios were introduced in 2004 as a mandatory graduation requirement for all Grade 10-12 students in the province. The “graduation portfolio” can be physical or electronic and is intended to complement more traditional classroom assessment practices. It is now an optional graduation requirement, but according to provincial government a portfolio culture now permeates BC’s schools, as students are required to collect and reflect on evidence of their unique learning. For example, in Surrey School District, all Surrey students develop an e-portfolio beginning in Grade 2.

### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities generally involve collaborative combinations of interested and relevant stakeholders from government, education, social services, regulatory bodies, employers and community-based organizations. They contribute to identifying the knowledge and skills of individuals, particularly immigrants, unemployed and under-employed persons.

### ***Comprehensive Assessment and Career Planning Service for BC’s Skilled Immigrants***

In this project, a Burnaby School District identified models and best practices of career assessment and planning services that integrate the needs of immigrant professionals, employers and professional associations. It also developed a comprehensive career assessment and planning model that can be incorporated in whole or in part by the multiple stakeholders working with skilled immigrants. The “three tracked” model recognizes that skilled immigrants have diverse needs and levels of English, career clarity and job search ability. It allows skilled immigrants to enroll in the component that best meets their needs and to continue to the next track only if required. The model was designed with not only employment but “self-sufficiency” as a goal.

### ***Credential Brokerage Service***

The Credential Brokerage Service, funded by HRSDC and operated by the community-based organization, MOSIAC in Vancouver, sponsors the cost of immigrants' international academic credential evaluation if they meet specific criteria. Successful candidates must be under-employed or unemployed, in search of education-related work that is in reasonable demand, have English skills commensurate with occupational requirements and be enrolled in or have completed an Employment Assistance Program in Canada.

### ***Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment Program (2006)***

In 2006, the BC government introduced a three-year, Immigrant Skilled Trades Employment Program (ISTEP), developed through a partnership with the BC Construction Association and the Construction Sector Council and funded by the federal FCR program. The program helps build careers in BC's construction industry and provide employers with skilled trades' workers. Landed immigrants who have experience in construction or who want to start a career in the industry are matched up with employers who have jobs. Candidates are able to "challenge" provincial requirements in the same manner as tradespersons from other provinces. Job coaching is provided by advisors.

ISTEP involves a six-week technical program and an additional six weeks of English language instruction specific to the trades. There is no cost to employers or to the immigrants wishing to participate in ISTEP and there is no fee for the services provided by the job coaches.

### ***Skills Connect for Immigrants***

An important program engaged in the recognition and economic integration of immigrants, is the Skills Connect for Immigrants program. Funded by the Ministry of Economic Development, the primary goal of this \$14.4 million program is to help new immigrants secure jobs that fully use their pre-arrival skills, knowledge and experience. Program services are delivered throughout the province by six community-based organizations. The program assesses and bridges skilled immigrants into the workplace in five economic sectors: construction, transportation, energy, tourism/hospitality and health. With specific reference to recognizing prior learning, Skills Connect provides clients with career

assessment and planning services including assessment of academic qualifications, technical skills, essential skills and career management skills.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

Occupational assessment activities involve the evaluation of internationally acquired academic credentials and non-academic learning of individuals to determine if they meet requirements to practice specific occupations in BC. Many regulatory bodies in BC conduct these assessments, often in conjunction with credential assessments provided by the International Credentials Evaluation Services (ICES). The following are examples.

#### ***College of Dental Technicians***

The BC College of Dental Technicians provides PLAR and CR processes for internationally-educated applicants who can provide appropriate documentation/evidence. They must verify that they have provided services equivalent to those of a dental technician for a period of not less than five years, and have a combination of knowledge, skills and abilities, which satisfy the education requirements for licensure. The College's Registration Committee conducts these assessments by reviewing documented evidence submitted by applicants. The College also requires that all international applicants obtain comprehensive and supplementary evaluations of their academic credentials from ICES. All applicants must also successfully complete theory and practical examinations.

#### ***College of Dieticians of British Columbia (2007)***

The College of Dieticians uses portfolio development in its continuing competence program which is a requirement for all registered dieticians in the province. The program includes a practitioner self-assessment relative to the occupation's standards of practice (professional portfolios are highly recommended), the identification of at least three goals, the establishment of a professional development plan to address these goals (updated annually), a progress tracking tool and a declaration of participation submitted annually with registration renewal.

The College also conducts its own assessments of internationally-educated applicants in conjunction with an evaluation provided by ICES. In 2008, Langara College will begin

offering an intensive practicum, the Dietetic Canadian Experience Program for all international applicants who meet the provincial registration requirements.

***IEN Registered Nurses Post-licensure Employment Project (2007)***

Over approximately two years, this project will recruit, assess, hire and integrate 44 registered internationally-educated nurses into acute care sites in five BC hospitals. The initiative will begin with an integrated bridging program comprised of three key activities: targeted recruitment, prior learning and clinical competency assessment, and a 16-week extended new nurse orientation. This project will adapt and use existing PLAR and clinical competency assessment tools and provide nurse mentors and clinical educators for support.

***IEN Licensed Practical Nurse Transition Program (2007)***

This project is also in its early stages. It will identify and recruit under-employed internationally-educated nurses currently working in Vancouver Coastal Health Care settings. Interested individuals will be assessed against project criteria and selected individuals will participate in a four week workplace English language program before taking part in a six month full-time transition program in licensed practical nursing. Prior to enrolling in the transition program participants will be assessed using PLAR and CR to determine clinical and theoretical gaps in training and experience. Following the transition program, participants will take both the Canadian English Language Benchmark Assessment for Nurses test and the Canadian Practical Nurse Registration Examination. Participants will then enter a four-month workplace practice and mentorship program.

**Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose PLAR and CR activities include assessment of international academic credentials for the purpose of employment, education, and/or occupational licensing and certification.

***International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES)***

ICES is operated by the British Columbia Institute of Technology. It provides assessment services for a range of stakeholder groups including individuals, educational institutions,

employers and regulatory bodies in the province as well as stakeholders in other jurisdictions such as the Yukon Territory.

## **MANITOBA**

### **Public policy context**

Government activity in PLAR began in the 1990s when Red River College was provided with funding for a full-time position of PLAR facilitator. In 1997, the Council on Post-secondary Education was formed and as part of its program approval process, asked institutions to consider how PLAR could be part of every newly funded program. Also in 1997, a Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Centre was established jointly by governments at the federal and provincial levels to provide advisory services to individuals who were unemployed or under-employed, and to provide PLAR consulting services to post-secondary education, business, industry and government. Demonstration projects were undertaken to validate the use of PLAR in a variety of fields.

In 2001/2002, the government developed a provincial *Policy Framework for PLAR*, designed to support a decentralized system of supports for recognizing adults' prior learning at universities, colleges, adult learning centres and workplaces across the province. A multi-stakeholder working group was established to coordinate PLAR activities. The three-year demonstration project which had founded the Manitoba PLA Centre ended, and the province re-profiled its project contribution to build capacity within Manitoba's education and employment support systems. By 2003, every public post-secondary institution in Manitoba employed trained PLA advisors. By 2007, PLAR was taking place at all public colleges and universities and 44 adult learning centres (ALCs) had been established and mandated to provide PLAR services. Provincial policy essentially states that ALCs must award credit to learners, whenever possible, for high school level prior learning. This learning may have been acquired through educational settings, work and life experiences.

As part of its efforts to recruit and integrate immigrants, the provincial government also adopted a *Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants*. It is a joint action plan involving three provincial ministries and HRSDC. The Strategy is intended to help newcomers enter the



labour market, secure and keep jobs and enhance their long-term employment prospects. Under this strategy, new assessment tools are being developed to identify newcomers' skills and competencies in relation to Manitoba labour market requirements. The plan is also to establish best practices for qualifications recognition and effective labour market integration. Several projects have a PLAR component.

Part of the province's Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants is a Framework for a Manitoba Strategy on Qualifications Recognition (2005) in which several principles create a foundation for efficient, credible, sustainable, accountable, fair and equitable assessments of academic credentials. The Immigration and Multiculturalism Division of Manitoba Labour and Immigration has been and continues to be a supporter of demonstration projects involving regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions and employers to increase labour market entry by immigrants.

The Departments of Labour and Immigration and Advanced Education and Training have coordinated and delivered numerous workshops to regulatory bodies to introduce the concept of PLAR. Emphasis is placed on demonstrating how PLAR provides a transparent, fair, competency-based approach to the assessment of qualifications while at the same time ensuring standards for practice are maintained. Follow-up meetings have taken place with a number of these bodies and regulatory bodies have been offered funding and resources to develop alternative assessment systems.

### **Prior learning terminology**

Definitions of prior learning vary. For example, the provincial government and Assiniboine Community College have defined prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired outside of formal educational institutions. Red River College and University College of the North include credit transfer as part of PLAR. Recently, the provincial government has adopted the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which includes post-secondary credit transfer and advanced standing, PLAR and qualification recognition in the trades and apprenticeship.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth
- Department of Competitiveness, Training and Trade
- Manitoba Labour and Immigration
- Department of Advanced Education and Literacy
- Universities
- Community colleges
- First Nations and Métis organizations
- Community-based organizations (re: employment and immigrant integration)

### **Provincial funding**

During early PLA implementation in post-secondary institutions, a small amount of base funding was provided to establish a core capacity in each institution. This funding was subsequently rolled into institutional operating budgets. Further assistance may be provided for specific activities or projects but generally, PLAR is funded through institutional budgets and learner assessment fees.

In 2001, a three-year funding package was allocated for the development and delivery of a comprehensive PLAR practitioner training program which was designed by Red River College.

The Department of Competitiveness, Training and Trade funds 16 Employment Centres which help individuals to prepare for employment. There is no charge for PLAR advisory services delivered at these centres.

The Department of Labour and Immigration funds and operates the provincial Academic Credential Assessment Service.

The Department of Advanced Education and Literacy funds registered adult learning centres that provide PLAR advisory services as part of their mainstream business. There is no charge for assessments for secondary school level academic credit.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities involve direct delivery by institutions at post-secondary and secondary school levels, and collaborative partnerships with employers, adult learning centres, employment services centres and regulatory bodies.

#### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in Manitoba is provided by the province's four public colleges, two university-colleges and three universities. All colleges, one university-college and two universities have institution-wide PLAR policies. A third university, the University of Manitoba, has a new PLAR infrastructure under development.

Brandon University has an RPL website, collects assessment data and participates in partnership-based PLAR projects. The University of Manitoba opened an RPL office in 2005 that focuses on capacity building and monitors internal RPL activities. College Universitaire de Saint Boniface, Assiniboine Community College, Winnipeg Technical College and University College of the North all collect assessment data, conduct faculty training and awareness initiatives, provide information on their websites and are engaged in capacity building.

The University of Winnipeg has Senate-approved PLAR policies and procedures which were passed following a decision that recognized several PLAR benefits including student recruitment and retention. Services are focused on the awarding of academic credit. Pre-assessment evaluations and candidate advising are required before permission to undertake PLAR is granted. The University has a full-time Coordinator of PLAR and Adult Learner Services and a PLAR website; it collects assessment data and participates in internal and partnership-based research.

Red River College is a leader in PLAR in the province and in Canada with a history of innovation, professional development, strategic planning and creating partnerships with other organizations such as the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network (MPLAN), the Manitoba PLA Centre, adult learning centres and employers. The College emphasizes capacity building and PLAR practitioner development. It collects assessment data and

provides information on PLAR on its website. Activity levels are higher at colleges than at universities.

Manitoba post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four main forms of credential recognition in Manitoba: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer, equivalency assessment and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by all institutions to promote student mobility. The Council on Post-secondary Education supports credit transfer and an articulation system across the province and coordinates committees to enhance both processes.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all institutions. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are charged fees on a per course basis.
- Equivalency assessments are conducted to evaluate training programs such as those delivered in the workplace. This process is also known as program review or external course/program assessment.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted independently by most institutions.

*PLAR* – PLAR is conducted by Manitoba's institutions for program admission and/or awarding academic credit. Learner fees vary and in some cases involve formulae that take into account number of credit hours, course length or length of the assessment procedure. Post-secondary institutions use a variety of assessment methods and tools. These include evaluation of educational documents, portfolio assessment, written and oral examinations, interviews, projects, assignments, skill demonstrations and product assessments.

*Portfolio learning* – Colleges are more likely to offer portfolio learning opportunities than universities. At Red River College, 19 programs have implemented professional portfolio workshops/courses as part of their curriculum. The College provides training on how to develop and effectively use portfolios for a variety of purposes including personal growth,

career/professional development or for providing evidence for program admission or academic credit. Some portfolio development courses are completed for credit; others are strictly for audit purposes.

### ***Primary/secondary school initiatives***

Manitoba offers a Mature Student High School Diploma through the provincial network of adult learning centres. Several prior learning recognition opportunities exist including the following:

- A challenge for credit option available at senior secondary school level has been developed by the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth. All school divisions are expected to develop local policies and procedures for implementation of this option.
- A dual credit option, which allows students in high schools to study post-secondary courses and apply them for credit at both the secondary and post-secondary levels.
- Credit for community service which allows voluntary community service to be recognized as student-initiated projects. Guidelines are provided by the Department of Education, Citizenship and Youth.

### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities involve apprenticeship, employment preparation and transitions, and bridging programs (training and orientation programs for immigrants who require a range of supports to successfully integrate into the Manitoba workforce.) PLAR can be used to determine eligibility for bridging training, help program managers to individualize training, exempt individuals from training, or develop educational and employment plans. Methods typically include credential assessment, competency assessment, and/or portfolio learning/assessment.

### ***Apprenticeship***

The Department of Competitiveness, Training and Trade reports that PLAR is used in the provincial apprenticeship program and trades qualifications process to evaluate the prior learning of training and examination candidates.

As in other provinces, program level placement tests are available in apprenticeship. There are also several other mechanisms through which individuals can earn advanced placement. These include grand-parenting, cross-credits between trades as well as more traditional methods of assessing knowledge and work experience. Efforts continue to incorporate Essential Skills training and PLAR into the apprenticeship program to support retention. A PLAR Coordinator is now in place in the province's apprenticeship program to provide a focal point for PLAR-related activities.

Experienced workers in designated trades can also become certified journeypersons through a trades qualification process. This process combines self-assessment, credentials assessment and time-based calculations of work experience to determine eligibility to write certificate of qualifications examinations. Trades qualification applications quadrupled from 145 in 1999 to 516 in 2005. It continues to be a matter of some debate as to whether the time-based aspects of assessment in apprenticeship programs meet the definition of PLAR.

#### ***Boeing Competency Identification***

A quality audit at Boeing has led the company to create competencies (including essential skills) for all job categories and a system to better determine training and development activities. Boeing has chosen to adopt the principles of PLAR and obtain support from educators to develop the competencies and assessment and documentation processes.

#### ***Boeing Technical Writing – PLAR Process***

Boeing developed a process for the assessment and recognition of prior learning against a technical writing and communication course. The process used authentic Boeing workplace tasks and materials incorporated into an English Language Arts Technical Communications course for credit in the secondary school level Mature Student Diploma Program.

#### ***Bridge to Work Pilot Project (2006)***

In 2006/07, under the Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants, the provincial government established a work internship program for skilled newcomers in high demand occupational areas. The pilot provided 25 immigrants an opportunity to obtain Canadian work

experience, employer-based gap training and validation of formal/non-formal learning through the development of skills portfolios.

### ***Collaborative Language Portfolio Assessment (Ongoing)***

Deliverers of English as an Additional Language (EAL) training use portfolios in adult language training classes provided through the Manitoba Immigrant Integration program of the Department of Labour and Immigration. A language portfolio is a selection of examples of work that provides concrete evidence of a learner's progress in learning English.

Learners' progress is assessed using the Canadian Language Benchmarks as the standard. Learners collect samples of their language tasks and classroom test results and discuss the portfolio collection, and their language strengths and weaknesses with their teachers.

### ***Industry Training Partnerships***

Manitoba's Department of Competitiveness, Training and Trade provides business and industry with a single window of access to support human resource planning and skills training. Industry-based PLAR is an integral component of the services provided by this program. The Industry Training Partnerships Branch provides consultation and expertise to business, labour and government and coordinates the development of industry-based PLAR projects. The program established a Workplace Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Committee (WPLAR), which is an industry-labour-government partnership that researches best practices, guides the development of PLAR workplace practitioners and supports industry-based projects.

### ***PLAR in Software Development Education (2002)***

This project was a partnership between Manitoba Information Technology sector council, the Department of Competitiveness, Technology and Trade, and Red River College. PLAR was built into the design of the College's new part-time Software Development Diploma Program with the intent to make it easier for those already working in the field to gain diplomas. PLAR candidates were assessed against whole program outcomes. Products included an applicant guide and self-assessment checklist.

### ***Workplace Informal Learning Matrix***

The Centre for Education and Work (CEW) in Winnipeg, conducted a qualitative research study in 2003 and 2004 in partnership with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board. Its purpose was to identify specific skills, knowledge and abilities learned informally in small and medium-sized workplaces and determine how employees were learning these specific skills. The project developed a template of workers' informal learning which could be used to recognize core competencies for promotion and development. The results of the study indicated that the workplaces involved in the study had a broad and rich informal learning environment particularly for skills in the areas of communication, problem solving, decision-making, working with others, leadership, workplace culture, diversity and continuous learning.

Following the study the CEW developed the Workplace Informal Learning Matrix (WILM) as a tool to support organizational planning for growth and change. The WILM helps individuals to evaluate their levels of performance on the job using the WILM and compare their assessment to the job classification. When there is a gap between their self-assessment score and the expectation for their job, a relevant training plan can be devised.

The WILM helps employers to build and benchmark required job competencies and focus more clearly on organizational training needs by providing a clearer picture of the needs of each individual. In smaller companies, where core competencies have not been developed, the WILM can be used to help create job classifications.

### ***Work-ready Skills Passport (2003-2005)***

This project researched the necessary essential, employability and core technical skills required in the construction sector in Manitoba. It resulted in profiles of essential, employability and core technical skills; generic, flexible assessment methods for determining individuals' work-readiness; and a piloted skills passport prototype designed to facilitate hiring into entry-level positions. A practical software tool for tracking the skills development of seasonal workers and facilitating their labour force attachment was also produced.



### **Occupational assessment activities**

Occupational assessment activities involve employers, regulatory bodies, post-secondary institutions, unions and sector councils. These activities are conducted to determine an individual's eligibility to work in a particular occupation in Manitoba. They typically include credential recognition and/or PLAR.

#### ***Bristol Aerospace: Competency-based Assessment and Training***

In Phase One of this project, aerospace manufacturing competencies were identified and a model was developed to create the assessment tools and criteria necessary to document competencies in each of 112 manufacturing processes in eight main manufacturing areas. In Phase Two, these competencies are being documented. Future phases will assess the workforce's skills and knowledge against the stated competencies and develop a Competency Based Training Framework for focused and documented on-the-job training.

#### ***College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Manitoba***

Between 2003 and 2005, the College of Licensed Practical Nurses collaborated with Manitoba Labour and Immigration and Assiniboine Community College to develop a PLAR process for Assiniboine College's Licensed Practical Nursing program.

#### ***College of Midwives of Manitoba, Prior Learning and Experience Assessment (PLEA) Project***

The College of Midwives of Manitoba obtained funding from the provincial Workplace Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Committee (WPLAR) for a multi-phased project to refine the profession's core competencies and identify initial PLEA assessment criteria. After further developments, the College's PLEA tools, processes and materials were revised, and the program's timeframe was lengthened. An outreach strategy and a communication process with employers were also developed. PLEA includes portfolio assessment and written and clinical examinations and is now an integral part of the College's registration process.

### ***Igniting the Power Within***

In 2004, a partnership among First Nations and Métis organizations and Manitoba Advanced Education and Training was formed. Its purpose was to answer a growing need for essential skills and PLAR information and training for local first-point-of-contact advisors and counsellors in Aboriginal communities. Igniting the Power Within certification training has been implemented to build advisor/counsellor capacity to use essential skills and PLAR within their existing services.

In the first stage of the project, 250 Aboriginal community advisors/counsellors were familiarized with the concepts and applications inherent in essential skills and portfolio learning. Subsequently, 75 participants began to build portfolios. Materials and methods developed for the project have been subsequently piloted in two Aboriginal communities. Teleconference portfolio completion groups are being used to assist project graduates complete their personal portfolios and increase the internal network of the project to the community level.

### ***Internationally-educated Engineers Qualification Pilot Program (IEEQ)***

Since September 2003, the IEEQ has been an option for internationally-educated engineers needing to fulfill the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Manitoba's (APEGM) academic qualification requirements for licensure.

IEEQ operates directly in partnership with the regulator and leads to a formal credential. The program is an alternative to Confirmatory Examinations required for licensing. Following initial assessment of their credentials and work experience, about 10 to 12 internationally-educated engineers participate in the pilot each year. Participants are typically experienced, mid-career engineers who hold a university degree in engineering from their home country and have professional experience prior to their arrival in Canada. The 12-month program combines an academic program with paid work experience during which their prior learning and current learning are subject to assessment.

Upon successful completion of the IEEQ, graduates receive a formal credential of "Engineer in Training" (EIT) from the APEGM. After completing one year of Canadian

work experience as EITs, candidates are eligible for a full P.Eng. license. In October 2007, the Manitoba government announced four additional years of funding for the IEEQ program which will allow it to recruit 40 internationally-educated engineers each year at the University of Manitoba.

### ***PLAR Foundations Training for Practitioners***

With funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Training, Red River College continues to deliver two levels of PLAR practitioner training for all post-secondary PLAR practitioners as well as staff in adult learning centres, employment centres, community groups and other interested organizations. This training is offered in classroom settings and in a distance delivery model. As of 2005, 383 participants have completed practitioner training.

### ***United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Security Officer Training Initiative (Ongoing)***

Responding to new mandatory security officer training demands, this project researched national, provincial and local trends in the security sector, identified competencies for training standards, reviewed current training available in Manitoba and made recommendations for an overall Security Officer PLAR process. Phase Two of the project developed a PLAR process for security officers including an accreditation process with testing and gap training. In Phase Three, flexible assessment methods typically associated with PLAR will be developed and piloted.

### ***Workplace Integration of Newcomers Project, Manitoba Sector Training Network***

The Manitoba Sector Training Network has established an industry-based model for assessment and training of immigrants in three targeted occupations: welder, CNC machining set-up operator and laboratory technician. The program identifies immigrant candidates, occupational competencies, interested employers, and subject matter experts to conduct assessments. The process involves preliminary interviews, confirmatory assessments, candidate self-assessment and observation in the workplace, and performance-based assessments. Skill gaps are addressed by workplace on-site and off-site training, low-wage employment and intermittent assessments. Successful completion of all competencies

results in an employer-based certificate and a list of confirmed competencies. Additional occupations are planned for subsequent phases of the project.

### **Multi-purpose PLAR activities**

Multi-purpose PLAR activities involve assessment and recognition of individuals' formal academic credentials and experiential learning for the purposes of employment and education. They also may provide financial assistance to individuals who cannot afford to have their credentials assessed.

### ***Academic Credentials Assessment Service (ACAS)***

ACAS is a service provided by Manitoba Labour and Immigration. It evaluates the credentials of people educated outside of Canada and compares their education to educational standards in Manitoba. Assessments result in academic credentials reports which are advisory and designed to facilitate access to education and employment. There is no charge for this service. In 2005-06, academic credential reports and accreditation referrals were provided to 662 immigrants.

### ***Adult Learning Centres (ALCs)***

ALCs are community partnerships organized to provide adult learners with opportunities to develop learning and employment skills, enhance academic qualifications and engage in lifelong learning. Specifically, they enable adults to obtain high school diplomas or specific prerequisites for post-secondary education. Adults may acquire a Mature Student Diploma through ALCs or take individual course credits. Between 1996 and 2000, exponential growth occurred both in the number of adult learners registering for courses and in the number of ALCs.

Today, ALCs have staff trained to use several PLAR assessment methods such as projects, assignments, case studies, product assessments, essays, reports, examinations, interviews, oral exams, panel assessments, presentations, portfolio assessments, logs and journals. Eleven PLAR resource guides have been developed for high school level courses. The guides provide adult learners with a self-assessment in order to identify learning gaps,

prepare for assessment and make informed career and education decisions. The guides have also been helpful to the adult educators to plan their PLAR activities.

### ***Credentials Recognition Program***

Manitoba Labour and Immigration's Credentials Recognition Program assists immigrants with professional and/or technical backgrounds to gain recognition for education and work experience obtained outside of Canada by offering assessment and wage assistance as well as counselling and referral services. Applicants must have successfully completed a minimum two-year post-secondary program outside of Canada and have credentials and work experience that are not formally recognized in Manitoba. Assessment assistance offsets the costs of assessment fees, books and exams. In 2005/06, 390 highly skilled immigrants were assisted with the costs of assessments and examination fees, courses and materials.

## **NEW BRUNSWICK**

### **Public policy context**

In December 2005, the Province of New Brunswick released *Lifelong Learning: Quality Adult Learning Opportunities*, a policy statement on adult and lifelong learning. It included six objectives, one of which was to "increase learning and employment opportunities through the use of prior learning assessment and recognition." The plan was to:

- Increase access to PLAR assessment services
- Integrate PLAR services into professional employment counselling and case management services
- Develop PLAR applications for apprenticeship and certification
- Advance and support PLAR utilization in the workplace
- Advance and support PLAR utilization and recognition in post-secondary education and training programs
- Increase opportunities for adult learners through credit transfer and articulated programming among post-secondary institutions

Since the provincial election in 2006, the new government has not released specific details on how these objectives will be met, but has promised to respect the direction of the previous government's policy.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The definition of prior learning varies by organization. For example, although there are no provincial policies on PLAR, the provincial government refers to prior learning as learning acquired through work, non-credit courses, employer-sponsored training, independent study, volunteering, travel or hobbies. The University of New Brunswick shares this definition but New Brunswick Community College defines prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired through work, or life experience or other educational programs, including credit transfer.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing learning:

- Department of Post-secondary Education, Training and Labour
- University of New Brunswick
- University of Moncton
- St. Thomas University
- New Brunswick Community College

### **Provincial funding**

No provincial funding is provided to New Brunswick's post-secondary institutions for their ongoing PLAR and CR services. Activities are financed through institutional budgets and learner fees. No provincial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance activities are in place. Institutional quality assurance mechanisms are determined by individual institutions.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities involve direct delivery of assessments, research and collaborative partnerships among colleges.

### *Post-secondary institutions*

New Brunswick's four universities are autonomous bodies with discretion to determine whether to offer PLAR. The University of New Brunswick and the Université de Moncton have institution-wide, PLAR-specific policies. St. Thomas University has a challenge for credit policy. Mount Alison University has policies only in relation to credit transfer.

The province's public community college, New Brunswick Community College-Collège communautaire du Nouveau-Brunswick (NBCC-CCNB) is part of the provincial Department of Education, Training and Labour and as such is subject to government policies. In 2006, the College issued a policy statement that it recognizes the value of the prior experiential learning of those wishing to pursue post-secondary education and that by offering opportunities for prior learning recognition, the College wanted to make training more accessible, facilitate access to the job market and increase mobility. The College has a written PLAR policy requiring appropriate mechanisms for credit transfer and the assessment and recognition of prior learning as part of the academic management function.

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) plays a role in maintaining and improving services to university students in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The Commission's policy on quality assurance states that all new university programs should have multiple access routes using PLAR, among other arrangements.

Post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by all New Brunswick post-secondary institutions. The community colleges in Atlantic Canada have collaborated in the development of a Guide to Block Transfer Agreements. The province also has an online, provincial credit transfer guide.

- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all New Brunswick post-secondary institutions. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. No fees are charged. In 2005, NBCC-CCNB established a policy that permits up to 100% of the credits needed to obtain a diploma or certificate to be acquired through credit transfer.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted by most institutions. Students are charged fees for these assessments.

*PLAR* – PLAR delivery depends on institutional policies. At University of New Brunswick, PLAR has limited availability but has been fully incorporated into the University's Bachelor of Education program and its Post RN Nursing program. Portfolio or hybrids of portfolio assessment are primary methods but challenge examinations, product or skill demonstrations and interviews with content specialists are also used. These assessments are conducted by faculty in individual program areas. Portfolio assessments are conducted by faculty-based PLAR committees. Awarding partial credit for a course is also possible and students may be asked to perform additional work to complete course requirements. The University currently does not charge learners assessment fees but a fee structure is under review.

At NBCC-CCNB, PLAR is available in most programs. The primary methods are portfolio assessment, written examinations and demonstrations. Assessments are conducted by Department Heads and/or faculty in the relevant program area. Fees are charged to students on a per assessment basis at a base rate. Full-time students are charged 50% of the regular PLAR assessment fee.

*Portfolio learning* – A non-credit course, *Creating your Personal Learning Portfolio*, is offered periodically by the University of New Brunswick.

#### ***Primary/secondary school initiatives***

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

#### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities involve collaborative partnerships in labour force development.



### ***Pathways to Success/Passerelles d'accès***

Funded jointly by the federal and provincial governments through the Canada-New Brunswick Labour Market Development Agreement, the Pathways to Success pilot project was allocated \$200,000 in 2004 and \$440,000 in 2005 to research, develop and validate PLAR tools and develop an essential employability skills curriculum. The goal was to provide people without a high school diploma or GED with a simple, efficient way to have their skills and knowledge recognized and validated. Following assessment, clients can be 'fast-tracked' into essential employability skills training.

This pilot project involves 60 clients over three years and is intended to reduce the amount of time a client spends in academic upgrading based on their individual training needs. The pilot is part of the province's long-term vision for adult and lifelong learning, a component of its Quality Learning Agenda. The intent is to expand the program to other regions of the province, and eventually integrate it into the academic studies program of the college system.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Multi-purpose PLAR activities**

#### ***Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre***

The four Atlantic provinces are currently working together to establish an Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre. It is based on a hybrid model that combines academic and competency assessments.

## **NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR**

### **Public policy context**

In 1994, following a PLAR pilot project in Early Childhood Education, the government of Newfoundland & Labrador began development of a provincial PLA policy and strategic plan that culminated in provincial guidelines in 1998. Since then, public policy statements on lifelong learning and a *White Paper on Public Post-secondary Education* (2005) have

been issued. PLAR has not been directly referenced. Monitoring and evaluation of PLAR activities are determined by individual institutions.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The provincial government does not have a policy-based definition of PLAR. Memorial University defines prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired outside of the University through courses taken at non-university institutions or skills acquired from work or other learning contexts. College of the North Atlantic defines prior learning as learning acquired informally including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteerism, travel and hobbies.

### **Provincial funding**

No targeted provincial funding is provided to Newfoundland & Labrador's post-secondary institutions for their PLAR services. Activities are financed through institutional budgets and learner fees.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities focus on direct delivery of assessments.

### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Two primary providers of post-secondary education in Newfoundland & Labrador are Memorial University and the College of the North Atlantic. Memorial University is legally autonomous with discretion to decide whether to provide PLAR. It has policies which govern credit transfer, recognition of some secondary school subjects and challenge for credit procedures.

In 2007, the College of the North Atlantic published a concept paper to establish a PLAR Centre and strategic plan. The report recommends that the Centre's mandate include servicing non-students in the development of career plans through portfolio development (both employability and academic portfolios). The paper also recommends that a full-time PLAR Facilitator be responsible for the implementation, coordination, promotion and monitoring of all PLAR activities and procedures within the province's college system.

PLAR Advisors located in various regions of the province would be the local resource persons to provide faculty, staff and the community with training, advice and guidance in implementing a PLAR system. They would also counsel current, potential and non-students on appropriate assessment methods, the portfolio development process and conduct essential workplace skills assessments. Decisions on the recommendations in the concept paper are pending.

Institutions use two mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition and PLAR. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by Newfoundland & Labrador’s post-secondary institutions to facilitate student mobility. The community colleges in Atlantic Canada have collaborated in the development of a Guide to Block Transfer Agreements.
- Individual course credit transfers are also conducted. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars’ offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted by each institution.

*PLAR* – PLAR delivery depends on institutional policies. PLAR is offered in Memorial University’s School of Nursing and challenge for credit is available in a number of other programs. College of the North Atlantic offers PLAR in a case by case basis.

#### ***Primary/secondary schools***

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

#### **Employment-related activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

#### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

## **NORTHWEST TERRITORIES**

### **Public policy context**

Currently, the government of the Northwest Territories (NWT) does not have a policy on PLAR. However, in 2005 the territorial government established a new strategic plan that included the development of formal mechanisms for assessing prior learning and increasing government staff members' understanding of prior learning.

### **Prior learning terminology**

In NWT government and post-secondary education literature, prior learning is referred to as knowledge and skills acquired through activities such as formal education, work, volunteering and independent study. No official definition has been established for PLAR.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing learning:

- Department of Education, Culture and Employment
- Aurora College
- International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS)

### **Territorial funding**

The territorial government has no funding programs to support PLAR implementation or operations. No targeted government funding is provided to Aurora College for PLAR services. Post-secondary PLAR and CR activities are financed through the College's budget and learner assessment fees.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related recognition activities focus on direct delivery of prior learning assessments.

### *Post-secondary institutions*

Public post-secondary education is provided by Aurora College. In 1995, the College's Board of Governors passed a PLA policy stating that "Aurora College shall use Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) to recognize past learning to meet admission requirements for a program and/or to obtain credit for one or more courses within a program." This policy is in the process of being updated. The College also has a PLAR Committee which works in an advisory capacity to program staff when requests for PLAR are received. Availability of assessment is determined by individual program areas. Monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance are the responsibility of the College.

The College uses two mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition and PLAR. These mechanisms can be used independently but are sometimes applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition at Aurora College: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are in place between Aurora College and several post-secondary institutions in Alberta, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. The College works in cooperation with the Province of Alberta to publish articulated credit transfers in the Alberta Transfer Guide. Agreements are also in place with universities in other provinces, as well as with some professional bodies.
- Individual credit transfers are conducted by the College when students wish to obtain credit for individual courses completed at other Canadian post-secondary institutions.
- Academic credential assessments are rarely conducted.

*PLAR* – Aurora College's policy states that interviews, challenges and standardized testing are among the tools to be used in assessing prior learning. The most common methods used are interviews, transcript and credential reviews, challenge exams, standardized tests and portfolio assessments. Assessments are conducted by the Registrar of the College in consultation with program staff. Assessment fees are charged to students. Credit has been granted through PLAR in the College's Early Childhood Development Program, the Adult Education Program and the Natural Resources Technology Program.

*Portfolio learning* – No portfolio learning activities are currently available.

### ***Primary/secondary school initiatives***

Aurora College is currently negotiating articulation agreements with NWT secondary schools in order to ease the transition to post-secondary education.

The Department of Education, Culture and Employment is working with Aurora College on an articulation process at the secondary school level that would enable the Adult Literacy and Basic Education curricula to be recognized for a high school diploma equivalency.

### **Employment-related activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

#### ***International Credential Evaluation Service and International Qualifications Assessment Service***

The International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES) in BC and International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) in Alberta provide academic credential assessment services to Aurora College, providing information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. These services are also available to employers and occupational bodies.

## **NOVA SCOTIA**

### **Public policy context**

In 2005, the government of Nova Scotia launched a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Initiative as part of its *Skills Nova Scotia Action Plan 2005-2006*. The goal of this initiative is to work towards establishing a provincial prior learning assessment and recognition framework. The Department of Education has taken the lead in establishing a provincial advisory committee to review prior learning assessment and recognition practices within the province. The work of the committee is ongoing. Currently, the

province has no PLAR policy. No provincial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance activities are in place.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The terms PLA, PLAR and RPL are all used in Nova Scotia. The PLA Centre in Halifax identifies prior learning as learning acquired through work, family and community life, volunteering, church and union activities, travel and hobbies. The Centre uses two acronyms: PLA and PLAR. Mount Saint Vincent University defines prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired through institutes, corporate or on-the-job training and self study. Cape Breton University refers to it as all learning acquired outside educational institutions. Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) has recently adopted the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and defines prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired through formal education, training and personal study as well as work and other life experience. The provincial government is currently reviewing these terms as part of its policy development and consultation activities.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in PLAR in Nova Scotia:

- Department of Education
- Department of Community Services
- Department of Health
- Universities
- Nova Scotia Community College
- Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning
- The PLA Centre, Halifax
- Department of National Defence
- Aviation Maintenance Sector Council
- Community-based organizations (re: employment and immigrant integration)

### **Provincial funding**

Although the provincial government has not had a PLAR policy framework on which to base its PLAR-related activities, it has financially supported several projects over the years including the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning. In 2005, the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Initiative included PLAR projects designed to advance individuals' education and employment. No targeted provincial funding is currently provided to Nova Scotia's post-secondary institutions for their PLAR/RPL and CR services. Activities are financed through institutional budgets and learner assessment fees.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities focus on direct delivery of assessments at the post-secondary and secondary school levels.

### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in Nova Scotia is provided by the province's 11 universities and two community colleges. Universities are legally autonomous and most do not provide PLAR services. The exceptions are Mount St. Vincent University and Cape Breton University both of which have institution-wide PLAR policies for program admission and academic credit. Mount Saint Vincent University offers PLAR for admission to two graduate programs as well as for most undergraduate programs.

Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) is the largest of Nova Scotia's public colleges. It has recently updated an institution-wide RPL policy. The emphasis is on portfolio learning and assessment for academic credit.

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) plays a role in maintaining and improving services to university students in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The Commission's policy on quality assurance states that all new university programs should have multiple access routes using PLAR, among other arrangements.



Post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer, advanced standing assessment and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by all Nova Scotia post-secondary institutions to facilitate student mobility. NSCC has over 30 articulation agreements with other institutions in Canada and other countries. The province's universities also use articulation agreements to varying degrees. Dalhousie University publishes an online credit transfer guide accessible on its website. Several other universities in the province are creating their own transfer credit guides. To date, there is no comprehensive online credit transfer guide for the province.
- The community colleges in Atlantic Canada have collaborated in the development of a Guide to Block Transfer Agreements.
- Individual credit transfers are conducted by all Nova Scotia universities and colleges. Decisions are normally made by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are normally charged fees on a per course basis. An online credit transfer guide at Dalhousie University provides prospective students with an idea of how their previous education may be credited.
- Advanced standing assessment at NSCC is used in some programs to award candidates blocks of academic credit up to one semester or admission to the second year of a two-year program.
- Academic credential assessments are conducted independently by most institutions. A fee is normally charged to students. Some institutions use the services of assessment agencies to provide information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. The costs of these assessments are borne by student applicants.

*PLAR* – PLAR delivery is determined by institutional program faculty. The most common methods of assessment are written examinations, essays, product assessments, simulations, performance assessments, interviews, demonstrations and portfolio assessments. Assessors are normally faculty. Universities charge assessment fees. At NSCC, part-time students are charged assessment fees, but there is no cost for full-time students.

*Portfolio learning* – In 1998, NSCC established itself as the “portfolio college”. All students are required to complete learning portfolios as a condition of graduation. E-portfolio is one option for learners to meet these requirements. Faculty and staff at NSCC have also undertaken portfolio development.

Cape Breton University integrates career portfolio development into some of its undergraduate programs (e.g., Information Technology, Science and Technology Bridge program). Mount Saint Vincent University uses portfolio development in some undergraduate programs as well as in the admissions process of some graduate programs.

*Dalhousie University, School of Public Administration*

In 2000, the Government of Nova Scotia approached Dalhousie University to develop and deliver a fully-funded Masters in Public Administration (Management) program for mid-career public service professionals, in order to prepare them for senior leadership succession. A partnership of the University’s School of Public Administration and the PLA Centre, Halifax used the Centre’s skills and learning portfolio program to provide a basis for admission of candidates who did not meet the normal admission requirements of an undergraduate degree. Since 2000, over 50 such candidates have successfully gained entrance to the MPA(M) through the portfolio process, and have graduated at high rates.

*Primary/secondary school initiatives*

In 2001, the provincial government established the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning, which offers tuition-free programs ranging from basic literacy courses to high school completion. A High School Graduation Diploma for Adults was established to address labour market demands and demographics indicating that 30% of Nova Scotians 25 years and older did not have a high school diploma (Statistics Canada, 2000). At 150 sites across Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia School for Adults Learning offers PLAR assessments of learning acquired from any area of life, including formal education, work experience, training, independent study, volunteer activities, travel, hobbies or military service.

### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities primarily involve portfolio learning in relation to employment preparation.

#### ***Individuals in Transition: Social and Employment Assistance Services Programs, PLA Centre, Halifax***

The Individuals in Transition Project provided leadership training and portfolio learning services through Employment Assistance Services (EAS) agencies in Nova Scotia. Initially, approximately 60 EAS staff completed the Centre's PLAR Practitioner Certificate program. They, in turn, provided portfolio learning programs for about 650 EAS clients over a three-year period. According to the PLA Centre, the project confirmed the effectiveness of the portfolio learning approach in re-integrating marginalized populations.

#### ***CORCAN Portfolio Project, Correctional Services Canada***

CORCAN is a branch within Correctional Services Canada that focuses on developing the employability of offenders as part of their rehabilitation process. It also offers education/training programs and support to inmates. In 2002, the Halifax PLA Centre's Portfolio Learning program was piloted at two correctional institutions in the Atlantic Region. The success of these pilots led to the adoption of the PLA Centre's PLAR Practitioners Certificate program to build capacity for ongoing Portfolio Learning programs in all five Atlantic Canada correctional institutions. A comprehensive evaluation framework has been developed and discussions are underway with CORCAN and the PLA Centre and its research partner PRAXIS regarding further program development and evaluation.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

Occupational assessment activities involve collaborative partnerships among regulatory bodies and professional associations. These initiatives are conducted to determine the eligibility of internationally-educated individuals to work in particular occupations.

### ***Association of Professional Engineers of Nova Scotia***

Using in-depth, structured interviews, the Association of Professional Engineers is assessing the knowledge and skills of non-North American engineers with work experience outside of Nova Scotia. The assessment process can lead to professional registration and authorization to work in the province.

### ***Tending the Field: PLAR for Continuing Care Assistants, Nova Scotia (2006)***

To address labour market shortages and introduce entry-to-practice standards in Nova Scotia's Continuing Care sector, the Department of Health initiated a PLAR approach to certification for Continuing Care Assistants. A project team comprised of the provincial Health Care Human Resource Sector Council, Nova Scotia Community College and the PLA Centre collaborated on a process targeting individuals employed but not certified, unemployed persons with relevant experience, and candidates from outside Nova Scotia.

The PLA Centre trained Registered Nurses as PLAR advisor/assessors who were subsequently matched with applicants to support the identification, analysis and demonstration of prior learning relative to the learning outcomes articulated by the sector. Each individual receives a Statement of Standing that details their achievements and remaining training needs. Successful completion of training gaps leads to eligibility to write the provincial certification examination. In 2006-07, the program assisted 88 learners. Administration of the process continues through the Nova Scotia Association of Health Organizations.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose PLAR and CR activities include credential assessment agency development to evaluate individuals' credentials, and community-based portfolio development services for the purposes of employment, education and licensing/certification.

### ***Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre***

The four Atlantic provinces are currently working together to establish an Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre. It is based on a hybrid model that combines academic and competency assessments.

### *PLA Centre, Halifax*

The PLA Centre is an independent, collaborative, community-based agency, located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It provides programs and support services to adult learners in transition using portfolio learning principles and practices. This process enables participants to identify, reflect upon, articulate, document and present the skills and knowledge they have acquired through their life and work experiences, as well as through whatever formal education and training they may have received. In addition to its traditional ‘bridging’ application for adult learners seeking access and credit in formal education and training, the Centre has served a broad diversity of adults seeking other ways to use their skills and learning – including those affected by employment, career advancement, industrial dislocation and restructuring, community and family engagement and other transition challenges.

This diversity of adult learners includes the unemployed and under-employed; people on welfare; low literacy learners; persons with disabilities and those facing systemic barriers (including Aboriginal and African Canadians, etc.), prison inmates and former sex trade workers; mid-career public service professionals; and newcomers facing the challenges of immigrant settlement.

The Centre provides leadership training and capacity building through its PLAR Practitioners Certificate program and has developed materials and guides in both official languages. It also offers policy and program research and evaluation services. Since 1996, the PLA Centre has trained and certified over 400 PLA Practitioners and has delivered Portfolio Learning programs to almost 6,000 adult learners in Nova Scotia and four other provinces.

In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning asked the PLA Centre to take a lead role in developing a ‘Pan-Canadian PLAR/Portfolio Learning Framework’.

## **NUNAVUT**

### **Public policy context**

There are currently no public policies on recognizing prior learning. However, in 2005, the Government of Nunavut established an Adult Learning Strategy which recognizes the importance of using PLAR as a tool to help adult learners reach their academic and employment goals, and incorporates plans to develop a PLAR framework. The Department of Education and Nunavut Arctic College (NAC) have been working collaboratively on this initiative.

### **PLAR terminology**

The Government of Nunavut and NAC both refer to prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired outside the sponsorship of formal educational institutions.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Department of Education
- Nunavut Arctic College
- First Nations Technical Institute
- Athabasca University

### **Territorial funding**

No government funding is provided to Nunavut Arctic College for its ongoing PLAR activities. However, federal funding for Nunavut's strategic plan was announced in 2007 and it is expected that a portion of these funds will be used to develop capacity to conduct PLAR at the post-secondary level. No government-based monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance activities are currently in place.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities focus on direct delivery by NAC.

### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education is delivered through NAC. The College has issued a policy statement that it will use prior learning assessment for admission and academic credit.

Additional institutional policies are under development. PLAR activities are limited but planning is under way.

NAC uses two mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition and PLAR in the form of competency assessment. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual course credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by the College to facilitate student mobility. NAC has 16 articulation agreements with colleges and universities in other parts of Canada.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted when students wish to obtain credit for individual courses completed at other Canadian post-secondary institutions. Credit transfers are determined by the College Registrar's office, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. No fees are charged for this service.
- Academic credential assessments are rarely conducted. No fees are charged for this service. NAC may also use the services of an assessment agency, the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) in Alberta as well as other provincial agencies in order to provide information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. The costs of these assessments are borne by student applicants.

*PLAR competency assessment* – Competency assessments may be conducted for the purpose of determining program admission or academic credit. Assessments take two forms: challenge examinations and portfolio evaluation. Eligibility for assessment is determined by interview, examination or through other criteria. No fees are charged. Some courses are not available for PLAR.

*Portfolio development in adult basic education*

In 2007, NAC received federal funding to develop culturally appropriate PLAR tools and to test a holistic approach to portfolio development in its Adult Basic Education program. This project will be undertaken collaboratively with First Nations Technical Institute, Ontario.

*Primary/secondary school initiatives*

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

**Employment-related activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

**Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

**Multi-purpose activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

**ONTARIO**

**Public policy context**

Ontario's government policies address the recognition of prior learning in secondary and post-secondary education. In 1993, Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities announced its intention to implement PLA over a three-year period at all of the province's colleges of applied arts and technology. Over the three years, a provincial PLA Secretariat coordinated implementation, developed provincial policies and guidelines, conducted research and designed and delivered PLA training to colleges across the province. In 1996, a policy was established that required the province's 25 colleges to offer PLAR assessment wherever possible. The policy's stated purpose was to make colleges more accessible to a broad range of adult learners, help adults to become more productive and capable members of society, and increase the efficacy of the colleges by eliminating unnecessary training. The policy continues to be in effect.

There are no provincial policies governing PLAR at Ontario's universities.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education (K-12 education) established PLAR policies for regular day school secondary school students and for mature secondary school students effective 2003.

The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration supports initiatives that promote the economic and social integration of immigrants. In 2006, the Ontario government passed



landmark legislation to address barriers faced by internationally-educated professionals. The *Fair Access to Regulated Professions Act (2006)* requires Ontario's 34 regulated professions to ensure that their licensing processes are fair, clear, open and timely. The Act establishes the Office of the Fairness Commissioner to audit registration and licensing practices, and ensure compliance. The extent to which this new Office will incorporate PLAR into their expectations of fair practice has not been explicitly stated but policy development is under way. Similar legislation is pending in Manitoba and Nova Scotia.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities defines prior learning as knowledge and skills acquired outside the sponsorship of formal education institutions. This definition has been adopted by most post-secondary institutions. The Ministry of Education defines prior learning as knowledge and skills that students have acquired, in both formal and informal ways, outside secondary school.

The following stakeholder groups are the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Community colleges
- Regulatory bodies
- Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration
- Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities
- Ministry of Education

### **Provincial funding**

The Ontario government currently contributes to public community colleges' costs of delivering PLAR assessments but the majority of PLAR costs are intended to be covered by institutions and assessment fees charged to candidates. Colleges receive provincial funding on a per assessment basis in accordance with a provincial funding formula but the amount institutions can charge is capped by provincial policy. All other PLAR and CR activities at colleges and universities are financed through institutional budgets and learner assessment fees.

The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration is also involved in funding immigrant integration initiatives. Investment has supported more than 68 active bridging programs over the last five years. The newest programs, which often include PLAR components, are in the fields of architecture, carpentry, engineering and technical occupations, financial services, health care occupations, law and legal services, construction trades, employment counselling, environmental planning, geoscience, early childhood education and teaching, tourism and social work. Many of these projects have credential assessment, PLAR and portfolio learning components.

The Ministry of Education provides ongoing funding for PLAR challenge assessments for regular day secondary school students and for mature students in secondary schools, on a per assessment basis, based on the type of assessment.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR activities include direct delivery by individual institutions at post-secondary and secondary school levels, collaborative partnerships among post-secondary institutions, research and pilot projects.

#### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in Ontario is provided by the province's 23 universities and 24 colleges. Universities are autonomous and most do not offer PLAR services. Colleges are less independent and are subject to provincial regulation and government policies requiring PLAR services. Most colleges do offer PLAR but activity levels vary widely. Assessments are conducted for admission to programs, exemption from courses, awarding of academic credit or the establishment of personal educational or career plans. Some colleges are also involved in delivering PLAR assessments as part of bridging projects for internationally-educated professionals. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities monitors the number of assessments conducted annually in college post-secondary programs. According to the Ministry, in 2006, 23 of Ontario's 24 colleges conducted PLAR assessments (5,356).

Post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but are often applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four main forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer, equivalency assessment and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by all Ontario post-secondary institutions to facilitate student mobility. Ontario has about 272 articulation agreements between colleges and universities in the province.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all Ontario post-secondary institutions. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are charged fees on a per course basis.
- Equivalency assessments evaluate non-institutional training such as workplace training programs. This process is also known as program review.
- Most institutions conduct their own academic credential assessments and charge students an administration fee. Some institutions use the services of assessment agencies to provide information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. The costs of these assessments are borne by student applicants.

*PLAR* – PLAR delivery depends on institutional policies and take a variety of forms. The most common methods of assessment are written challenge examinations, structured interviews, demonstrations and portfolio assessments. Assessments are normally course-based and administered by faculty.

*Portfolio learning* – The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities reports that in 2004/05, four Ontario colleges engaged in assisting students with the development of portfolios for the purposes of PLAR. The number of universities offering portfolio development to students is unknown, but generally considered to be low. The G. Raymond School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University is one example of a university that uses portfolio learning in bridging programs for internationally-educated professionals.

*Algonquin College and University of Ottawa – Foreign Trained Nurses Project*

Algonquin College provides PLAR to internationally-educated nurses who wish to enter an alternative occupation (Personal Services Worker), Algonquin's Practical Nursing program or the University of Ottawa's bridging and Bachelor of Science degree program in nursing. As part of the bridging program, participants may challenge one elective course and the four-month consolidation component based on a portfolio assessment. Assessments also include clinical practice in simulated laboratory conditions and strong advising and support services.

*Colleges Integrating Immigrants to Employment (CIITE) Partnership (2005-2007)*

CIITE is a multi-phased strategy for modifying and refining systems, programs and structures of the Ontario college network in order to improve the support structures and services colleges provide to skilled immigrants. With funding support from the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, the project focuses on the development and implementation of systemic college-based strategies that address barriers to immigrants' rapid entry into the workforce. Phase 1 of the CIITE project identified a myriad of barriers faced by internationally-trained immigrants in the colleges including information and advisement, credentials assessment, language assessment and transition to employment.

Phase 2 is currently under way. It involves sub-projects that develop and test selected immigrant focused practices and services in the college system. Under the leadership of CON\*NECT, Centennial College, George Brown College and Fanshawe College, 11 Ontario colleges are hosting pilot projects focusing on admissions, advisement, credential assessment and advanced standing, language proficiency and employment preparation.

The projects on advisement are intended to improve information and advising systems; provide fair, timely and transparent processes for obtaining course exemptions and advanced standing; prevent duplication of learning; and expedite learner pathways to employment. Colleges are expected to have an increased capacity to assess academic credentials and grant exemptions and advanced standing to internationally-trained immigrants. Colleges, regulators and employers are expected to have increased confidence in equivalencies established between international credentials and Ontario standards.

Projects on PLAR will address the fact that formal assessment of international credentials cannot fully identify and confirm the skills, competencies, mastery of particular tools, practices and processes of internationally-trained immigrants. The goal of these projects is to design prototype models of assessment processes for competencies acquired outside Canada that will complement formal international credential assessment processes and expedite learner pathways to employment.

*College-University Consortium Council (CUCC)*

CUCC was established in 1996. It is led by a partnership of the Council of Ontario Universities, the Council of Presidents, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Among the Council's responsibilities are the facilitation of province-wide credit transfers between colleges and universities, encouragement of sequential and concurrent college-university programs, promotion of joint academic ventures, and encouragement of partnerships with industry. A key responsibility of the Council is the maintenance and expansion of the Ontario College-University Transfer Guide. The Guide is currently outdated and CUCC has undertaken a revision.

*Fast Track to Technology Occupations (FTTO), Sheridan College*

This project enables the fast tracking of participants into the second year of several technology programs at Centennial College and Sheridan College. Through the program, internationally-trained technicians and technologists are admitted directly into the second year of selected programs on the basis of their previous education, credentials and work experience. Programs include:

- Architectural Technology
- Biology and Environmental Technology
- Electronics
- Computer and Telecommunications Technologies
- Mechanical and Manufacturing Technologies

The program offers a seven-week bridging program to strengthen participants' language skills and reinforce the technical skill base needed for the chosen program of study.

#### *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario was established in 2005. It is an independent agency funded by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The Council has the responsibility of conducting research and providing the government with objective advice on all aspects of higher education in Ontario. In particular, the Council is creating a quality framework for the post-secondary sector and monitoring accessibility to the government. One of the Council's key responsibilities is to encourage inter-institutional student transfers, in part, by conducting research in matters relating to credit transfer. The Council's first review and research plan acknowledges the need to learn more about students' prior learning.

#### *Primary/secondary school activities*

Primary schools do not participate in PLAR. Secondary school students may have their skills and knowledge evaluated against Ontario curriculum requirements in order to earn credits toward the secondary school diploma. PLAR evaluation and assessment procedures are carried out under the direction of school principals. Policy and operational directions are provided to district school boards by the Ministry of Education. PLAR involves two components: challenge processes for credit, and equivalency processes for regular day school students for placement only and an equivalency process for mature students for credit. The Ministry of Education monitors the number of assessments conducted annually by secondary schools but conducts no other monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance measures.

#### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities involve a range of stakeholder groups including employment service agencies, regulatory bodies, educational institutions and immigrant serving agencies. PLAR and CR tend to be among several components included in initiatives designed to promote employment, promotion or job transitions. Many of these initiatives are bridging programs – training and orientation programs for immigrants who

require a range of supports to successfully integrate into the Canadian workforce. PLAR is used to determine eligibility for bridging training, help program managers to individualize training, exempt individuals from training or develop educational and employment plans.

Methods typically include credential assessment, PLAR and/or portfolio learning/assessment.

***Access to the Early Childhood Education Field in Ontario Project, Association of Early Childhood Educators***

The Association of Early Childhood Educators offers a program called “Access to the Early Childhood Education Field in Ontario”. This program provides language supports, Canadian work experience and job search assistance to internationally-trained Early Childhood Educators (ECE). Existing knowledge and language skills are assessed through a proficiency exam aligned with Canadian Language Benchmarks. Participants can take part in courses such as the ECE in Canadian Context, a mentorship program, employment preparation/job search training and a six-week, 240 hour practicum placement at one of George Brown’s ECE lab schools.

***Algonquin Connection Expertise of the Internationally-trained (ACE-IT), Algonquin College***

Algonquin Connection Expertise of the Internationally Trained (ACE-IT) prepares students for both non-regulated and regulated employment. Participants are provided with a multi-faceted educational program that assesses, recognizes and builds on their prior knowledge and skills. This is done using simulated laboratory facilities, specifically developed PLAR tools and an English-language assessment. Students are provided with cultural awareness training, study skills, insight into the Canadian health system and preparation for employment success. Students in areas of regulated employment are prepared to challenge or write the exams of the regulatory bodies.

***Engineering Bridges, Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO)***

Engineering Bridges prepares internationally-trained engineers for employment by bridging technical and language gaps and providing employment support, including labour market

research and portfolio development. A participant's skills and competencies are evaluated through a combination of self-assessment and formal assessment tools provided by organizations such as the Professional Engineers of Ontario and World Education Services. Participants receive information on the licensing process and have access to paid and unpaid work experience opportunities through existing resources such as Job Development, Employment Ontario and Career Bridge.

***Engineering Connections, Accessible Community Counselling and Employment Services (ACCES)***

This project is a specialized six-week job search program designed to help internationally-trained engineers bridge into employment in their field or into a related field. It includes:

- Labour market research to match labour market demand with availability of skills
- Screening and assessment (including employer review and referral services) for communication and technical skills
- Language assessment
- Six-week training module with a focus on orientation to the engineering profession, skills enhancement, communication, licensing and employer expectations
- Job search and work placement support

***Engineering Your Future, Skills for Change***

The project delivers eight engineering-specific training modules building on internationally-trained engineers' former training and education. Employment counselling and support, mentoring and job development services are also be offered. In addition, the project provides comprehensive information on the engineering field, offer individual assessments and counselling, and makes appropriate referrals.

***Medical Radiation Therapist Project, Cancer Care Ontario***

A project currently under way in a partnership between the Ontario government and Cancer Care Ontario (an umbrella organization that steers cancer treatment and prevention services) is using PLAR to assess the knowledge and skills of medical radiation therapists



to determine if they have the necessary learning to move to a new, advanced role as clinical specialists in radiation therapy. Pre-established occupational competencies are the criteria against which all candidates are assessed. PLAR methodologies include portfolio assessment, case study examinations and structured interviews. Employers interested in exploring use of the advanced role participate as PLAR assessors and work placement hosts for a defined period of training and practice at the advanced level.

***Settlement to Employment Program (STEP), Algonquin College***

STEP is a partnership involving Algonquin College, the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO), the National Capital Region's YMCA-YWCA, the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration and CIC. It facilitates the integration of internationally-trained individuals to employment in the field for which they have been trained and educated. The program provides individual assessment including language assessment, counselling, educational pathways, employment/profession specific training, profession-specific mentorship and profession-specific work placements. Emphasis is placed on engineering, financial services, accounting, information technology and the trades.

**Occupational assessment activities**

Occupational assessments involve regulatory or other occupational bodies, educational institutions and in some cases, employers. These PLAR and CR activities are conducted to determine an individual's eligibility to work in a particular occupation.

***Agrology – Assess Skills, Provide Training and Lead to Accreditation and/or Employment, Ontario Institute of Professional Agrologists***

This program, the first in Canada for agrologists, is designed to provide immigrants with preparation prior to arrival in Canada, equivalency evaluation within Ontario, professional assessment, portfolio development, language training specific to agrology, and mentors and mentoring projects in work-related environments. Successful graduates will receive the P.Ag. designation.

***Bridge to Accounting Credentials, Ryerson University***

This project helps internationally-trained accountants move toward registration and employment. The project assesses their knowledge, develops individual action plans and provides:

- Courses in Canadian business law and taxation
- Occupation-specific language and cultural literacy training
- Work placements, coaching and mentoring

Ryerson also helps participants with completion of other approved academic credits accepted by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario, the Certified General Accountants of Ontario or the Society of Management Accountants of Ontario.

***Bridging for Internationally-educated Nurses (BIEN), Mohawk College***

This project assists internationally-educated nurses gain accreditation and/or employment as practical nurses or personal support workers. The program consists of assessment and recognition of prior learning and experience, supported work experience, vocational skills and academic training, and occupation-specific language training. Successful graduates attain a post-secondary education credential.

***Bridging for Internationally-educated Optometrists, College of Optometrists and University of Waterloo***

The University of Waterloo is currently engaged in a pilot project to conduct PLAR and provide bridging for internationally-educated optometrists. The process includes credential reviews, a short bridging program of one month classroom and practice out-placement, and clinical assessments. A longer bridging program is also available for applicants requiring additional education. Supports are provided to applicants (e.g., sample questions). The University advises the College of Optometrists that candidates who successfully complete the assessment and bridging activities have the equivalent to a University of Waterloo degree in optometry.

***Bridging to Employment and Registration for Internationally-educated Social Workers, Ryerson University***

This bridging program provides learning and support services which includes language and communications proficiency testing, a knowledge and skills assessment and referral process, and placement and mentoring opportunities for internationally-educated social workers.

***Building on Their Skills, Carpenters' Local Union 27***

The Carpenter's Local Union 27 offers an 80-hour program on evenings and weekends that helps internationally-trained members upgrade their skills to meet the provincial standards for interior and exterior trim carpentry work. It also helps them work toward the requirements for General Carpentry certification. Assessment and recognition of prior learning and job-specific language training are also part of the program. Approximately 60% of the program is hands-on application and 40% is theory.

***College of Respiratory Therapists of Ontario (CRTO)***

The registration regulation governing CRTO allows PLA and CR to be provided to internationally-educated applicants after all other registration requirements are met. The process includes credential assessment, interviews and facility tours followed by a written test, a clinical test (performance in a controlled environment for observation and assessment) and a written assessment report by the Michener Institute. Final decisions regarding equivalency are made by the CRTO.

PLAR and CR are also being used on a permanent or pilot basis by other occupational bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario and the Professional Engineers of Ontario.

***College Teachers' Bridging Program, George Brown College***

This bridging program is designed to assist internationally-educated college teachers to integrate into the Ontario workplace. It includes assessment, higher-level language training focused on the education sector, introduction to workplace and teaching techniques,

classroom observation and participation, workshops with coaching and networking opportunities and work placements.

***Distance International Midwifery Pre-Registration Program (DIMPP), Ryerson University***

This project provides distance delivery capability for all components of the International Midwifery Pre-Registration Program curriculum. This includes:

- Prior learning assessment for internationally-trained midwives
- Profession-specific language testing and education
- Course offerings addressing enhancement needs in clinical knowledge, skills and orientation to practice in Ontario

***Faculty of Engineering, Architecture and Science Internationally-educated Engineers Qualification Bridging Program, Ryerson University***

This program provides participants with the opportunity to successfully complete the academic qualifications requirements for professional engineering licensure in Ontario. Participants enter one of two streams – an advanced standing admission into the third year of one of the seven engineering programs offered at Ryerson, or a personalized academic program. The project is also establishing an Office of Internationally-educated Engineers that will provide services including:

- Direct links with the Professional Engineers Ontario (PEO)
- Direct connections to academic programs
- Intensive advanced language training
- Canadian professional experience through a four-month co-op program

Through co-op placement, participants gain paid engineering employment experience, develop contacts and apply the knowledge gained in their university courses.

***Fast Track to Technology Occupations (FTTO), Sheridan College***

The seven-week FTTO program is designed as a bridging program for internationally-educated individuals who wish to obtain provincial certification in one of a range of technology occupations. The project is funded by the provincial government. Admission testing, assessment of previous education and professional experience, bridging training, Canadian work placement experience and mentoring services are provided at no cost to participants. The FTTO program bridges into a number of graduate certificate programs, and year two of several two-year and three-year diploma programs. Applicants to graduate certificate programs may be granted advanced standing on a course by course basis. Graduates may be eligible to be certified by the Ontario Association of Certified Engineering Technologists and Technicians (OACETT).

The fast track diploma programs will be submitted to OACETT for certification and, in conjunction with The Canadian Technology Accreditation Board, for national accreditation. Pending approval by these two professional bodies, it is expected that the programs will meet the academic requirements for OACETT certification.

***Improving Access: An Assessment and Bridging Program for Internationally-trained Massage Therapists, Centennial College***

A bridging program for internationally-educated massage therapists is operated by Centennial College in collaboration with the College of Massage Therapists of Ontario. Following a successful, initial pilot project, the program now involves assessment of candidates' knowledge, technical and language skills. Formal academic credential assessment is followed by a three-step PLAR process which includes a written examination, a clinical examination with 13 stations and a comprehensive clinical evaluation. Information on occupational requirements and an opportunity to self-assess are provided online.

This project has developed a pilot assessment and bridging program to prepare internationally-trained massage therapists for professional practice which includes:

- Higher-level language assessment based on Canadian Language Benchmarks

- Academic credential assessment
- Student success-oriented academic advising
- Modularized learning components to fill identified equivalency gaps
- Simulated and real world clinical experience in labs and community placements
- Occupationally-specific and socio-culturally relevant language curriculum in the classroom, online and in the lab
- Flexible learning pathways in the classroom and through e-learning and mentoring
- College of Massage Therapists of Ontario entry-to-practice exam preparation
- Career assistance to facilitate a smooth entry into the Ontario labour market

***PLAR Model for Nursing Baccalaureate Equivalency, College of Nurses of Ontario***

The regulatory body, the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO), has developed a PLAR model to evaluate the learning of internationally-educated nurses and facilitate their entry into professional practice in Ontario. The model includes foundation principles to guide development, criteria for applicant eligibility, process quality assurance criteria and a step-by-step assessment sequence. The initiative features a collaborative development process used by the CNO to engage relevant stakeholders and potential assessing agencies. Responsibility for implementing the model has been given to a university which will work in collaboration with the CNO to provide prior learning assessments.

***Professional Access and Integration Enhancement (PAIE), Toronto and Region Conservation Authority***

This program assists internationally-trained planners and internationally-trained geoscientists in the regions of Peel, York, Durham and Toronto obtain certification. The program includes a three-month classroom training session and a nine-month high-skilled volunteer work placement covering experience in municipal, regional and provincial legislation, values, culture and procedures in professional planning and geoscience with the goal of certification. Assessments of prior learning are conducted using structured

interviews, writing samples for technical knowledge and writing skills and credential assessment.

***Raising Our Sights: Building Bridges to Optometric Practice in Ontario, University of Waterloo School of Optometry***

“Raising Our Sights” is an extension of an existing project that provides bridge training for internationally-trained optometrists to facilitate their integration into the profession in Ontario. This project is focused on three main components:

- Development of a new prior learning assessment tool to reflect upcoming changes in the assessment criteria of the Canadian Standard Assessment in Optometry
- Greater emphasis on occupation-specific language training to ensure that participants have the necessary higher-level language skills
- Development of online delivery for course material, to provide more flexibility in how participants access the material

**Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose credential recognition is offered by academic credential assessment services that provide information to a range of stakeholders interested in gaining a better understanding of immigrants’ formal educational backgrounds.

***Academic Credential Assessment Services***

The primary academic credential assessment agencies in Ontario are World Education Services (WES), Comparative Education Service (CES) at the University of Toronto, and Academic Credential Evaluation Service (ACES) at York University. They provide assessments for the purposes of employment, education and occupational licensing/certification.

**PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND**

**Public policy context**

The government of Prince Edward Island began to address the recognition of prior learning in earnest in 2002, when the Department of Education issued a formal statement on its belief that the “recognition of prior learning is fundamental to a lifelong learning culture,

and that all learning should be considered for recognition by educational institutions, professions, and work organizations.” The Department expressed its support in principle for PLAR and made a commitment to encourage learning communities to become better connected through the formal recognition of learning acquired through work and other life experience. In 2004, the provincial government initiated a plan to use PLAR to help address skill shortages in the province’s apprenticeship system.

Increasing PLAR is also part of a literacy and lifelong learning strategic initiative articulated in the Canada-Prince Edward Island Labour Market Development Agreement. Details on how increased activity might be achieved are not available.

No provincial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance activities are currently in place.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The provincial government has not defined prior learning. University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) defines it as learning acquired from non-traditional sources including informal study, non-credit and workplace courses, work experience, unpaid work, hobbies and volunteering. PLAR focuses on portfolio assessment for academic credit and excludes special credit, credit transfer, block credit or credit challenge by examination. Holland College refers to prior learning as learning acquired outside formal educational institutions.

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing prior learning:

- Department of Education
- University of Prince Edward Island
- Holland College
- Workplace Learning PEI Inc.

### **Provincial funding**

The Department of Education currently supports PLAR through ongoing funding provided to Workplace Learning PEI Inc. as well as project-based funding to UPEI for the establishment of a transitions program to support adults returning to school. No provincial



funding is provided to PEI's post-secondary institutions for ongoing PLAR services. Activities are financed through institutional budgets and learner assessment fees.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities involve direct delivery by PEI's two post-secondary institutions and collaborative partnerships across institutions.

#### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education is provided by UPEI and Holland College. UPEI has recently established PLAR policies and procedures using a program-based assessment model. Holland College is currently in the process of developing a comprehensive strategy that integrates PLAR into the College's existing systems (e.g., program planning) and provides detailed policies and procedures. Emphasis is placed on PLAR for academic credit. The College also has a number of pilot projects under way to test various PLAR structures and procedures, including a non-credit portfolio development course. Decisions on what elements of programs will be available for PLAR will be decided by program faculty as part of the program planning process.

PLAR monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance activities are determined by individual institutions. Holland College is using its ISO 9001 certification process to establish quality assurance in its PLAR services.

The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC) also plays a role in maintaining and improving services to university students in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. The Commission's policy on quality assurance states that all new university programs should have multiple access routes using PLAR, among other arrangements.

Post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to assess prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition in PEI: articulation agreements, individual credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by both UPEI and Holland College to facilitate student mobility. PEI does not have a provincial credit transfer system. The community colleges in Atlantic Canada have collaborated in the development of a Guide to Block Transfer Agreements.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by both UPEI and Holland College. Credit transfers are normally determined by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions or program faculty. No fees are charged.
- Academic credential assessments determine whether applicants' prior academic certificates, diplomas and degrees are equivalent to PEI's post-secondary credentials. UPEI and Holland College conduct their own assessments and no fees are charged to students.

*PLAR* – UPEI offers challenge examinations but does not consider these to be PLAR.

These examinations are currently course-based and funded through assessment fees.

Portfolio assessment is viewed as the primary method of PLAR. Additional forms of assessment may be administered if portfolios alone do not fully demonstrate achievement of required learning outcomes. Assessment fees equivalent to 50% of normal course fees are charged.

In February 2007, Holland College commenced Canada's first program-based PLAR model for institution-wide implementation at the college level. As implementation is in progress, not all policies, procedures, methods or assessment tools have been finalized. The PLAR model incorporates learning gap analyses and individualized learning plans for students. Programs or program clusters will develop strategic plans for implementation based on the model, which is designed to be flexible and student-centred. Programs will be provided with institution-wide policies and guidelines; the focus is currently on portfolio as the primary assessment tool. Other assessment methods such as demonstrations, challenge examinations, video reviews, oral examinations, projects, checklists and logbooks may be used to supplement portfolios. Informal PLAR will also be possible for enrolled students and determined in negotiation with program faculty. Assessment services will be team-based.

*Portfolio learning* – UPEI offers career and learning portfolio development as part of a transitions program offered to individuals who require extra support or do not meet the usual entrance requirements. In addition, the Centre for Life-long Learning offers portfolio development as part of its non-credit certificate programs.

#### *Joint Degree in Human Resource Development*

Holland College and UPEI jointly offer a Bachelor in Education Degree in Human Resource Development. The program is designed for adult educators who teach either at post-secondary institutions (such as community colleges or business or industry organizations), and public school vocational and technology teachers. Qualified graduates of this program may apply to the PEI Department of Education for a Technology Education Teaching License to teach technology education in PEI high schools. Upon successful completion of 12 courses of this program, applicants may apply for a joint Holland College/UPEI Certificate in Adult Education (CAE) which qualifies them for employment in community colleges and high school technology education programs. This new program recognizes applicants' prior learning in two ways: recognition in the trade and technical areas of study at Holland College and well as academic credit at UPEI.

#### *Primary/secondary school initiatives*

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

#### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities include apprenticeship initiatives.

#### *Apprenticeship*

The Department of Education is currently designing and piloting PLAR in apprenticeship as part of its Path to Success project. The initiative, which is federally funded but managed by the Department of Education's Apprenticeship Branch, will include assessment of essential skills, followed by a technical skills self-assessment based on a tool developed by the Ministry and validated by content experts. The purpose of the Path to Success project is to determine if PLAR combined with learning interventions can help to increase apprenticeship participation and improve qualification examination pass rates.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose PLAR and CR activities include credential assessment agency development to evaluate individuals' credentials for the purposes of employment, education, and licensing/certification, and collaborative partnerships between a community-based organization and UPEI.

### ***Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre***

The four Atlantic provinces are currently working together to establish an Atlantic International Credentials and Competency Assessment and Recognition Centre. It is based on a hybrid model that combines academic and competency assessments.

### ***Workplace Learning PEI Inc.***

Workplace Learning PEI Inc. is a federally funded, not-for-profit organization managed by the provincial Department of Education. Workplace Learning PEI Inc. works in partnership with businesses, unions and other organizations to provide information sessions and workshops on PLAR, portfolio development, and PLAR practitioner training and certification. This initiative has developed a learning portfolio to enable people to seek recognition of their skills from a certification body, learning institution or employer. The program co-delivers a learning portfolio course with UPEI through which students in transition create academic learning plans, career plans and goals development. The course enables students to obtain course and program credits, gain advanced standing, plan their entry into the workforce and obtain employment. Portfolios are also being used in transition programs in eight secondary schools (school to work, school to college).

## **SASKATCHEWAN**

### **Public policy context**

In 2004, the provincial government of Saskatchewan established a RPL provincial policy framework. It set out strategic directions to support the recognition of lifelong learning, and contribute to provincial educational and labour market planning processes. The framework

identifies specific actions to be undertaken collaboratively by government and other stakeholders to promote quality RPL practices within business and labour, education and training institutions, and all other regional stakeholders. Consideration is given to northern and outlying regions, which are characterized by a predominantly Aboriginal population, with relatively high unemployment rates. A concerted effort is being made to plan initiatives to address the particular issues faced in these regions.

Following the adoption of the RPL framework, an RPL Coordinating Group (RCG) was given responsibility for implementing the Framework's action plan. The RCG membership represents a wide variety of provincial stakeholder groups. In the past year, the RCG has completed a number of RPL initiatives. In September 2007, three reports were issued: the RCG published an analysis of websites on PLAR as part of its plan to establish a Saskatchewan RPL website and several recommendations were made; the Coordinating Group's RPL Communications Working Group published a communications strategy that includes a five-year work plan to make the concept of RPL widely known and accepted across the province; and the RPL Centre Working Group of the RCG reported on its research into existing RPL Centres and made several recommendations with respect to drafting a concept proposal to establish an RPL Centre for the Province of Saskatchewan. Other steps taken to promote the implementation of RPL are presented in the RCG annual report.

Improving the labour market integration of immigrants is also a priority goal of the province and is addressed in the Canada-Saskatchewan Labour Market Partnership Agreement. The Agreement states both governments' intention to strengthen the province's capacity to assess credentials and individuals' prior work experience.

No provincial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance of PLAR activities are in place.

### **Prior learning terminology**

RPL is used as an umbrella term by Saskatchewan's government and post-secondary institutions. It includes PLAR – the assessment of knowledge and skills intentionally acquired through participation in non-credit courses, workplace-based training, workshops,

and incidentally acquired through life experience, workplace-based tasks, volunteer activities, self study, hobbies and family responsibilities; credit transfer; and qualifications recognition (recognition of educational credentials).

The following stakeholder groups are among the most active in recognizing learning:

- Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment
- Saskatchewan Institute for Applied Science and Technology (SIAST)
- Regional colleges
- Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission
- Primary and secondary school divisions
- Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations
- Saskatchewan Tourism Sector Council

### **Provincial funding**

Targeted funding to support the implementation of the RPL Framework has been provided to the regional colleges, SIAST, the Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission and Dumont Technical Institute. Funds have been allocated by Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment to the RCG to advance the goals and actions in the RPL Provincial Policy Framework and to support priorities identified by the RCG.

In 2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06, the provincial government provided funding for two staff working in the area of RPL within the Department of Advanced Education and Employment. In its 2006/07 budget the province provided \$500,000 to support new and ongoing initiatives related to RPL. The budget allocated funds to provincial post-secondary education and training institutions, including \$250,000 to SIAST to expand the number of programs providing PLAR for credit, and to develop curriculum for training RPL practitioners. Funding also went to regional colleges to expand the delivery of RPL advising and referral, and Dumont Technical Institute to expand the capacity of the institution to implement RPL processes for Aboriginal learners.

In 2006/07, additional funding was provided to the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission to augment existing RPL processes.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities involve direct delivery of assessments, professional development, research, pilot projects and collaboration with other institutions.

#### ***Post-secondary institutions***

Public post-secondary education in Saskatchewan is provided by the province's two public universities, one institute and nine regional colleges. These institutions are relatively autonomous organizations with discretion to determine their PLAR activities.

Saskatchewan's universities offer limited PLAR in some programs. The University of Saskatchewan has a challenge for credit policy and the University of Regina is developing an institutional PLAR policy. The Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission offers RPL to apprentice candidates.

In 2006, as a result of new provincial funding, the province's regional colleges began to hire RPL staff; develop RPL policies and procedures; evaluate individual organizational needs; provide learner support through information services, advising, agency referrals, and workshops on portfolio development and e-portfolio; and materials for advisors.

SIAST, the province's largest college level post-secondary institution, has extensive PLAR policies, procedures, handbooks, web pages and other resources. Developmental initiatives are ongoing and include the following recent examples:

*Web resources* – Internal websites provide SIAST faculty and staff with instant access to information, forms, links, policies, procedures, workshops and toolkits designed specifically for developers, advisors and assessors.

*RPL training* – With funding from Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, the RPL Office at SIAST has developed a certified training program for RPL practitioners, with a goal to assist organizations and individuals to develop skills and build capacity for

implementing RPL. The first two-credit courses, Introduction to RPL and Career Counselling with Aboriginal Clients, were introduced in 2007.

*Applied research* – The SIAST RPL Office in partnership with The Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, Ryerson University and the University of New Brunswick engaged in an applied research project to examine quality assurance in PLAR in Canada. SIAST collected research data from its learners and faculty through focus group discussions and structured interviews. The project resulted in a report on quality assurance in post-secondary education, a guide for institutions and an annotated bibliography for researchers.

*Course preparation* – In 2005/06, 14 SIAST programs across the various divisions completed PLAR projects. Included are all SIAST Communication Arts courses in Associated Studies, as well as the Hotel and Restaurant Administration, and Recreation and Tourism programs.

*Transfer credit project* – The RPL Office is undertaking a review of all existing credit transfer and articulation agreements with a view to centralizing information on the Institute's Banner student management system.

Post-secondary institutions use three mechanisms to recognize prior learning: credential recognition, PLAR and portfolio learning. These mechanisms can be used independently but are often applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are four forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual course credit transfer, equivalency assessments and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by all Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions to facilitate student mobility. In 2006, the Saskatchewan Council for Admission and Transfer launched an online credit transfer guide, a database of all articulation and transfer agreements between institutions in Saskatchewan.
- Individual course credit transfers are conducted by all Saskatchewan post-secondary institutions. Decisions are normally made by Registrars' offices, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are charged fees on a per course basis.



- Equivalency assessments are conducted to evaluate training such as workplace training programs. This process is also known as program review.
- Academic credential assessments determine whether applicants' prior academic certificates, diplomas and degrees are equivalent to Saskatchewan post-secondary credentials. Most institutions conduct their own assessments and charge students an administration fee. Some institutions use the services of assessment agencies to provide information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity.

*PLAR* – PLAR activities in Saskatchewan's post-secondary institutions are based on institutional policies and are limited in form and volume. The University of Saskatchewan charges assessment fees using a formula; the University of Regina does not charge assessment fees.

At SIAST, the most common assessment methods and tools are outcomes-based with an emphasis on authentic assessment. Methods used include interviews, written or oral exams, demonstrations, simulations, course challenges, research papers, standardized tests and group presentations. Traditional portfolio assessment is not a primary method of assessment but may be used in some programs or in combination with other methods. A portfolio-type tool called an "evidence file" is more typically used in programs that require documented evidence of learning.

PLAR assessments are available to adult learners seeking college academic credit, personal and career development, and admission to a few high-demand, competitive entry programs. Assessments are normally course-based and administered by faculty who teach the course which is the subject of the assessment. Assessment fees vary and are generally charged on a per course basis. At SIAST, fees are normally less than tuition for the same course.

The majority of SIAST courses have been prepared for PLAR and the institution has developed a database of eligible courses. The database provides prospective candidates with information that helps them determine whether to proceed with PLAR, and what steps are required in order to do so. SIAST maintains records on assessment success rates.

*Portfolio learning* – In some programs, the University of Saskatchewan uses learning portfolios to assess prior learning.

### *Continuing Care Assistant Project*

To help address the health care needs of Saskatchewan residents over the age of 65 years, SIAST developed a project to assess the prior learning of individuals in rural areas where labour shortages are particularly high. SIAST subject experts coordinated assessments of prior learning using distance education techniques. They conducted 93 PLAR challenges in 2004/05 and 192 PLAR challenges in 2005/06 in the Institute's Continuing Care Assistant Program. Most of these applicants were not located in a major urban centre.

### *Portfolio Development in Teacher Education*

Saskatchewan universities provide students in teacher education with "hands-on" experience with portfolios, since portfolio development is taught within the K-12 school system. Enterprising students may individually adapt their portfolios to an electronic application. Institutions are also investigating the use of e-portfolios through special projects in partnership with federally and provincially-funded initiatives. For example, the regional colleges have used e-portfolio software in Older Worker pilot projects and in an Office Education program. Traditional portfolios (not e-portfolios) have proven to be successful in Older Worker projects and in Aboriginal training programs.

SIAST offers portfolio learning for employment preparation in programs such as Office Education, Dental Assisting, New Media and Applied Photography. The Institute's Adult Basic Education program has also incorporated portfolio development into the adult upgrading programs for personal development and career identification.

### *Primary/secondary school initiatives*

In 2007, the provincial government announced \$400,000 in funding for K-12 career development projects in 13 school divisions as part of a new Career Development Action Plan. Included in this project is the development of a model for the implementation of web-based Personal Career Portfolios for students in Grades 6-12 for English Language, Francophone and Immersion schools. The project will also provide a model for strengthening capacity for First Nations and Métis career development. School divisions have been encouraged to partner in these projects with business and industry, post-secondary education, career and employment centres, First Nations and Métis

organizations, economic development authorities, community-based organizations and neighbouring school divisions.

### **Employment-related activities**

Employment-related PLAR and CR activities include employment preparation and career planning.

#### ***Building Systems Technician Initiative***

A partnership between a major Saskatchewan crown corporation and SIAST resulted in PLAR and skills upgrading for building maintenance technicians through the Institute's Building Systems Technician Program (BST). Through PLAR, credit was granted for previous training, experience and knowledge that matched course learning outcomes. A customized training program was then developed to address identified knowledge gaps. The training took place at the worksite and provided flexible class times. This collaborative approach resulted in 21 highly trained workers.

#### ***Outfitter Qualifications***

Prior learning assessment was used to support enhancement of workers in the outfitting industry, which is comprised of small owner-operated businesses that provide guides for hunting, angling and touring experiences throughout Saskatchewan. An assessment and top-up training system in commercial vessel safety was developed to accommodate First Nations and Métis cultures.

#### ***Rural Saskatchewan Older Workers Project***

In 2003/04, the Rural Saskatchewan Older Workers Project was delivered in seven regional colleges across the province. The goal of the pilot was to deliver alternative training approaches to prepare unemployed and under-employed workers between the ages of 50 and 64, to make the transition to long-term sustainable employment. The process included a portfolio learning process which resulted in participant attitudinal changes, positive self-esteem and self-efficacy development.

### ***Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) Career Pathing Project***

SAHO has developed a Career Pathing project the purpose of which is to support the success and transformational growth of employees through the development of flexible, personalized career paths. In particular, the project aims to empower Aboriginal employees in entry-level positions to access future career and job options. The cornerstone of the process is the integration of holistic portfolio development. Employees develop career-focused portfolios that document their formal and informal learning experience, serve as a learning plan for future training and identify areas of personal career interests. Individually, these portfolios validate the accomplishments and abilities of employees, while providing documentation and evidence that may be applied through PLAR processes for certification or academic credits. Collectively, the portfolios provide a “talent inventory” that can be matched with current and future needs of the health sector.

### ***Ready to Work, Saskatchewan Tourism Education Council (STEC)***

STEC engages in RPL activities with clients through résumé and portfolio building. It works with clients to identify and assess formal and informal learning, and through its Ready to Work Program, delivers training and work-based certificates that, along with résumés, create a portfolio that participants are encouraged build as they acquire new skills and knowledge.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

Occupational assessment activities involve partnerships between educational institutions and regulatory bodies that have a joint interest in expanding the labour pool and addressing skill shortages.

### ***Nursing Re-entry Program***

The Nursing Re-entry Program is a certificate program offered by SIAST for individuals who:

- Have been previously registered in Canada as a psychiatric nurse, practical nurse or registered nurse and are eligible for re-registration in Saskatchewan

- Are currently registered in Saskatchewan and want to update and evaluate their knowledge and skills
- Have not been registered in Canada and require or want to prepare to write registration exams (Assessment Strategies Inc)

PLAR is offered for all courses in the program. Identified retraining needs are addressed via distance education. In 2004-05, there were 61 PLAR challenges and in 2005-06, there were 46 PLAR challenges in the Nursing Re-entry Program.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

Multi-purpose credential recognition activities include the assessment of international academic credentials for the purposes of employment, education and licensing/certification.

### ***International Qualifications Assessment Services (IQAS)***

In 1995, the government of Saskatchewan established a contractual partnership with IQAS based in Alberta. IQAS evaluations are advisory only. The costs of these assessments are borne by student applicants.

## **YUKON TERRITORY**

### **Public policy context**

The Department of Education of the Yukon Territory does not have formal PLAR policies. No territorial monitoring, evaluation or quality assurance of PLAR activities are in place.

### **Prior learning terminology**

The government of the Yukon Territory has not defined PLAR. Yukon College is the most active stakeholder group in recognizing prior learning.

### **Territorial funding**

No ongoing government funding is provided to for post-secondary PLAR services.

### **Education-related activities**

Education-related PLAR and CR activities focus on direct delivery of assessments by Yukon College and collaborative partnerships with other post-secondary institutions.

### *Post-secondary institutions*

Public post-secondary education in the Yukon is delivered through the single, multi-campus, Yukon College. In addition to providing territorial residents with career-oriented training programs, Yukon College is committed to native and northern studies and to promoting the territory's Aboriginal cultures. The College does not have formal PLAR policies but development has been part of the College's 2002-2007 strategic plan. PLAR and CR activities are financed through institutional budgets and student assessment fees. Monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance of PLAR and CR activities are the responsibility of the College.

The College uses two mechanisms to assess prior learning: credential recognition and PLAR. These mechanisms can be used independently but may be applied in combination.

*Credential recognition* – There are three forms of credential recognition: articulation agreements, individual course credit transfer and academic credential assessment.

- Articulation agreements are used by Yukon College to facilitate student transfers to universities and other public post-secondary institutions. Agreements are in place with Royal Roads University, University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, University of Victoria, Open University of British Columbia and University of Regina. The College also has articulation agreements with institutions in Alaska. A number of the College's agreements are published in the British Columbia Transfer Guide.
- Individual credit transfers are conducted by the College. Decisions are normally made by the Registrar's office, sometimes in consultation with sending institutions. Student applicants are normally charged fees on a per course basis.
- Academic credential assessments are also conducted by the College. A fee is normally charged to students. The College may also use the services of assessment agencies.

*PLAR* – PLAR at Yukon College has been conducted in programs such as Early Childhood Education on a project basis. The most common methods of assessment are challenge examinations and portfolio assessment. Assessors are normally faculty teaching the course which is the subject of the assessment. Students are charged assessment fees.

### *Gateways Project – Early Childhood Education*

Yukon College recently participated as a pilot site for the Gateways Project in Alberta. The project successfully used portfolio development to record and assess 16 students' prior learning against the competencies required for completion of Early Childhood certificates and diplomas. As a result, the College issued ten diplomas and one certificate based on this alternative evaluation process and identified what gaps in learning required additional course taking. Other students gained course credits towards a Degree of Professional Arts through Athabasca University.

### ***Primary/secondary school initiatives***

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Employment-related activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Occupational assessment activities**

No PLAR or CR activities were identified.

### **Multi-purpose activities**

### ***International Credential Evaluation Service and International Qualifications Assessment Service***

The International Credential Evaluation Service (ICES) in BC and International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS) in Alberta offer academic credential assessment services to Yukon College, providing information on international credential equivalency and document authenticity. These services are also available to employers and occupational bodies.

## APPENDIX B



*Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Development on Lifelong Learning*

# DEVELOPMENT OF POLICIES AND PRACTICES RELATED TO THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS IN QUEBEC

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*This report was supported by funding from the Prior Learning Assessment  
Centre in Halifax.*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ACDEAULF:	Association canadienne d'éducation des adultes des universités de langue française [Canadian adult education association for French-language universities]
CEA:	Centres d'éducation des adultes [adult education centres]
CEGEP	collège d'enseignement général et professionnel [general and vocational college in Quebec]
CIQ	Conseil interprofessionnel du Québec [Quebec interprofessional council]
CSE:	Conseil supérieur de l'Éducation [superior council of education]
ICEA:	Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes [institute for cooperation in adult education]
MELS:	Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport [ministry of education, recreation and sport]
MEQ:	Ministère de l'Éducation (name for MELS until 2003) [ministry of education]
MESS:	Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale [ministry of employment and social cohesion]
MICC:	Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles [ministry of immigration and cultural communities]
SARCA:	Services d'accueil, de référence, de conseil et d'accompagnement [reception, referral, counselling and support services]
SOFEDUC:	Société de formation et d'éducation continue [training and continuing education group]

## INTRODUCTION

The recognition of prior knowledge and skills is important for worker mobility and the integration of immigrants, as well as for the enhancement of all experiential learning. The Quebec government is focusing its efforts related to prior learning in the areas of education and employment. The term recognition of prior knowledge and skills in this report refers to activities such as the assessment, recognition and validation of previous formal, non-formal or informal learning; prior learning involving equivalence of courses, degrees or diplomas earned outside the educational institutions recognized by the ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS); or personal or professional experiential learning and how they can be applied to current education and training.

Recognizing and validating prior learning indicates an individual's knowledge and skills in light of specific criteria. Defining clear criteria is thus key to the quality of the process of recognizing prior learning.<sup>1</sup>

Various methods can be used to assess prior learning. They include the development of professional profiles that are then used by Quebec's sectoral labour force committees (Comités sectoriels de main-d'œuvre) as references for the recognition of prior learning. A number of educational institutions, adult education, and vocational education and training centres run by school boards, colleges and universities are also willing to recognize non-formal prior learning in relation to a particular program, on the basis of demonstrations, structured interviews, and presentations of examples or products. In addition, some professional regulatory and professional recognition bodies have applicants take a written test to assess their prior learning, for purposes of admitting them to the body or issuing a licence. Finally, some organizations offer courses with the goal of producing a portfolio of documents and other elements that reflect an individual's knowledge and expertise.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the fact sheet on recognition of prior learning in Canada put out by the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials. [www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.17.19](http://www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.17.19)

It is important to understand that the various forms of recognition of prior learning do not recognize experience in and of itself, but rather the knowledge and skills that an individual's experience has enabled him or her to acquire.<sup>2</sup>

In Quebec, recognition of prior learning, with certain exceptions, follows two streams: one in the education system and the other in workforce policies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the fact sheet on the recognition of prior learning in Canada put out by the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials. [www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.17.19](http://www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.17.19)

A detailed description is available in a well-documented synthesis of the documentation relating to the recognition of prior learning in Québec up to 2005 (see Talbot 2005, in the References).

## THE EDUCATION SECTOR

The recognition of prior knowledge and skills in Quebec's education sector is a major issue in educational policy, in program admission practices and in assessing an individual's true qualifications. Under the responsibility of the MELS, public educational institutions in Quebec offer prior knowledge and skills recognition services for basic education or adult education, for specific MELS-approved programs and diplomas.<sup>4</sup>

### GOVERNMENT POLICY ON ADULT EDUCATION AND CONTINUING EDUCATION AND TRAINING

In its notice on recognition of prior learning (*Avis sur la reconnaissance des acquis*) of 2000, Quebec's superior council of education (*Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* or CSE) expressed the view that [TRANSLATION] "the Quebec government should ensure that all persons can present their prior learning and once it is officially recognized they would be able to progress in their education or in their professional and personal life" (p. 91). Some of CSE's recommendations in 2000 influenced the content of the government policy on adult education and continuing education and training adopted in May 2002 (*Ministre de l'Éducation du Québec 2002a*), including the following principles:

- Individuals have a right to the social recognition of their learning insofar as they are able to provide evidence of their experience and skills.
- Individuals do not have to redo in a classroom context learning they have already acquired in another context (...).
- Any system of recognition of prior learning must strive to be transparent (CSE 2000, p. 91).

The government policy on adult education and continuing education and training (hereinafter the government policy) emphasizes the crucial importance of the recognition of prior knowledge and skills in the education of adults in Quebec. Included in the four

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<sup>4</sup> [TRANSLATION] "Concerning a benchmark approved by the MELS, like a course in a program or a local institution program, or again, a benchmark issued from a partner that has been approved by the MELS, prior knowledge and skills recognition is a process that certifies (by management mechanisms like giving equivalences, or measuring and evaluating knowledge and competencies) prior formal, non formal and informal education and training, with no distinction of place, moment or learning methods, by delivering an official document (attestation, certificate or grade summary) or by assigning another title determined by the MELS" (*Direction de la formation générale des adultes, 2007, p. 43*).

major orientations around which the government policy is structured is the promotion “of official recognition of prior knowledge and skills” (MEQ 2002a, p. 6). The government policy highlights the difficulty of accessing existing mechanisms for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills. It also aims at promoting access to education and training that has been missed through training methods adapted to the special needs of adults, who often must reconcile the requirements of education, family life and the workplace. Evening courses and part-time courses are examples of adapted methods. The government policy, like the CSE notice on recognition of prior knowledge and skills (2000), proposes diversifying recognition and skills approaches and mechanisms through, among other things, a system of continuing education units (subsection 3.3). The government policy also seeks the harmonization of systems of recognition of prior knowledge and skills in the workplace and with those in education, an approach that seems to be broadly recognized in principle (subsection 2.2).

The 2002–2007 action plan on adult education and continuing education (MEQ 2002b, hereinafter the action plan) is structured around four priorities, including an overall objective directly related to recognition of prior knowledge and skills. This objective is divided into eight measures that are intended to [TRANSLATION] “put in place a diverse set of structural means to ensure access to prior knowledge and skills recognition services in every region of Quebec” (MEQ 2002b, p. 26). Apart from the harmonization of education and workplace systems mentioned above, the action plan calls for intensification of the role of the reception and educational, employment and integration referral services for immigrants. It seeks specific recognition for prior learning in employment by stressing the key structural contribution of the workforce skills development and recognition framework (MELS 2006c, hereinafter the framework) and professional standards (see subsection 2.1). The action plan focuses on a major revitalization of recognition of prior learning in the education sector, in particular through experimentation with tools in basic education and in professional and technical education and training. The action plan places special emphasis on the immigrant population.

It should be noted that the 2002–2007 action plan (MEQ 2002b), to which we refer, is being revised and replaced by a new 2008–2013 action plan in June 2008. The revision uses the same four priorities: basic education, continuing education and training in relation to

employment, recognition of prior knowledge and skills, and the division of responsibilities for funding education and training. The same approach of

***A new initiative: polarization of resources to provide for a shared prior knowledge and skills recognition service***

The Service régional de reconnaissance d’acquis et des compétences in the Mauricie is the result of the collaboration of seven institutions:

- CEGEP de Trois-Rivières
- Three private colleges
- Commission scolaire de l’Énergie (school board)
- Commission scolaire Chemin-du-Roy (school board)
- Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

giving priority to the recognition of prior knowledge and skills is kept. In its summary report on the 2002–2007 action plan, the MELS (2007a) identifies an increase in services rendered and a steady rise in participation since 2002, in both school boards (Table 1.1) and colleges (Table 1.2).

Under the government policy, private and public educational institutions at various levels began working together. In the Mauricie Region, the regional service for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills, as well as the “Fer de lance” project in the Eastern Townships in the 1970s, simplified the recognition of prior knowledge and skills for adults by giving them information and ensuring that the services were uniform, coordinated and consistent.<sup>5</sup> Initiatives of this kind are emerging in other regions of Quebec and include a Montreal college service centre for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills consisting of 12 anglophone and francophone public colleges on Montreal Island, plus its vocational education and training counterpart for the assessment and recognition of prior learning in vocational education and training.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.clafleche.qc.ca/CFC/Nouvelles/voir.asp?newsNo=116](http://www.clafleche.qc.ca/CFC/Nouvelles/voir.asp?newsNo=116)



## THE SCHOOL BOARDS

Quebec's 72 school boards have a general mandate to provide adult education and vocational education and training. Two school board structures reach the adult public for these purposes: the adult education centres and the vocational education and training centres. They are locally responsible for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills.

Table 1.1 shows the influx of applications and the services rendered in recent years by the school boards. Up to 2004–05, a steady increase can be seen in the number of candidates for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills and the number of skills recognized, followed by a decline in 2005–06. The number of programs recognized and of school boards involved increased between 2004–05 and 2005–06. In 2005–06, 42 school boards out of 72, or 58%, of school boards offered recognition of prior knowledge and skills to adults.

**Table 1.1**

**Recognition of prior knowledge and skills in school boards in Quebec**

	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06
Number of clients	924	1,249	1,463	1,436
Number of skills recognized	7,103	8,182	10,304	8,786
Number of programs recognized	N/A	N/A	82	84
Number of school boards offering prior knowledge and skills recognition services	N/A	N/A	37*	42*

\* of a total 72 school boards

Source: MELS (2007b)

### Adult education centres

The adult education centres, responsible for adult basic education and thus for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills for adults at the secondary level, are in the process of launching new services to support current activities involving recognition of prior knowledge and skills. Notably,

[TRANSLATION]

*the MELS is establishing a computerized system, to certify and finance, corresponding to the General Education Development Testing Service (GEDTS): a service available across North America. The progressive introduction of this system is in motion in Quebec. The MELS is increasing the number of service points offering the GEDTS in the voluntary school board (Direction de la formation générale des adultes 2007, p. 21).*

The reception, referral, counselling and support services (Services d'accueil, de référence, de conseil et d'accompagnement or SARCA) initiative is an original reception and guidance program but not directly responsible for recognition of prior knowledge and skills. Linked with the objective of ensuring adult basic education, the action plan describes a measure specific to SARCA: [TRANSLATION] "To encourage adults to undertake education and training, especially basic education, and to foster their perseverance and success, reception and referral services for adults will be improved and will include counselling and support services" (MEQ 2002b, p. 7). The implementation of SARCA by the boards has been gradual. According to our information, in 2005–06 SARCA was launched by 50 school boards; in 2006–07 by a further 20.

SARCA's strategic planning in 2006 illustrates the broad range of services offered to adults: contextualized reception, counselling, guidance, sustained support, comprehensive and adapted information, vocational guidance, proactive services and partnerships among various sectors (MELS 2006b).

Through SARCA, the school boards are also responsible for the original approach provided for in the action plan (MEQ 2002b, p. 28): the report on prior learning in relation to basic education. The new service for adults [TRANSLATION] "is not an official approach to recognition of prior learning, but rather an exploratory approach," identifying for adults their prior learning in terms of education and experience, which gives them confidence and encourages them to define their needs and plans (MELS 2006a, p. 23). The report on prior learning in relation to basic education, emphasizing a skills-based approach, is aimed at adults, particularly those who do not have secondary school diplomas.

One example of this approach to recognition of prior knowledge and skills is the work of the Montréal school board's Champagnat adult education and training centre: it offers reception, information and mentoring to complete self-assessment grids, interviews, and subsequent tests and work. The centre charges \$50 for records analysis and skills assessment, and education and training shortfalls can be made up at a cost of \$40 a semester.

### **Vocational education and training centres**

The school boards' vocational education and training centres are responsible for vocational education and training at the secondary level. The recognition of prior learning at the vocational centres is based on the programs offered and once education and training shortfalls have been made up it is possible for the individual to go on to earn a vocational studies diploma or certificate from the MELS. [TRANSLATION] "Prior knowledge and skills will be assessed in terms of the objectives defined in the curriculum for the trade in question. Thus, it is not experience that will be recognized but rather the skills resulting from that experience."<sup>6</sup>

The stages of recognition of prior knowledge and skills are presented in detail on the "Inforoute" on vocational and technical education and training in Quebec

([www.inforoutefpt.org](http://www.inforoutefpt.org)). It contains information about the programs available and guides adults toward appropriate service locations. In existing vocational programs, such as college technical programs, there is five-step approach that involves meeting with a counsellor, preparation of a file, interview with a specialist, assessment and certification or a plan to make up the missing education and training.

***Examples of vocational education and training programs with potential recognition of prior knowledge and skills (Direction de la formation générale des adultes 2007):***

- hairdressing
- accounting
- water treatment methods

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<sup>6</sup> Based on [www.csdm.qc.ca/Champagnat](http://www.csdm.qc.ca/Champagnat)

## **CEGEPS**

More than half of Quebec CEGEPs say they offer reception and referral services to adults (Bélanger, Carignan and Robitaille 2007). Recognition services for prior knowledge and skills related to continuing education services are designed and offered based on each program at an institution, although this approach is not yet available for all programs offered. For instance, the Collégia group (CEGEPs of Gaspé and Matane) [TRANSLATION] “offers a recognition of prior learning and assessment service that allows adults to have the skills they acquired outside an academic environment evaluated” for the program in early child education (Technique d’éducation à l’enfance in Gaspé) or in networking (Réseautique in Matane).<sup>7</sup> Costs vary according to the institution. For example, Collège Edouard-Montpetit’s centre for business services and continuing education (Centre de services aux entreprises et de formation continue) offers consultation and file analysis services in recognition of prior knowledge and skills for \$35, while the charge for equivalency recognition is \$25 a course.

Table 1.2 shows that recognition of prior knowledge and skills activities at the CEGEP level are constantly increasing. More than 2,000 people applied for them in 2005–06. Recognition of prior knowledge and skills services are offered in 41 CEGEPs out of 48, or 85% of public college-level educational institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.collegia.qc.ca](http://www.collegia.qc.ca)

**Table 1.2**

**Recognition of prior knowledge and skills in CEGEPS in Quebec**

	2002–03	2003–04	2004–05	2005–06
Number of clients	N/A	1,648	1,664	2,083
Number of programs recognized	N/A	60	118	131
Number of CEGEPs offering prior knowledge and skills recognition services	N/A	N/A	36*	41*

\* of a total 48 CEGEPs

Source: MELS (2007b)

It is possible to obtain credits for various types of knowledge and skills through recognition of prior learning provided they are equivalent to the skills and knowledge that would probably have been acquired through success in the given college-level course. This entails verification of whether the acquired knowledge and skills match those shown by the students after each course in the college degree general and technical programs

(diplôme d'études collégiales). This assessment may take one of the following forms: a portfolio (developed beforehand with a counsellor), a written test, a practical test or an interview.

Recent research (Bélanger, Carignan and Robitaille 2007) on the development of continuing education in Quebec CEGEPs, however, notes that recognition of prior knowledge and skills is underdeveloped. The research decries the lack of specialized personnel assigned to recognition of prior knowledge and skills and emphasizes the inadequacy of the tools currently available and the time required to process each file with

***Examples of technical programs for which students can apply for recognition of prior knowledge and skills (Direction de la formation générale des adultes 2007):***

- early child education
- computer technologies
- business management

those tools. As a result, the demand for such services tends to overwhelm available resources.

But as CSE (2006) stated in a recent notice, adults will not agree to continue their education throughout their working life, particularly with regard to post-secondary continuing education, unless their prior knowledge and current skills are recognized. Without that recognition, they may give up their professional development or general education.

## UNIVERSITIES

Research conducted by the Canadian association for adult education of French-language universities (Association canadienne d'éducation des adultes des universités de langue française or ACDEAULF 2007) on recognition of prior knowledge and skills in the university sector found that [TRANSLATION] “the analytical and decision-making processes in this area are extremely varied” (p. 1) from one university to another. The authors' evaluation of the university situation portrays a community with different and ad hoc procedures: [TRANSLATION] “No particular policy on the recognition of prior learning has been adopted by Quebec's universities. A few clauses in the policies or regulations refer to it but that is all” (ACDEAULF 2006, p. 15). The CSE 2002 Notice considered it [TRANSLATION] “essential that the education system makes explicit reference” (p. 92) to the legitimacy of the recognition of prior knowledge and skills, but according to ACDEAULF (2006) this is rarely done. Between 2002–03 and 2003–04, 47,284 instances of recognition of prior knowledge and skills were completed in Quebec's universities. Generally, universities leaned toward course equivalence rather than recognition of skills, an approach that may be less adapted to adults who have accumulated professional experience.

***The 47,284 prior knowledge and skills activities completed between 2002 and 2004 in Quebec universities can be broken down into:***

- 41.4% course equivalences
- 32.2% others (credits)<sup>8</sup>
- 22.2% exemptions
- 4.1% overall equivalency

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<sup>8</sup> Two institutions recognize credits without distinction (source: ACDEAULF).

## THE WORKPLACE

In the workplace, actors such as the ministry of employment and social cohesion (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale or MESS), Emploi-Québec and the sectoral labour force committees included recognition of prior knowledge and skills among their priority issues. The adoption of the framework and the establishment of professional standards are part of this trend to promote the recognition of prior knowledge and skills for workers.

### THE WORKFORCE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND RECOGNITION FRAMEWORK

The issue for Bill 90, an act to foster the development of manpower training,<sup>9</sup> enacted in 1995, was promoting workforce qualifications. The coming into force (in January 2008) of Bill 5 (passed in May 2007), which replaces Bill 90, is indicative of the direction to be taken: with the title changed from an *act* to foster the development of manpower training to an act to promote workforce skills development and recognition. In the same vein, the workforce training fund (Fonds national de formation de la main-d'œuvre) was renamed the workforce skills development and recognition fund (Fonds de développement et de reconnaissance des compétences de la main-d'œuvre). Bill 5 focuses on the development and recognition of workers' skills, and highlights formal education and training as one of the preferred methods for achieving the goal of qualification.

The labour market partnership commission (Commission des partenaires du marché du travail) had earlier, in 2001, adopted the *Cadre général de développement et de reconnaissance des compétences* (the framework) to better adapt skills development and recognition to the realities of the various economic sectors. Bill 5 gave a legal basis to the recognition of skills acquired through employment. The framework has two overlapping components: skills development and skills recognition, which includes official approval. Among the framework strategies, we may note the development of professional standards (subsection 2.1.1) and the certification of professional qualifications.

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<sup>9</sup> R.S.Q., c. D-7.1.

The framework involves, in various capacities, the Commission, the MESS, Emploi-Québec, the sectoral labour force committees, unions and organizations. For example, the development of professional standards, which are benchmarks for skills assessment, is the responsibility of the sectoral labour force committees, while funding for and validation of the standards is the responsibility of the Commission. As for the certification of qualifications, the Commission may, by regulation, set fees for the issuance of a certificate. The certification is granted by the MESS.

***Seven steps of the recognition of prior knowledge and skills in the framework<sup>10</sup>***

1. Exploration of needs
2. Development of a professional standard
3. Sectoral consensus
4. Official approval of the professional standard (entry in the register of competencies)
5. Development of tools
6. Introduction of a professional standard and tools
7. Recognition of skills (certification)

The methods used to assess the skills connected with a professional standard vary: work file analysis, portfolio preparation, work placement (real or simulated), specific project experience, applicant audit or assessment interview. It is up to the sectoral labour force committees to determine the conditions needed to demonstrate mastery of a skill.

The framework is intended to [TRANSLATION] “promote diversification in places of learning and recognition of workplaces as places to learn” (Direction du développement des compétences en milieu de travail 2006, p. 7). The role of the framework is strengthened through Bill 5, which is one of the three main changes in the government policy, along with the expansion of the role of the sectoral labour force committees and the Commission and the development of “mutual associations.” It should be noted, however, that the framework is not compulsory: employers decide whether to participate.

In its guide to the framework, the Direction du développement des compétences en milieu de travail (2006, pp. 8-9) sets out the founding principles of the framework:

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<sup>10</sup> From an introduction to the Framework (MELS, 2006c).



- improve workers’ on-the-job skills;
- introduce a structured approach in Quebec to the development and recognition of skills in the workplace;
- recognize skills acquired that relate to a professional standard and enable workers to acquire the education and training needed to master the skills they lack;
- support any structured learning strategy based on a professional standard; and
- provide for official recognition by government certification of the skills mastered.

One of the main components of the framework is a [TRANSLATION] “recognition mechanism based on the register of competencies, which records professional standards and workers’ skills and issues qualification certificates and certificates of occupational competence” (MELS 2006c, slide 5).

The working group on workplace learning, set up by the Commission and responsible for laying the foundation of the framework, stresses in its report the importance of implementing the framework properly and it notes how the Quebec situation has evolved. The working group observes that:

[TRANSLATION]  
*Between April 1, 2002, and November 30, 2005, more than 9,000 qualification agreements were signed and just over 3,000 workers had their skills recognized by a certificate of occupational competence. The numbers keep going up: they indicate that the framework is increasingly meeting learning and qualification needs, thereby justifying this formula (Groupe de travail de la CPMT sur l’apprentissage en milieu de travail 2006, p. 3).*

In 2006–07, almost 3,000 agreements were signed in the professions, trades and job functions and 87 certificates of occupational competence were recognized.

Despite this positive result, the working group pointed to some difficulties in 2006 in evaluating all the impacts of the framework:

[TRANSLATION]  
*It is difficult to access information on the introduction of standards and how learning is carried out in organizations because of limited and even non-existent management information; delays in developing the computer system for the registrar of competencies are considerably hampering a*

*genuine follow-up and evaluation of the introduction of the framework* (Groupe de travail de la CPMT sur l'apprentissage en milieu de travail 2006, p. 4).

One of the challenges is the increasing demand by workers, given the increasing precariousness of employment, to have their right to work protected not only by broader access to continuing education, but also by recognition of their skills, so as to facilitate greater mobility within their sector.

### **Professional standards**

Professional standards, or profiles, establish the skills required for a particular trade or profession. At the time of this report, 34 professional standards have already been approved and 17 others are in preparation.

Professional standards

[TRANSLATION] “describe the key skills and conditions required to perform various trades, professions or job functions.”<sup>11</sup>

The sectoral labour force committees have a mandate to prepare professional profiles. The preferred approach to developing professional standards is for the sectoral labour force committees to define them as the need arises, instead of systematically developing standards for all existing professions, job functions or trades.

#### *Some professional standards in force:*

- manual meatpacker
- steel frame assembler
- door and window assembler
- quality controller
- cabinetmaker
- composite products rolling-mill operator
- milling-machinist
- die maker
- finishing-binding equipment operator
- complementary printing process equipment operator
- spinning frame operator
- weaving frame operator
- industrial cleaning operator
- dairy production worker
- forestry worker — bush clearing
- tool maker
- wood finish painter
- fishmonger
- four-colour offset printer
- offset rotary printer
- industrial stuffer
- home appliance repairer
- heavy vehicle driver

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<sup>11</sup> [emploi.quebec.net/francais/individus/qualification/registre\\_compétences.htm](http://emploi.quebec.net/francais/individus/qualification/registre_compétences.htm)

[TRANSLATION]

*In view of the time it takes to develop a professional standard, it may be said that it is only in the last two years or so [i.e., in 2004] that the introductory phase of the framework has been concretely delivered, with the first standards being approved in July 2003 (Groupe de travail de la CPMT sur l'apprentissage en milieu de travail 2006, p. 1).*

The Fonds national de formation de la main-d'oeuvre has given grants to fund the development of professional standards. The resources of the Fonds fluctuate (the Fonds is largely financed by contributions from organizations that do not invest the equivalent of at least 1% of their total payroll in employee education and training), however, and the cost of developing a standard is high and requests for developing standards are increasing. The Commission stresses that funding sources should be diversified and solidified to facilitate the preparation of professional profiles.

There is also interprovincial certification, under the Red Seal program,<sup>12</sup> which lets workers have their trade skills recognized throughout Canada for improved mobility. This involves passing an examination that recognizes the skills acquired in certain trades, including pastry cook, machinist and hairdresser.

### **The workplace apprenticeship program: one way to achieve certification**

Adults seeking certification can be referred to various education and training strategies to complete the prior learning for which they have been recognized. The new workplace apprenticeship program (Programme d'apprentissage en milieu de travail, PAMT) seems to be, at the CPMT, the preferred route for workplace learning under the framework, but other pathways are also recognized: formal education and training, mentoring, e-learning.

The workplace apprenticeship program, the first framework measure to be introduced by Emploi-Québec, is closely linked to professional standards to facilitate recognition of prior knowledge and skills and certification. [TRANSLATION] “The workplace apprenticeship program permits the acquisition and validation of skills in various work contexts (...) and leads to obtaining a certificate of professional qualification issued by Emploi-Québec” (Talbot 2005, p. 65). Obtaining a professional qualification certificate shows that the

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<sup>12</sup> [www.sceau-rouge.ca/Site/trades/aig\\_province.htm](http://www.sceau-rouge.ca/Site/trades/aig_province.htm)

holder has mastered all skills required by a professional standard, whereas an attestation shows that the holder has achieved at least one of the skills in the standard. The Commission has played a significant role in renewing the apprenticeship system with the introduction of the workplace apprenticeship program as an alternative route to work-related education and training and recognition of skills.

The workplace apprenticeship program strategy essentially relies on training by experienced fellow workers: [TRANSLATION] “The Emploi-Québec network distributes at no cost apprenticeship booklets and journeyman guides to organizations under the workplace apprenticeship program” (Groupe de travail de la CPMT sur l’apprentissage en milieu de travail 2006, p. 4).

In its report on the 2002–2007 action plan, the MELS (2007a) notes that participation in the workplace apprenticeship program has exceeded the objective set out in the action plan: the number of participants in 2005–06 was 5,463 instead of the initially anticipated 3,750.

## **BRINGING THE WORKPLACE AND THE EDUCATION SECTOR CLOSER TOGETHER**

For the time being, the MELS and Emploi-Québec’s systems for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills are two separate systems. One approach calls for a single system to support the recognition of prior knowledge and skills in Quebec, while another supports keeping two separate systems while establishing links and parallels between them.

However, little has been done to accomplish the latter:

[TRANSLATION]

*The introduction of the framework seems to have caused some conflicts with the education sector, even though educational institutions occupy a niche that is often similar in terms of workplace learning. Reciprocity and complementarity are two principles on which the framework was developed, and every effort should therefore continue to be made to reconcile the approaches used by the two systems, so that each retains its own unique features while recognizing the other* (Groupe de travail de la CPMT sur l’apprentissage en milieu de travail 2006, p. 4).

The government policy on adult education and continuing education and training wants the education and workplace systems to be harmonized (MEQ 2002a). The action plan

calls for the creation of an expert panel to ensure that: [TRANSLATION] “an individual whose learning has been officially recognized under one system will have that learning recognized by the other system” (MEQ 2002a, p. 27). In 2000, CSE emphasized that it was ineffective to maintain two parallel systems without tying them together.

## OTHER ACTORS

### MINISTÈRE DE L'IMMIGRATION ET DES COMMUNAUTÉS CULTURELLES

The 40,000 increasingly qualified immigrants<sup>13</sup> who come to Quebec every year create significant demand for the recognition of prior learning acquired in their countries of origin. The ministry of immigration and cultural communities (Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles or MICC), through a comparative assessment of education outside Quebec,<sup>14</sup> issues a fact sheet (which is not recognized as equivalent to a diploma) giving the equivalence of the diploma obtained abroad. A database for establishing equivalences, based on foreign and international databases, has been set up. MICC also administers agreements with various countries to facilitate recognition of equivalent diplomas and integration of immigrant populations into the workforce.

The worker adaptation committee for immigrants (Comité d'adaptation de la main-d'œuvre – personnes immigrantes)<sup>15</sup> was created in partnership with Emploi-Québec, the ministry of municipal affairs and Quebec regions (ministère des Affaires municipales et des régions), MICC and the MELS. The worker adaptation committee for immigrants is an information hub for the integration of immigrants into the labour market and acts as chief advisor to its partners in this regard. The committee is also involved in the recognition of prior knowledge and skills for immigrants. It has launched a campaign to facilitate the reporting of prior learning, transfers and adaptation of skills to facilitate access by immigrants to various professions. In concert with the various stakeholders and some of the professional orders, the committee develops and proposes special programs, such as projects to update nurses with foreign degrees by seeking [TRANSLATION] to “render the additional education and training prescribed by the Ordre des infirmières et infirmiers du Québec easier access and to allow candidates who succeed in the education and training to write the professional entrance examination for the Ordre des infirmières et

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<sup>13</sup> Two-thirds of new immigrants aged 15 and over have at least 14 years of education (MICC 2007).

<sup>14</sup> [www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/education/evaluation-comparative/index.html](http://www.immigration-quebec.gouv.qc.ca/fr/education/evaluation-comparative/index.html)

<sup>15</sup> [www.camo-pi.qc.ca/](http://www.camo-pi.qc.ca/)

infirmiers du Québec” (Emploi-Québec 2007, p. 4). Some initiatives have also been taken for the admission of engineers, professional technologists, pharmacists, physicians and specialized workers in the manufacturing sector: [TRANSLATION] “At this time, MICC has funded some 20 projects by professional orders to facilitate immigrants’ access to regulated professions” (CIQ 2007a, p. 2).

## **THE PROFESSIONAL ORDERS**

The professional orders also face the question of recognizing prior learning, particularly in the immigrant population that, because of current demographic trends, represents the future. The mandate of the professional orders is well known:

[TRANSLATION]  
*A professional body is required by law to verify the competence of individuals who seek to obtain a licence in order to practice a profession. (...) Where the individual does not hold a diploma recognized as valid, a regulation approved by the Government of Quebec determines, for each professional body, the standards that must apply in analysing an application for recognition of an equivalence (CIQ 2006a, pp. 4–8).*

It should be noted from the outset for purposes of the data we are referring to here, that the 45 professional orders that are members of the Quebec interprofessional council (Conseil interprofessionnel du Québec or CIQ) rule on the equivalence of diplomas and education and training acquired outside Quebec, and not on recognition of adults’ experiential learning. In the last nine years, the professional orders have received increasing numbers of applications for recognition of prior knowledge and skills (CIQ 2006b). From 1997–98 to 2000–01, the number of applications was around 800 and stable in the various sectors. From 2000–01 to 2004–05, the number of applications for recognition of prior knowledge and skills exploded, from 800 to just under 4,000. The sectors experiencing most of this increase are health and human relations (with smaller increases for the engineering, development and sciences, law, administration and business sectors). These figures include interprovincial mobility. For example, in 2004–05, of some 4,000 applications, more than 500 came from adults coming from other provinces in Canada. This declined by approximately 500 applications for recognition of prior knowledge and skills in 2005–06 (CIQ 2007b). Of applications between 1997 and 2005, 82% were approved by the professional orders and 18% were refused (CIQ 2006c).

Nearly half the adults whose applications were approved achieved full recognition, while 35% obtained partial or temporary equivalence for diplomas or education and training acquired outside Quebec. The requirement to obtain the missing training to receive a full or partial equivalence continues to be a problem. CIQ (2007a) is aware of the remedial education and training situation, especially as it applies to immigrants, and is calling attention to the areas where the professional orders need to take concrete measures:

- improve administrative mechanisms for processing applications (for example, hiring personnel);
- improve methods for evaluating the applications (for example, developing appropriate tools);
- improve procedures for processing applications (for example, by developing on-line assessments); and
- call on outside expertise to carry out these improvements.

Since 2006, as a result of the dissatisfaction of the communities involved and government intervention, the professional orders have been asked to propose projects for improving their procedures, methods and tools for recognizing prior knowledge and skills. The projects are financed by MICC (CIQ 2006d).

### **SOCIÉTÉ DE FORMATION ET D'ÉDUCATION CONTINUE**

Since 1988, the training and continuing education group (Société de formation et d'éducation continue or SOFEDUC) has been another key player in the recognition of prior learning as it relates to labour market integration: [TRANSLATION] “SOFEDUC is not a training organization and does not itself issue continuing education units. Its mandate is instead to accredit organizations that can issue continuing education units that meet high quality standards.”<sup>16</sup> “Through various processes, the SOFEDUC accreditation program ensures that its members respect both pedagogical and administrative tests of high quality in delivering and administering made-to-measure education and training activities.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [www.sofeduc.ca](http://www.sofeduc.ca)

<sup>17</sup> [www.cspi.qc.ca/cse/reconnaissance.htm](http://www.cspi.qc.ca/cse/reconnaissance.htm)



A continuing education unit is a standardized means of recognizing the education and training activities in which an adult participates throughout his or her life. It testifies to the quality of a training

*A continuing education unit represents ten hours of participation in a structured education and training activity, organized and directed by an accredited organization, led by skilled trainers and approved by an evaluation.*<sup>18</sup>

activity. Continuing education credits are used in managing education and training activities for which no credits are awarded.<sup>19</sup> CSE (2000) has emphasized the utility of continuing education units in recognition of prior knowledge and skills practices.

SOFEDUC has accredited approximately 65 affiliated members for the issuance of continuing education units, including private and public education institutions at all levels, private firms, continuing education services in organizations and professional orders. As such, the Pointe-de-l'Île school board's *Service aux entreprises* is accredited by SOFEDUC to [TRANSLATION] "issue continuing education units in the context of made-to-measure education and training activities that meet high standards."<sup>20</sup> Another example can be found at the Drummondville CEGEP: [TRANSLATION] "Continuing education entitling people to continuing education units is offered primarily in the form of workshops or seminars for workers and those wishing to develop or update their skills. The CEGEP has also developed workshops with continuing education units for students in regular education. The activities entitling people to continuing education units are registered on a college bulletin signed by the CEGEP registrar. This is an official document that allows the participant's commitment and enriched coursework to be appraised" (Bélanger, Carignan and Robitaille 2007, p. 56).

SOFEDUC thus allows institutions to respond more effectively to demand by offering made-to-measure education. In this way, adults can have their prior skills recognized and receive access to the education and training they are missing without necessarily having to enrol in a full program.

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<sup>18</sup> [www.sofeduc.ca/uec.html](http://www.sofeduc.ca/uec.html)

<sup>19</sup> [www.sofeduc.ca/uec.html](http://www.sofeduc.ca/uec.html)

<sup>20</sup> [www.cspi.qc.ca/cse/reconnaissance.htm](http://www.cspi.qc.ca/cse/reconnaissance.htm)

## **INSTITUT DE COOPÉRATION POUR L'ÉDUCATION DES ADULTES**

For several years now, the adult education cooperation institute (Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes or ICEA) has been a pioneer in the recognition of prior knowledge and skills, particularly in relation to the status of women. The complex situation of women in the home who want to rejoin the workforce, but are faced with the lack of value placed on the skills they have developed in years of volunteer work first attracted ICEA's attention in 1985.

The ICEA paper entitled *Nos compétences fortes* [our strong skills] is a benchmark that parallels that accepted by the MELS that recognizes experiential learning by a system of approvals. This approach relies on building self-esteem, particularly in those who cope poorly or not at all with the written word (Bélisle, 1995). The concepts underlying this approach to recognition of prior knowledge and skills are grounded in valuing individuals and broadening the analysis of the work and skills they have developed: [TRANSLATION] "Individuals are asked to take action to discover their skills, talk about them using concrete and persuasive examples, enhance them and, finally, use them in new situations."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> [www.icea.qc.ca/publications/ncf/ncf.html](http://www.icea.qc.ca/publications/ncf/ncf.html)

## CONCLUSION

Recognition of prior knowledge and skills has become a pivotal feature of any continuing education service in receiving and effectively coaching adults in their always highly individual journeys along the path of lifelong learning. This is true of the adult population as a whole, as well as for individuals in professional transition or seeking mobility within their field. Recognition of prior knowledge and learning is also important for adult immigrants, considering the well-known difficulties they encounter in obtaining recognition for credentials or skills acquired abroad, hence, the critical valuable role played and to be played in the future by professional orders and CIQ. Transition and mobility are becoming increasingly commonplace and always pose the problem of validating earlier skills or transferring skills acquired from one professional field to another, or from one country to another.

While recognition of prior knowledge and skills has now become one of the key issues in adult education and continuing education policies and action plans, it is hard to know how much this has been translated into practice and the extent to which men and women who seek recognition for their prior skills actually obtain a response. Some general statistics from school boards, CEGEPs, universities and the labour force show an increasing trend in that direction. However, we do not have the required data to evaluate how accessible such measures in fact are.

There are two main avenues in Quebec for the recognition of prior knowledge and skills, depending on whether about a worker is looking for an academic program in which to enrol or for a professional profile based on work experience. The first avenue generally involves looking at initial education and training and integration into possible formal education programs, while the second involves developing and recognizing workplace skills, the benchmark being the job function. The education sector and labour force still need to resolve communication issues and bridge the gap between the two avenues.

Another point deserves attention: what is the impact of the development of prior learning recognition services on lifelong learning and, more specifically, on the decisions individuals make on whether to participate in the various forms of adult learning? There

is not enough information to indicate the probability of a reciprocal influence between recognition of prior knowledge and skills and the more widespread active pursuit of further education. Does recognition of prior knowledge and skills intensify lifelong learning or is it a substitute?

Another question relates to equality of educational and learning opportunities. What effect does level of initial education or individuals' social and economic status have on access to recognition of prior knowledge and skills services? Do less qualified workers enjoy the same access as more qualified workers? Are there differences among various immigrant groups? Answers to these questions would require more knowledge and comparisons between applications made and granted in recent years by school boards, CEGEPs and universities, as well as by the sectoral labour force committees and professional orders.

Finally, with the data available at present, we cannot make a comparative analysis of the situation in the various regions of Canada. A 2003 survey by the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment made some comparisons between Quebec and Ontario but dealt exclusively with post-secondary institutions. In January 2006, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning published a document entitled *Principles for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*<sup>22</sup> that defined the principles to be applied in the prior learning recognition process, namely: accessibility, accountability, criteria-referencing, efficiency, equity, legality, quality, right of appeal, transparency, validity and reliability. A report has been circulating recently, made of official provincial answers to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development questionnaire on recognition of non-formal and informal education and training (Direction de la formation générale des adultes 2007). The chapter on Quebec describes the context of the province's prior learning recognition practices and policies. Despite these initial developments, we do not have the information required to make a national diagnosis. Provincial monographs are urgently needed for making transprovincial analyses to inform decision-makers and other players in the strategic field of lifelong learning.

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<sup>22</sup> [www.cirl.org/PLAR\\_Principles\\_PSC.pdf](http://www.cirl.org/PLAR_Principles_PSC.pdf)

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## APPENDIX

### Resources Available in Quebec

Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport du Québec  
Professional and Technical Education  
1035 De la Chevrotière, 12th floor  
Québec City, Québec  
Canada G1R 5A5  
[www2.inforoutefpt.org/rac/](http://www2.inforoutefpt.org/rac/)

Cégep@distance  
7100 Jean-Talon E., 7th floor  
Montréal, Québec  
Canada H1M 3S3  
[www.cegepadistance.ca/services/reconnaissance\\_des\\_acquis.asp](http://www.cegepadistance.ca/services/reconnaissance_des_acquis.asp)

Service régional d'admission du Montréal métropolitain (SRAM)  
P.O. Box 11028  
Centre-ville Station  
Montréal, Québec  
Canada H3C 4W9  
[www.sram.qc.ca/?9C582711-DF73-43CC-915A-1585EC078CD3#acquis](http://www.sram.qc.ca/?9C582711-DF73-43CC-915A-1585EC078CD3#acquis)

CAMO Personnes immigrantes  
[www.camo-pi.qc.ca/acquis.shtml](http://www.camo-pi.qc.ca/acquis.shtml)

**APPENDIX C**

**EIGHT INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES  
IN PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND  
RECOGNITION**

**Prepared by: Joy Van Kleef,  
Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning  
For the Pan-Canadian Framework Project**

**March, 2008**



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## INTRODUCTION

As a supporting document for the Pan-Canadian Framework Project led by the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, this report presents examples of PLAR initiatives in eight countries: Australia, France, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, the Netherlands and the United States.

The examples demonstrate a variety of uses of PLAR from facilitating access to education, to enhancing employability. They include a broad range of assessment processes from skills assessment of tradespersons to knowledge assessment of doctoral candidates. These initiatives occur in different public policy contexts including employment, education, immigration and labour mobility, and are governed by a variety of leader organizations including educational institutions, labour unions, employers and different levels of government. They target a wide range of groups including prospective and current students, tradespersons, unemployed and under-employed persons, volunteers, workers and disadvantaged groups. Collectively, they provide us with many thought-provoking approaches to consider in our development of PLAR strategies in the Canadian context.

## **AUSTRALIA**

### **INITIATIVE**

General Skilled Migration Program

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

- Australian Qualifications Authority
- Department of Immigration and Citizenship
- VETASSESS (an Australian Registered Training Organization of assessment-only services)

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

In February 2007, the Council of Australian Government agreed to a package of measures designed to underpin a new national approach to apprenticeships, training and skills recognition and alleviate skill shortages currently evident in some parts of the economy. This initiative included new streamlined offshore assessment services in specific countries for particular trade occupations to meet skilled migration and be accepted for licensed employment throughout Australia.

The General Skilled Migration program requires all individuals wishing to immigrate to Australia as skilled workers to undertake an assessment of their skills and experience by appropriate Australian authorities before arriving in Australia. Applicants' qualifications must match an eligible occupation in a Skilled Occupation List. Guidelines for about 450 occupations set out the required level of qualifications, training and work experience in order to be granted a pre-set number of immigration points that are assigned based on the level of demand in the Australian labour market.

Following consultations with industry and state and territorial governments, the government of Australia authorized VETASSESS to conduct trade skills assessment for residents of India, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, South Africa and the Philippines who wish to have their skills assessed for the General Skilled Migration program in one of the following trade occupations:

- General electrician
- General plumber
- Refrigeration and air-conditioning mechanic
- Motor mechanic
- Carpenter and joiner
- Electrical power line tradesperson
- Cable jointer
- Bricklayer

### **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this service are to provide applicants with greater certainty about whether they will be able to work in their nominated occupation upon arrival in Australia.

Applicants in the electrical and plumbing trades who are successful in having their skills recognized will be automatically entitled to receive a provisional license from the relevant regulator upon arrival in Australia without further testing. The provisional license will allow that person to work under supervision while undertaking specified gap training and work experience in the Australian environment. Applicants in non-licensed occupations will receive an Australian qualification that attests that they have the full range of skills of the trade.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

The General Skilled Migration program was established under the Migration Regulations (1994). The VETASSESS service is a component of the General Skilled Migration program.

#### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Department for Employment and Workplace Relations
- Industry regulatory authorities
- Peak employer and employee bodies

- Box Hill Institute of Training and Further Education (TAFE)
- Central Gippsland TAFE
- Great Southern TAFE
- Kangan Batman TAFE
- South West Regional College
- Swan TAFE
- Victoria University

### **Target populations**

Residents of India, Sri Lanka, United Kingdom, South Africa, and the Philippines who intend to immigrate to Australia under the General Skilled Migration program.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

VETASSESS delivers three assessment activities sequentially:

3. A self-assessment for potential applicants to gauge their suitability for the assessment process. The tool poses a series of questions that help applicants to determine whether they have the required training, work experience and competencies to meet the Australian standards for their nominated occupation and decide whether to apply for skills recognition.
4. A paper-based assessment that reviews an individual's trade training qualifications and work experience evidence. The assessment is used to develop a personal competency profile that provides an overview of an applicant's skills and experience. The assessment indicates whether applicants:
  - Have the skills to do particular jobs
  - Have the knowledge and understanding of why the job is done in a particular way
  - Understand related policies and procedures
  - Can manage more than one task at a time
  - Can deal with everyday work-related problems
  - Can work with other team members

5. A technical interview and practical skills test undertaken in the applicant's home country, delivered through scheduled visits to each of the five countries.
6. The technical interview involves a personal meeting with an assessor during which applicants respond to a series of questions focused on the critical aspects of the competency (skill) groups. They are provided to applicants in writing, are written in plain English, and use a mix of open-ended questions and questions requiring specific answers.
7. Practical assessments involve a series of challenge tests or simulations that integrate a number of the competency (skill) groups required for the relevant Australian qualification. Assessors are qualified trade skill assessors from Australia.

Applications for assessment are available online and require evidence of formal, non-formal and informal training, work experience, employment and other items of evidence that support an individual's ability to demonstrate their qualifications.

Successful applicants receive an assessment outcome letter from VETASSESS that states that they have met pre-migration skills assessment requirements. These letters can be submitted to the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship in support of applications for immigration.

### **Funding structures and levels**

The VETASSESS Consortium operates on a fee for service basis.

Self-assessments have no costs associated with them. Paper-based competency assessments cost applicants \$600 AUD. Practical skills assessments range from \$1,500 to \$1,600 AUD. Re-assessments are conducted for a fee of approximately \$200 AUD. Appeals can also be undertaken for a fee of approximately \$140 AUD.

### **Quality assurance**

National occupational standards for each trade have been established by occupational action groups comprising state government, industry regulators, state registering authorities and employer and employee representatives. These standards are the basis for

assessment and accepted by all Australian states. Trades Recognition Australia within the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations has responsibility for managing the arrangements with VETASSESS and ensuring the assessment standards are maintained.

VETASSESS provides online forms and guidelines to assist applicants throughout the assessment process. VETASSESS also conducts reviews of unsuccessful assessments on request. Unsuccessful applicants receive records of assessment that details where they have met the assessment standard and where they have not. This information helps to identify additional training and/or work experience required to meet the occupational standard.

Candidate satisfaction surveys are provided online and incorporated into VETASSESS operations.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

VETASSESS commenced receiving applications on September 1, 2007. No outcomes or impacts are yet available.

## **ISSUES**

As VETASSESS is a new service, no issues have been identified.

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## **FRANCE**

### **INITIATIVE**

Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

- National Government of France
- Universities

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

PLAR in France is referred to as Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE), the validation of non-formal and informal learning (i.e., knowledge and skills acquired through work, volunteering and other life experiences). VAE occurs in several contexts – in education, in the workplace, in occupational certification. This summary focuses on VAE in universities.

Following initial legislation in 1934 which initiated the validation of non-formal and informal learning in the field of engineering, national laws and decrees of 1985, 1992, 1993 and 1999 broadened the terms of how claims for recognition of prior learning were to be addressed by French universities. In 2002, additional legislation was passed which placed a national legal duty on all universities to move on key objectives of the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy including the broadening of access to further and higher education through the recognition of prior learning. The result of these laws is a national framework for recognizing prior learning that can be used to award individuals access to a university program, exemption from university courses and academic awards up to and including whole degrees.

### **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The overall purpose of the legislative reforms was two-fold: to recognize the skills and learning acquired on the job by the workforce, the majority of which had no formal qualifications; and to promote access to education.

The purpose of each legislative reform was slightly different, each progressively opening doors to further granting of academic credit based on prior learning. The 1985 decree increased access to formal education by using PLAR to exempt applicants from normal program entry requirements and from individual courses. The decree, which is still in effect, sets out specific processes through which a general judgment is made about the potential and capacity of a candidate to successfully complete their chosen course of study. Universities check that the level of responsibility and the problems that candidates have addressed demonstrate the skills and the type and level of knowledge that correspond to the entry qualification normally required. Criteria relating to candidate work experience, responsibilities, relevance to the chosen program and level of prior experience are taken into account.

The 1993 legislation authorized the awarding of academic credit for all but one unit/course within programs (rather than exemption) based on analysis that identified approximate rather than exact equivalencies. Credit was given for learning acquired through at least five years of work. The legislation again laid out the specific process to be taken and established criteria relating the complexity, scale, scope, content and level of a candidate's prior learning, as well as the context of their learning and types of problems faced. Universities were required to confirm not only that candidates had the knowledge required for credit award but also the intellectual skills and problem-solving abilities usually developed by attending the courses.

These legal developments led the way for another series of laws which resulted in the Ministry of Education (1992), the Ministry of Agriculture (1993) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports (1999) establishing validation processes for qualifications issued by their departments. By 1999, three out of four universities were engaged in validation.

Following evaluation of the impact of these initiatives, a decree was passed in 2002 requiring every university in France to establish processes for the validation of non-formal and informal learning that would allow up to 100% of a degree to be awarded based on assessment of learning acquired through at least three years of paid or unpaid learning acquired in any context. Most degrees are now subject to this law although there are a number of exceptions in professional areas.

In February 2006, the Ministry of Labour was assigned responsibility for taking forward the development of VAE. Validation was identified by the Prime Minister as a key tool in the fight against unemployment and a target was set to increase threefold the number of individuals gaining certification through the VAE process.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

Universities that had experience with recognizing prior learning under the decrees of 1985 and 1993 were relatively well positioned to implement the 2002 legislation. They shared their expertise with less prepared universities through collaboration using a national university network. Voluntary harmonization was in part facilitated by a national staff training plan involving 900 university participants and the development of a generally accepted approach to assessment. All universities in France are now offering VAE in most degree programs.

### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

National laws and decrees in 1985, 1992, 1993, 1999 and 2002.

### **Key partners/collaborators**

None

### **Target populations**

The legislation initially targeted individuals without formal qualifications. However, validation is now seen as a key component of France's lifelong learning strategy and all French citizens are encouraged to participate.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

Portfolio assessment combined with an interview is the primary method of validating non-formal and informal learning. Juries, whose members are nominated by the President of the university, conduct all assessments. A majority of members must be academics and there must be at least one external member (e.g., employer). There is an emphasis on assessing candidates' problem-solving and critical thinking skills rather than their achievement of specific outcomes required by academic programs. The focus is on the intellectual capacities the program aims to develop. A full credential or a partial credential may be awarded. Where partial credentials are awarded, the jury must provide

candidates with recommendations on what is required to receive full awards and candidates have five years to comply.

Assessments follow the same general process at all institutions:

- Reception and information services
- Orientation to identify the most appropriate qualification and the institution likely to offer the best solution
- Preparation of the portfolio or collection of evidence. This phase requires direct advising services.
- Examination of the portfolio by the jury and interview
- Jury decision
- Informing the candidate and follow-up

### **Funding structures and levels**

The cost of assessing an entire degree is approximately € 1,600 or \$2,200. However, the universities are reimbursed by government for the full cost.

The European Social Fund has supported VAE projects in France to a value of € 1.5 million per year and with the aim of helping universities put in place the necessary frameworks to deliver VAE.

### **Quality assurance**

Quality assurance has been identified as a priority policy area. It is currently addressed by procedural requirements embodied in the legislation and the jury process. No specific documentation on quality assurance was identified.

### **Outcomes and impacts**

A sampling of statistics is provided below to indicate the scope of VAE activities.

- The decree of 1985 is still in effect and in 2004, universities examined about 18,500 applications for exemption from admission and course requirements. About 13,700 requests were successful.
- Since 2002 there has been a considerable increase in participation by individuals with no or few qualifications. A total of over 50,000 qualifications were awarded

between 2002 and 2005. Between 2003 and 2005, a total of 4,000 of the 30,000 qualifications awarded through the VAE were whole university degrees.

- Université Paris-sud has over 27,000 students. In 2006, it had 110 VAE candidates of whom 38 received whole degrees on their first attempt and just under 60 candidates were recommended by the jury to take further formal or non-formal training as a way of qualifying for a degree.

The growth of VAE has been attributed to new structures, expansion of eligibility, upstream interventions and wider distribution of information to the public (Cleary et al, 2002). One of the impacts of the 2002 legislation is a change in emphasis in the role of assessment juries. Portfolios must contain a candidate's future plan or validation will not be awarded. The jury's role is increasingly geared to developmental advising. When only part of a qualification is awarded, it must propose ways in which candidates can obtain the whole qualification. A second impact of increasing VAE is an acceleration in the development of modularized degree programs that can be taken over longer periods of time according to the circumstances of students.

Various initiatives are currently under way to address financing, quality assurance and regulation. The 2002 law is mobilizing agreements among educational institutions, employers, professional bodies and unions with respect to continuing education and human resources and professional development.

## **ISSUES**

Research indicates several areas of concern, some of which are similar to those experienced in the Canadian context. They include concerns about:

- The burden placed on the institutional staff due to recent rapid growth in VAE
- The importance of forming partnerships with the private sector
- The need for a new information campaign
- The lack of credentials that correspond to an individual's learning
- The quality of information and guidance
- Lengthy, bureaucratic procedures
- Candidate lack of confidence

- Lack of trained assessors

In September 2006 a 'Plan VAE' was established to remove barriers to the VAE process.

It is based on five key measures:

- A national information campaign based on two main services: an national Internet portal and a helpline service together with a communication campaign to inform the public of the right to VAE
- Simplified administration procedures, including one unique form for all VAE candidates regardless of the qualification they are applying for
- Guaranteed payment of expenses for members of the assessment juries
- Payment of the costs of VAE for the unemployed
- Implementation of local policies for the development of VAE

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## **IRELAND**

### **INITIATIVE**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within a national qualifications framework

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

- Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)
- Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)
- National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

In 2003, Ireland launched a National Qualifications Framework, which sets out ten levels of education, each defined in terms of general standards of knowledge, skills and competence expressed as learning outcomes. The Framework envisions that equal value should be given to all forms of learning regardless of its source or how and when it was achieved.

The NQAI, which leads the development and maintenance of the National Qualifications Framework, took on the task of promoting a national approach to the recognition of prior learning (RPL). The NQAI became responsible for coordinating and harmonizing the RPL processes of education providers and awarding bodies. It was determined that RPL would be applicable to learners gaining program admission, academic credit or exemptions from specific program requirements and eligibility for full awards and qualifications.

The Framework defines RPL as a means by which all prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. It includes learning that has taken place through formal, non-formal or informal means but has not necessarily been assessed or measured prior to entering a program or seeking an award. The term accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) is sometimes used by universities and refers to the recognition of only non-formal and informal learning.

In 2005, the NQAI published National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training. This initiative was seen as a means of bringing together the various strategies that were already in place or under development at institutions around the country. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice. They are intended to give an exemplar of the types of arrangements that should be considered for implementation and they have been used to varying degrees by universities, university-colleges, institutes of technology, HETAC and FETAC in developing their policies and procedures for RPL.

### **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The National Qualifications Authority's specific objectives are to facilitate the use of RPL by education and training providers and awarding bodies with respect to:

- Credit towards an award or exemption from some program requirements
- Eligibility for full awards
- Entry to a program leading to an award

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

In 1999, the Qualifications Act created a foundation for a national approach to RPL through the establishment of three new organizations: NQAI, and two credential awarding bodies, FETAC and HETAC.

FETAC is responsible for setting standards and awarding qualifications to graduates of programs in the areas of basic education, community and adult education, vocational education and training (other than primary or post-primary education or higher education and training). FETAC has an RPL policy that requires all registered training providers to facilitate learner progress through the recognition of prior learning for program access, exemption/credit, and access to full credentials as far as they can, subject to guidelines. FETAC can also, in conjunction with training providers, make academic awards directly to learners.



HETAC is the organization responsible for awarding qualifications at all levels of higher education, up to PhD level provided by institutes of technology, recognized institutions, and private providers, excluding universities. HETAC sets standards for higher education and training awards, validates programs, monitors institutions' quality assurance procedures, delegates awarding powers to recognized institutions and ensures that student assessment is fair and consistent. HETAC has statutory authority to make academic awards directly to learners. In 2006, HETAC published the *Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award*. It also has policies and procedures on RPL. Like FETAC, HETAC awards are available to all individuals and can be made directly to learners up to PhD level, solely on the basis of RPL.

Ireland's seven universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) are autonomous providers of education and training. They award their own credentials. Each has discretion to provide RPL but as a sector, they have responsibility for facilitating access and in this capacity there is a public policy expectation that they will consider applying the *National Principles and Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning*. In practice, RPL is directed toward eligibility to enter programs, and awarding academic credit in and exemptions from program requirements. However, RPL is generally not regarded as a core institutional activity. A few universities have institution-wide RPL policies and procedures including the University of Limerick, National University of Ireland – Galway and University College Dublin. Other institutions may have policies and procedures in some programs.

### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Dublin Institute of Technology
- Providers of further education and training
- Universities
- University-colleges

### **Target populations**

All adults interested in pursuing education, training and employment-specific qualifications.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

Apart from credit transfer, portfolio assessment is the most common method of RPL conducted by institutions in both the further education and higher education sectors. Portfolios may include curriculum vitae, project work and evidence-based material such as publications, essays, reports and written communications. An interview may form part of a portfolio assessment procedure.

Generally, preparation for assessment requires substantial input from applicants. Learner supports range from initial guidance and individual mentoring to fully established programs for applicants on how to develop their portfolios. Advisors are not usually involved in the assessment process. Assessors are generally faculty from the relevant departments. Decision-making processes vary. For example, in institutes of technology, results are generally reviewed by an RPL committee, a program board or a college examination board that may involve moderation by an external examiner.

The processes for awarding whole credentials by Ireland's two awards councils take a unique route. Prior to submitting an application to HETAC for example, applicants must consult with HETAC to discuss the nature, range and scope of prior learning that typically arise under this policy. The principal criterion is that applicants must be able to demonstrate attainment of the relevant HETAC standards for the award sought. For non-research awards, evidence must show that prior learning has contributed to an applicant's knowledge, skill or competence. For research degrees, particularly at a doctoral level, there must also be evidence that an applicant's prior learning has made a substantial contribution to knowledge in the field.

The assessment process also addresses the authenticity of evidence submitted. Currently, HETAC selects and engages an external panel of three expert assessors. They, together with HETAC, decide on the type of assessment mechanism(s) to be applied. HETAC may also request the assistance of a higher education provider in forming an opinion as to whether an applicant has achieved the standard of the award sought. Following the recommendation of the assessment panel, HETAC makes a decision. Unsuccessful applicants may also be advised of gaps in their knowledge, skill or competence.

Assessment of prior learning by further education and training providers currently focus on access to programs. To date, assessments have not been carried out for academic credit but this will be possible once FETAC has developed its new credit system for the further education and training sector. Providers are responsible for determining detailed RPL procedures within the context of their quality assurance policies and FETAC's award arrangements. FETAC guidelines emphasize that providers should set out minimum acceptable criteria for successful participation in the selected program and that applicants should be given an opportunity to highlight their relevant prior learning in relation to these and entry criteria. In all cases, the assessment process is externally verified to ensure consistency and compliance with standards.

With respect to direct applications for awards, FETAC contracts education and training providers to provide initial advice to prospective applicants and to conduct assessments. If initial eligibility for an award is established, an applicant must submit a portfolio to demonstrate learning that meets required standards. A wide range of sources of evidence may be the basis of assessment including work experience, training, personal experience, work projects and voluntary work. FETAC guidelines also set out that the evidence must meet 70% of all the learning outcomes required for program entry. Evidence is scored and graded by the assessors. Criteria of sufficiency, currency, authenticity and validity must be followed. Applicants may be required to undertake further assessments as appropriate to demonstrate achievement of the standards.

### **Funding structures and levels**

Funding for initial implementation at individual institutions has been provided over the years by government funding agencies and projects for specific target groups have also received support. However, most RPL is financed by institutions from within their overall budgets. RPL is not mainstreamed into general funding arrangements for education and training.

In 2006/07, special funding for RPL was provided under the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Initiatives Fund for a consortium of higher education institutions. Nine institutions are participating in a € 2.14 million project aimed at standardizing and mainstreaming RPL policies and procedures, recognizing RPL as an important input in

identifying existing skills of the workforce and developing on-line tools for the RPL process (e.g., e-portfolio). This will include staff training, mentoring and marketing, and the development of documentation, procedures, accredited modules on portfolio development, and mentor training and piloting.

The government of Ireland has stated that in both education and training sectors, funding issues will need to be addressed in order to sustain RPL activity. This is particularly true for the significant number of education and training providers who require RPL professional development.

Information on how much of the financial costs of RPL are borne by RPL applicants is limited. In further education and training, most institutions have not carried out detailed costing exercises on RPL assessment activities due to the low number of applicants and limited scope of activity. In publicly-funded institutions where fees are charged to applicants, the fee is based on the cost of the module, unit or award in question. Such fees are generally based on a sliding scale. Learners also bear a substantial cost in terms of the investment in preparing portfolios for assessment – in some cases this can exceed the workload that would be incurred if they took the module.

The question of fees to be charged to applicants who seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC on the basis of RPL is expected to be considered as practice develops.

### **Quality assurance**

Within higher education, RPL practice takes place within the context of the overall quality assurance arrangements for higher education. The overall policy thrust is for institutions to have ownership and responsibility for their own quality assurance. The trend is to apply existing principles and procedures for quality assurance to RPL.

In the case of the assessment of direct applications for HETAC awards, HETAC engages a minimum of three assessors/examiners (including international examiners) for the assessment of each application for a direct award to ensure that appropriate standards are reached.

FETAC's policy approach is also to embed quality assurance in the operations of registered providers. Only providers that have required quality assurance arrangements in place can offer RPL in respect of FETAC awards.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

Some institutions collect their own data on RPL. For example, Cork Institute of Technology records students who have applied for credit or exemptions on the basis of RPL. Approximately 1,060 portfolios were submitted between 2000 and 2006. Statistics also may be kept in specific programs and pilot projects but in general, there is no systematic collection of RPL data. Certificates awarded by FETAC do not make reference to achievement through the RPL route although a new information system is planned and will track RPL for statistical purposes. HETAC is currently evaluating progress under access, transfer and learner progression, and in this context is reviewing RPL. As part of this activity HETAC has undertaken a survey of institutional RPL activity, the results of which are not yet available.

## **ISSUES**

The Government of Ireland has identified the following issues in promoting implementation of RPL:

- Lack of statistical data
- General lack of awareness among institutions, learners and employers
- Insufficient absence of resources to increase activity levels
- Incompatible educational structures and systems
- Competing educational priorities (e.g., development of credit system)
- Cost
- Lack of appropriate assessment tools
- Concerns about quality assurance
- Concerns about equity between traditional and RPL assessment practices
- Perspectives that RPL is not possible in certain fields of learning

- Uncertainty about demand
- Time-consuming for learners
- Absence of mentoring and guidance

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## **NEW ZEALAND**

### **INITIATIVE**

Recognition of Prior Learning within the National Qualifications Framework

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

- Ministry of Education/Tertiary Education Committee
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

As in the case with so many other industrialized countries, New Zealand, in the early 1990s, tackled labour, societal and economic issues as it attempted to move forward constructively in the Knowledge Age. The Probine-Fargher report of 1987 noted that in comparison with other OECD countries, New Zealand had a low post-secondary participation rate and a confusing and uncoordinated vocational education and training system. One-third of New Zealand's students left school with no formal qualification (OECD, 2004). Establishing a culture of lifelong learning was deemed to be a necessary solution to problems of early-school leaving, unemployment, under-employment and low levels of achievement within the indigenous population.

In response to these challenges, New Zealand embarked on a comprehensive program of qualifications reform that resulted in the establishment of the NZQA. The Authority's purpose, in part, was to bring order to the country's "confusing array of national qualifications" by establishing a National Register of Qualifications and coordinating the administration a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). To accomplish this, the NZQA drew upon policies from other countries with existing dual or multi-track qualifications frameworks, specifically England, Scotland, and Australia (Philips, 2000). The NQF was developed through a two-year process of policy development and public consultation in 1990-1991.

The recognition of prior learning was integrated into the NQF.

## **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The guiding principle of the NQF is "that all learning achievement should be recognized" (OECD, 2004, p. 7). The practical purpose of the NQF is to organize all national qualifications into levels based on levels of learning, and to provide a basis for individuals to achieve and be recognized nationally for their learning through various forms of relevant, flexible, learning and assessment activities.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

The NZQA was established under the Education Amendment Act (1990). It is an independent Crown agency accountable to government through the Ministry of Education and empowered to make and enforce its own policies to coordinate the administration and quality assurance of national qualifications. The Authority:

- Manages the National Register of all quality-assured qualifications in New Zealand (secondary, industry, tertiary, and university academic and vocational qualifications)
- Accredits and audits education and training providers and industry training organizations for quality assurance
- Manages the NQF (all post-compulsory education except university degrees and post-graduate awards), including approving/delegating approvals of applications to assess and award NQF national standards
- Evaluates overseas qualifications

### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Accredited education providers
- Industry training organizations (ITO)
- Maori Qualification Service (MQS)
- National Qualifications Services (NQS)
- Quality assurance bodies (NZQA, Institute of Technology and Polytechnics Quality, New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee)
- Standard-setting bodies



The NQF currently structures ten levels of learning that include over 800 national certificates and diplomas. Levels 1-4 are of approximately the same standard as senior secondary education and basic trades training certificates. Levels 5-6 approximate to advanced trades, technical and business diplomas. Level 7 approximates to advanced qualifications such as undergraduate degrees and Levels 8-10 approximate to graduate and post-graduate standards.

The NQF articulates nationally approved standards called “unit standards” at the post-secondary level and “achievement standards” at the secondary school level. Standards are assigned a credit value (based on notional “time spent” of ten hours per credit) and placed at a specific level on the NQF. Standards are essentially learning outcomes (elements) accompanied by performance criteria. Standards include a title, code number, level, credit value, purpose, prerequisites and other operational detail. They must be endorsed by national standard-setting bodies representing providers, employers, professional associations and other affected parties. They cover both vocational and general education.

There are four standard-setting bodies: the Ministry of Education, Industrial Training Organizations, Maori Qualifications Services and National Qualifications Services.

National qualifications (certificates and diplomas) are made up of groups of related national standards, established by the NZQA and delivered by accredited educational and training providers. These providers must be approved if they wish to be listed in the National Register and assess students against national standards. There are three Quality Assurance Bodies: the NZQA, the Institute of Technology and Polytechnics Quality and the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee.

Because the national standards are agreed upon through multi-stakeholder processes, learners' achievements can be recognized in a number of contexts. Their knowledge and skills are transferable between qualifications and providers. Courses leading to national certificates and diplomas are available at polytechnics, private training establishments, secondary schools and wānanga (Maori institutions). Learners may obtain part of a qualification in one place and complete it in another. The cross credits are automatic. Learners can study full-time, or part-time, and can complete training in the workplace if

the qualification relates to their work. There are specific national unit standards and national qualifications for Maori learning.

### ***RPL within the NQF***

To determine how best to integrate RPL within the qualifications framework, the NZQA sponsored research on RPL and began a national consultation process that ended in 1993 with the publication of a national policy, an initial set of unit standards, principles and procedures for implementation, and an implementation model (Keeton, 1994).

Today, RPL refers to two processes: credit transfer and assessment of prior learning. In assessment of prior learning, emphasis is placed on two types of assessment: the assessment of diverse evidence of prior performances that usually occur at established organizations, and assessment of current competencies for which no convincing evidence of prior performance is available. Credits awarded through both types of assessment are granted equal standing to credit awarded through other forms of assessment (OECD, 2004, p. 25). RPL is no longer a distinct, stand-alone concept or initiative.

### ***Record of Achievement (formerly Record of Learning)***

In 2006, the NZQA re-named the Record of Learning to reflect the fact that only learning achievements are reported. A single Record of Achievement for each learner is held on a national database by NZQA. All credits attained by learners are recorded and made available to learners through the Internet. Accumulated NQF credits from all accredited providers are recorded until a qualification is completed.

### **Target populations**

The NZQF is designed to facilitate learning recognition for all New Zealand learners. The term "learner" is used to cover all those who might seek qualifications, including students at school, private training establishments, polytechnics, wānanga (Maori tertiary institutions) or universities, or those who might be employed in the workplace seeking recognition of learning gained on the job.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

Assessment of prior learning and current competencies are conducted by all organizations that are accredited to assess achievement of unit standards or achievement standards in learning programs or workplaces. No additional registration or accreditation is required.

Methods of assessment are determined by assessing organizations. A range of methods and tools are used, including demonstrations, case studies, problem-based assessment, and collections of documented evidence. Assessors are advised to balance the demands of the standards and learner needs, with what is manageable in practical terms. If assessments result in the awarding of unit standards that complete a national certificate or diploma, program completion is not required. In some cases, assessments are conducted prior to program enrollment and students attend only relevant parts of the program; in other cases, individual programming is set up to allow students to achieve remaining standards.

### **Funding structures and levels**

Post-secondary level learners pay a \$25 registration fee to join the NQF national database, and \$1.00 for each credit achieved. These funds are applied to the costs of moderation and keeping the standards up to date. There is an additional \$15 fee for issuance of national certificates and diplomas.

Most assessing organizations pay an initial accreditation fee and annual fees thereafter of \$775 plus \$10 per FTE student. Additional charges may apply for work conducted by external contractors and specialists as well as a charge of \$150 per hour.

### **Quality assurance**

The NQF is built on a process of consensus. Specially convened, multi-stakeholder standard-setting bodies develop the standards, and drafts are publicly posted for initial as well as ongoing comment. Once a final version has been quality assured by the NZQA, the standard is registered on the NQF. Registered NQF standards are reviewed on a one to five year cycle by experts and stakeholders.

The NZQA has a Board of eight to ten members reflective of education, industry and employer interest groups. Members are appointed by the Minister of Education.

Standard-setting bodies are responsible for the quality of standards submitted for registration on the NQF. The Framework's registration quality assurance process involves an evaluation of the standards against the registration criteria, and a compliance check to ensure that any issues raised in the evaluation have been addressed. The registration criteria focus on standards being fit for purpose, assessable and capable of consistent interpretation, as well as general editorial and formatting matters.

After a NQF standard or qualification is registered on the NQF, they are available to all accredited education organizations. They can be searched for and downloaded from the NZQA website. All registered standards must have an Accreditation and Moderation Plan which states how education organizations will ensure national consistency of assessment against the NQF standards.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

Evaluative information is limited.

In 2006, there were 5,500 qualifications registered on the National Register and over 100,000 unit standards. The comprehensive approach taken by the NZQA to assessing learning has a number of positive features:

- Efficiencies are created by ensuring that all assessments relate to a common set of standards
- Assessment results are recorded on individual learners' Record of Achievement that can be used in a variety of contexts
- Much of the process is electronic
- The system improves portability of NZ credentials in other countries
- The system has integrated recognition of indigenous knowledge
- Levels of industry training toward qualification completion have increased
- Post-secondary enrollment have risen (14% increase in post-graduate study entrants since 1997)
- The National Register is seen as a unifying device for recognizing learning

In a study of how teachers' assessment practices changed with the implementation of a national certificate in educational achievement (NZQA, 2004-06), researchers found several impacts including increased teacher confidence, adoption of new and varied assessment strategies which were seen to be fairer to students, increased teacher collaboration, a re-examination of the balance of assessment and learning, and changes in students' attitudes, increased understanding of the assessment system and a greater sense of learner control and responsibility for their learning – the “strategic student”.

## **ISSUES**

A variety of opinions exist on the value and success of the NQF. A report by the OECD in 2004 indicates that the implementation of the NQF has been a learning experience; lessons learned during the period of the 1990s will bring about new improvements (OECD, 2004, p. 73). Quality assurance continues to be an issue. The Tertiary Education Strategy continues to seek a "greater alignment" (PECD, 2004, p. 74) between national goals and the activities of the tertiary education organizations (TEO). To do so, all TEOs are developing charters and profiles to describe how the activities of providers will contribute to the educational system as a whole.

Critics of the NQF suggest the following issues:

- A complex bureaucracy has created a cumbersome system: “inflexible, divisive, incomprehensible” (Birchfield, 2005)
- Educators fear loss of emphasis on knowledge and the commoditization of learning
- Checklists and “standardization” paradigm threaten learners' individuality
- Ambitious rhetoric has not always translated into action

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## NORWAY

### INITIATIVE

Competence Reform

### LEAD ORGANIZATIONS

- County governments/assessment centres (responsible for upper secondary school education)
- Ministry of Education and Research
- Vox (National Institute for Adult Learning)

### POLICY CONTEXT

The Competence Reform was launched as part of the Norwegian Life Long Learning strategy (1999-2003), a result of national wage negotiations between the state and the social partners. It was based on acknowledgment of the fact that a well-educated population is the most important resource a country can have for the creation of new jobs, ensuring quality of life and preventing new class distinctions. The main objective of the reform has been to help meet the needs of individuals, society and the workplace in terms of skills and knowledge, and to give adults opportunities to acquire education and training to improve their qualifications.

According to the Plan of Action for the Competence Reform, one of its principal objectives was to establish a national system for documenting and validating informal and non-formal learning outcomes. This includes learning attained through paid and unpaid work, organizational involvement and organized training. In order to accomplish this, the national Validation Project was formed in 1999. The aim of the project was based on an agreement between the Ministry of Education and Research and the social partners. It was further based on the Storting (Parliament) resolution in connection with parliamentary discussions of White Paper No. 42 (1997–98) relating to the Competence Reform:

*“The Storting asks the Government to establish a system that gives adults the right to document their non-formal and informal learning without having to undergo traditional forms of testing.”*

## **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The primary goals of the National Validation Project were to:

- Build community capacity for the assessment and documentation of individuals' competencies
- Provide individuals with validation of their competencies at upper secondary level of education
- Provide colleges and universities with methods and procedures for validation of applicants' competencies in relation to course admissions and exemptions based on prior learning
- Provide companies with methods and tools for identification and documentation of individuals' competencies
- Provide NGOs and the voluntary sector with methods and tools for identification and documentation of individuals' competencies from the third sector learning arena
- Experiment with a range of assessment methods and tools to validate non-formal and informal learning and develop a practical understanding of the concept of "equivalent" competencies

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

The legislative basis for the validation of non-formal and informal learning in Norway was advanced in 1976 when the Adult Education Act gave adults the right to have their knowledge and skills documented regardless of how they were acquired. The purpose was to increase adult enrollments in education. One of the main results of the Competence Reform has been that the Parliament has legalised that all adults have a statutory right to primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. The legal right to upper secondary education was put in force in the fall of 2000; while the legal right to primary and lower secondary education has been in force since August 2002. This education and training must be adapted to the individual's needs and life situation, such as when and where the education is to be provided and the rate of progression.

The National Validation Project (1999-2002) began with funding from the national government to all of Norway's county governments who are responsible for upper secondary education. The counties subsequently used this funding to establish 121



assessment centres throughout the country. Higher education institutions were also expected to establish processes through which applicants' non-formal and informal learning could be recognized. Employers and trade unions were encouraged to do the same.

In 2001 amendments to the University and University Colleges Act gave adults over the age of 25 years, the statutory right to seek admission to university and college courses and programs and to be exempt from certain studies based on their prior learning.

The national Parliament specified in the mandate for the National Validation Project that the validation processes used both at upper secondary level and at higher education level should not include traditional examinations and that methods would need to be developed to accredit competencies that are "equivalent" to competencies acquired through formal education.

#### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Non-governmental organizations (voluntary sector)
- Social partners (employer organizations and trade unions)
- University-colleges/universities
- Voluntary organizations

#### **Target populations**

The Competency Reform targets all adults. The target group for the Validation Project was all adults interested in having their competencies identified and validated for admission to education or improving employability. Workers in the voluntary sector were targeted in several special projects.

#### **Delivery mechanisms**

Local assessment centres provide information and assistance to individuals interested in pursuing validation of their competencies at the upper secondary level of education. The centres conduct assessments using the academic standards of the national education system as the basis for validation. Several methods of assessment are used including written CV/portfolios, self-assessments with and without electronic tools, practical

demonstrations and extensive use of interviews. Following assessment, the centres issue Competence Certificates that list and attest to individuals' competencies at a particular level. Counties train assessors as part of their quality assurance responsibilities.

In higher education, institutions are required to consider applicants' non-formal and informal learning either by assessment or using applicants' Competence Certificates. Overall, validation processes vary with assessment criteria, implementation strategies and quality assurance being the responsibility of individual institutions (Vox, Norwegian Institute for Adult Education, 2002). Higher education institutions also determine program and course admission requirements and method of assessment, and have the final word on whether applicants meet required competencies.

In exploring the potential of non-formally recognizing non-formal and informal learning in the labour market, nine experimental projects were carried out in different sectors in cooperation with employer and employee organisations. A variety of methods and tools were used to identify and describe workers' competencies in ways that would be useful to individuals and also help employers in their human resource planning. Competencies were ultimately signed off by employers.

As part of the Validation Project, eight projects developed "competency passports" to document learning acquired in the voluntary sector. In one of these projects, an instrument called a Personal Competence Document (PCD) was developed. A PCD is a self-declaration of knowledge and skills acquired through volunteer work. It is used by individuals to map competencies and more generally to raise awareness of educators and employers of the value of work conducted in the voluntary sector. In the first section of the document, competencies are described indirectly by focusing on activities. In the second section, competencies developed in these activities are described directly. Documentation, such as diplomas, certificates, attestations, etc. and physical products such as art work, support the description of competencies. The user decides if and how much of the PCD system to use. PCDs can be used for personal development, employment search and access to education.

### **Funding structures and levels**

Government funding was provided to Norway's 19 counties to establish the assessment centres. Additional projects in 12 counties were funded from 1999-2002 to develop new validation methods and tools.

Since implementation of the Competency Reform, assessment centres are the ongoing responsibility of each county as part of their annual budgets. In some cases, the costs of individual assessments are covered by government departments; however, for all individuals born before 1978, who do not already have a secondary school certificate, assessments of competencies related to upper secondary school education are at no cost.

Validation in higher education for admission or exemption is considered part of institutions' regular academic responsibilities and no fees are charged to individuals.

### **Quality assurance**

The quality of non-formal and informal learning validation practices at the upper secondary level of education is the responsibility of the counties. Higher education institutions are accredited by the national Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education. Their validation processes are subject to review through their accreditation processes.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

By the end of 2001, over 24,000 people had taken part in the piloting of various methods and tools; 15,000 had their prior learning charted and validated in upper secondary education. Between 2000 and 2005 approximately 60,000 persons underwent assessment. The vast majority (80%) were completed in vocational subjects.

In 2001, 6,000 individuals undertook validation for admission to higher education study programs – many in fields related to health and social studies. In 2001 and 2002 between 7% and 8% of all applicants to higher education enrolled in education through validation processes. Without these new rights, many of these applicants would most likely have remained non-participants (FAFO Institute for Labour and Social Research, 2004). Since this initial surge, annual figures have now dropped to about 1,300 per year.

In higher education, the extent to which the validation of non-formal and informal learning is actively used varies by institution but overall, it has been found to improve adult access to education and lead to a more positive reception by higher education institutions. Institutions in rural areas where programs are not as heavily subscribed as urban institutions tend to make greater use the validation process as an access tool.

Research (Brandt, 2002) showed that in most subjects, students progressed as quickly and received grades at least as high as students admitted on the basis of a general upper secondary education. The adult students were also found to be highly motivated, hard working and a positive addition to the learning environment.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning relating to labour market competencies is less well-documented. However, in one instance where validation was used to recognize the competencies of workers in the health and social sector, employers were reportedly satisfied with trainees who had their competence validated and were subsequently authorized to work within the social sector. Employers did not show signs of discrimination towards the candidates or their competencies.

The evaluation of the Validation Project included a national survey in 2001 and a county survey in 2003 to employees and employers that had participated in pilot projects. Workers' validations were considered useful for local wage negotiations by 50% (2001) and 65% (2003) of the employees. The validation was considered useful for job seeking by 65% (2001) and 85% (2003) of the employees. Almost 10% of the employees received new positions in connection with the validation. Among employers, only 10% considered validation useful for local wage negotiations.

## **ISSUES**

Research indicates low levels of exemption requests. Between 2001 and 2004, only 123 requests had been made (Brandt, 2005). Although an average of 72% of exemptions requests were granted, some universities find Competence Certificates to be inadequate in validating competencies against course and program competencies. In some cases, higher education institutions are requiring that adult applicants complete secondary school level examinations.

Several national regulations require supervised practice periods for students during university college studies for teachers, social workers, nurses and other health professionals. As a consequence, most university colleges on principle refuse exemption from practice periods in these studies to students that have earlier relevant, but not supervised, work or care experience.

Different interpretations of the term ‘equivalent competence’ constitute a main barrier granting exemption from a course – and thus a shorter formal education process after the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning for labour market purposes received less attention than for educational access or exemption. Concerns by employers that recognition would generate demands for increased wages were a source of resistance. In addition, the different values and expectations of educators and workplaces also resulted in limited institutional use of Competency Certificates. Focusing on facilitating the translation of competencies across these two sectors has been identified as a possible means of acknowledging but still addressing these differences. Widespread use of the tools developed during the projects has been limited and does not appear to have captured the energies of unions or employers. Clearer indications of the benefits to employers will likely be needed before strong support is given (FAFO Institute for Labour and Social Research, 2004).

Evaluation of the “competency passports” developed for the voluntary sector indicates a number of challenges in documenting competencies that are gained in such a wide variety of workplace contexts, and in managing the workload associated with validation. These concerns underscore the importance of finding simple and practical tools for validating learning.

The mandate of the national Validation Project was first geared towards the formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes for low skilled persons wanting to enter the education system. The social partners moved to extend the mandate to the development of tools for documentation of competencies from working life and third sector as well. Nine experimental projects targeting the labour market and five

projects targeting the third sector were carried out during 1999-2002. The projects were carried out by the social partners in different sectors, study associations and county administrations which cooperated with enterprises. Some projects were directed at specific sectors or industries, other projects were focused on a geographical area.

Many organisations have their own systems and procedures for documenting competences either as part of their HR management system or ISO requirements. Yet due to the Competence Reform, more emphasis has been placed on the right of the individual to document non-formal and informal learning that has been developed over time in the work context. This is especially the case among the small and medium-sized organizations.

### **Tools in working life**

In the national Validation Project different tools were developed. Most digital tools start with self-assessment of the kind of work tasks the employee has performed and responsibilities he/she has held in the company. This self-assessment is then subject to discussion, evaluation and ultimately validation and signed by the employer as a passport, to be combined with a CV. Some tools have been jointly developed by employer associations and unions.

Existing commercial tools for charting competence in work tasks may be used within a workplace. Documentation tools have this use too, but aim to be used by employees applying for new jobs or when applying for admission to an educational institution on the basis of non-formal and informal learning.

The different tools developed during the Validation Project still exist, but they are not free to use. Building on the experience from the Validation Project, Vox has made the "Competence Card" tool available on their website. Together with the tool are some examples and a database tool for human resource management.

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## **SCOTLAND**

### **INITIATIVE**

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) is a company of limited guarantee and registered charity. It is led by a Board of Directors comprised of senior representatives of five partner organizations:

- Association of Scotland's Colleges
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
- Scottish government
- Scottish Qualifications Authority
- Universities Scotland

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

The SCQF is a key feature of Scotland's lifelong learning agenda. Its purpose is to help people access appropriate education and training over their lifetimes by helping the public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an enabling strategy adopted by the SCQF partnership as part of the Framework. RPL facilitates the recognition of learning achieved through life and work experiences (paid and voluntary), as well as learning gained in non-formal contexts through community-based learning, workplace training, continuing professional development and independent learning.

The key organizations for the SCQF are the higher education institutions, Scotland's colleges and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). SCQF works with multiple stakeholders through the SCQF Forum which was established by the SCQF Board to



promote the Framework. The Forum includes education and training providers, professional bodies, community organizations and employers.

The SQA is Scotland's national body responsible for the development, accreditation, assessment and certification of qualifications other than degrees. Currently, only the SQA, institutions of higher education and Scotland's colleges are authorized to award SCQF credit points or provide credit-rating services to employers and professional bodies for work-based learning or learning undertaken for professional qualifications.

### **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the SCQF is to make clear the relationship between various Scottish qualifications and thereby facilitate learner transfer across education and training programs through the allocation of SCQF credit points that are calculated by recognized credit rating bodies and assigned to specific programs. Graduates of credit rated programs are awarded credit points and may be able to apply them toward completion of other qualifications such as a university degree.

RPL is an integral part of the SCQF and is intended to ensure that relevant non-formal and informal learning is nationally recognized as comparable to other more formal forms of learning.

### **IMPLEMENTATION**

#### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

The Framework has no legislative or regulatory foundation. It is a descriptive and enabling framework that depends on the support and cooperation of education and training providers and other stakeholders across Scotland for its implementation.

#### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Colleges
- Employers
- Professional bodies
- SCQF Forum
- Universities

Institutions of higher education, colleges and other education and training providers, professional bodies and employers are all potential participants in the SCQF as deliverers or beneficiaries of its credit rating and credit award processes.

The SCQF Forum is a committee of key organizations that provide or support education and training in Scotland. The Forum develops strategies for how the organizations/sectors will work together in making use of the SCQF to support lifelong learning. The Forum also advises the SCQF Partnership on the continuing development and maintenance of the SCQF, lifelong learning needs and the implications of these for the SCQF.

### **Target populations**

The SCQF targets all individuals in Scotland interested in pursuing education or training.

RPL targets:

- Adults returning to education
- Unemployed people seeking recognition for skills gained through informal learning
- People wanting to improve upon existing qualifications
- Those wanting to re-train or change careers
- People who have undertaken non-formal learning or training in the workplace or through community-based learning
- People who have gained a range of skills and knowledge through volunteering or through activities or projects within their community
- People who have been out of the education system for a long time and who may lack formal qualifications, as well as self- confidence as learners
- People who have disabilities of some kind
- Minority ethnic groups; gypsy travelers
- Migrant workers
- Refugees and asylum seekers

## **Delivery mechanisms**

The SCQF identifies 12 levels of learning that are ranked based on their complexity. Learning identified with every mainstream qualification in Scotland has been or will be positioned according to these levels. The Framework applies to learning acquired through school, continuing education, higher education, community education, professional development and work-based learning. Credit ratings are conducted based on the volume and level of learning in each credential and SCQF credit points are awarded based on this credit rating process.

The Framework provides for credits to be awarded through two main mechanisms. First, education and training providers may apply to credit-rating organizations for a determination of the credit value of their programs. Graduates of these programs are then awarded a designated number of SCQF credit points. These points can be accepted by other education and training organizations thereby reducing the amount of time required to complete credentials. In all cases, the decision to recognize credit points rests with receiving organizations. Secondly, individuals can apply to credit rating organizations for recognition of their learning. Individual assessments also result in the awarding of SCQF credit points that can be used as credit currency with education and training providers. RPL is part of this process.

RPL can be undertaken by a learner for two purposes: personal and career development or in support of their transition between informal and formal learning (formative recognition), and it can be used to gain credit for entry to or credit within formal programs of study (summative recognition).

Formative recognition may result in a mapping, or a notional leveling, of an individual's learning within the context of the SCQF as part of an educational guidance or personal development planning process. This mapping or 'notional leveling' involves comparing the outcomes of learning to the SCQF Level Descriptors or National Occupational Standards (NOS). It may also involve identifying and further developing core skills gained through prior informal learning as part of bridging activities to ease the transition between informal and formal learning. Formal assessment of an individual's learning is not conducted if RPL is for personal and career development.

Summative recognition used to support transitions, or for gaining academic credit, involves a formal assessment of prior learning. A determination is made of the comparability of the learning (knowledge, skills and understanding) to particular requirements for entry to a program, for credit against particular course requirements or for general or specific credit for expected outcomes or competencies of part or all of a level of a program or qualification in a particular subject or vocational area.

In some cases, the amount of credit awarded is pre-set through articulation between receiving organizations and learning providers; in other cases, such as prior learning acquired through work and life experience, individuals must undertake direct assessment.

The SCQF has published detailed guidelines, handbooks and resource packs for organizations and professionals involved in using the SCQF. The Framework and RPL Guidelines state that learners should be provided with guidance on the approach used to evidence their learning and supported in the gathering or production of this evidence. Scottish Qualifications Certificates issued by the SQA provide learners with a record of their SCQF qualifications and credit point awards.

### **Funding structures and levels**

To date, funding for activities involved in establishing the SCQF and its RPL processes comes from government.

Development of credit ratings for specific educational programs is primarily financed by the organizations seeking credit rating through fee payments to credit rating providers (e.g., Napier University's Centre for Customized Programmes). The typical fee is 5,000 GBP. In some cases, financial assistance has been provided by government. In 2005/06 and 2006/07 for example, the Scottish Executive provided funding to support credit rating of vocational qualifications in several key sectors including health, social care and community learning and development. Credit rating providers also incur costs associated with training, document preparation, meetings, travel, monitoring and evaluation.

The cost of individual applications for SCQF credit points includes direct costs such as registration, certification and verification costs, and indirect costs such as human and physical resources, work time taken by assessors and verifiers in planning, training,

method and tool development and assessment, and liaison activities with the SQA. These costs are borne by the assessing organization and supported by fees charged to individual learners. Learners may access a government-based funding program (Individual Learning Accounts) for assistance up to 200 GBP.

The SCQF Guidelines require that fee structures for RPL (i.e., the methodology for calculating fees) reflect the amount of staff time spent in supporting and assessing RPL claims and that they be clearly stated, and consistently applied. The actual fees charged to individuals vary. Some institutions do not charge but typically fees of 100 GBP apply.

### **Quality assurance**

The SCQF Framework and RPL Guidelines require that RPL be underpinned by internal quality assurance mechanisms. Moderation of RPL for personal and career development should focus on ensuring that the standards of notional leveling are consistently applied. Moderation of RPL for credit should be integrated within existing quality assurance processes and should be available for scrutiny by appropriate external quality assurance bodies.

The RPL Guidelines also call for staff involved in the planning, development and operation of RPL procedures to be provided with training, and continuing support for this role.

A SCQF Quality Committee was established in 2006/07 to advise the SCQF Partnership Board on all aspects of quality assurance of the Framework including consistency and criteria for credit rating.

Mechanisms for monitoring and reviewing RPL procedures may take into account:

- The number of learners undertaking RPL
- An evaluation of the learner experience, including the time taken by learners to undertake the RPL process
- An evaluation of the staff experience, including the time spent by staff in supporting the RPL process and managing the process of recognition
- A tracking of progression routes of learners who have undertaken RPL

- An evaluation of the effectiveness of any collaborative arrangements with other learning providers/learning partnerships/receiving institutions

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

The SCQF and its associated credit rating and credit award processes (including RPL) are designed to enable the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning to occur within a comprehensive and unified qualifications system. This system clarifies the relationship between all education and training credentials so that individuals can make realistic educational plans and transfer more easily from one learning experience to another, employers can better understand applicant and worker qualifications and education and training providers can maximize the relevance of their teaching.

The SCQF development process has been characterized by consultations with and evaluations by stakeholders. The current consensus is one of general satisfaction among users and beneficiaries. Much of the SCQF's success in implementation has been attributed to its incrementalism, its policy breadth and the leading role of Scotland's universities (Gallacher et al, 2005). The Framework's current strengths are perceived as its partnership model, the status of the SQA as the single national awarding body and the Framework's comprehensive coverage.

The SCQF and its associated credit rating and credit award processes (including RPL) are supported by a wide array of detailed guidelines and evaluation reports designed to assist credit-rating organizations, credit-seeking organizations, organizations conducting RPL, individual applicants, professional bodies and employers. These resources provide clarity and guidance and promote consistency and transparency.

Data on the impacts of the SCQF are limited. However, one extensive study of Scottish Vocational Qualifications in the food and drink manufacturing sector reported the following improvements in employment:

- Productivity up 20%
- Quality up 12%
- Wastage down 6%
- Complaints down 12%

- Accidents down 56%
- Absenteeism down 20%
- Staff retention up 27%

## **ISSUES**

The SCQF focuses on Scottish education and training programs and qualifications. The Framework does not target the unique challenges faced by internationally-educated individuals. Development work is under way to link the SCQF with other qualifications frameworks in order to further promote mobility across countries but countries without these frameworks may face challenges in finding ways to compare and recognize qualifications with Scotland.

The voluntary nature of the SCQF and its credit ratings has raised some concerns that providers may not participate as much as in some other qualifications frameworks that stress mutual recognition of credits awarded by different awarding bodies.

There have also been criticisms about the slow speed with which the SCQF has developed. Causes have been identified as the practice of working by consensus, insufficient attention to cross-sectoral development (particularly non-further education or higher education qualifications), insufficient delegation of authority, the need for a quality assured register of credit-rated qualifications and potential conflicts of interest. These concerns led to the establishment of the SCQF as a company limited by guarantee.

The cost of credit rating was also identified in stakeholder consultations as a potential barrier for voluntary sector organizations and employers in obtaining credit ratings for their education and training programs.

The resource intensive nature of RPL is recognized by the SCQF Partners and as such, the Guidelines encourage the use of existing tools for support and assessment, as well as the development of more innovative, less-resource-intensive approaches. On-line tools and group approaches are encouraged as means of complementing individual support.

## **RESOURCES AND REFERENCES**

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## **LEARNER EXAMPLES**

Here are two examples of how the SCQF works. They have been provided courtesy of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Partnership.

### **Example 1**

Mary thought the future looked bleak. She had no job, no qualifications. Then she started on a community learning course and began to earn credits that led to a Diploma and a job. Mary was a single mum in her early 40s. She'd not worked since her daughter was born 11 years ago.

A friend persuaded her to find out about community-based learning and Mary started on a community managed lifelong learning project. That earned her a cluster of SQA units in childcare. And the learning project itself was so interesting that she became more and more involved in the centre that she became chair of the management committee.

“I realized that people like me can have another chance. That I wasn't the only one who had wasted their time at school and then let things drift. That's why I got so involved in the community learning project.” Mary decided she wanted to get back into learning properly and make her life take a new route.

Mary got advice from her local further education college, which gave her credits both for her SQA units and for the experience she'd gained from her involvement with the learning project. She started on a college designed course in Working with Communities



and found a new lease of life. “The college gave me a lot of support to help me get into a routine of learning.”

Mary decided to stay on and take an Higher National Certificate in Working with Communities. “Studying suddenly became part of my life. My daughter would do her homework alongside me in the evening. It gave us something else to share. I gained the Higher National Certificate and felt really proud.” Thanks to her qualifications Mary has achieved another ambition. She now has a full-time job working with young mothers coordinating community learning programs.

### **Example 2**

Ann had always lived with her parents at their home in the Black Isle, and when she gained a Higher National Diploma in Social Sciences at Inverness College she decided to broaden her experiences and move to another city to progress into higher education. Ann used credits from her Diploma in Social Sciences to transfer to a Degree program in Edinburgh.

“I love the Highlands, but I felt that going to university was a good opportunity to try something new. Staff at the college were great and gave me advice about the best degree program to take so that I'd be given credits for my diploma.” When she applied to a university in Edinburgh to do a Degree in Psychology with Sociology, the university decided that the learning she had acquired for her Higher National Diploma was relevant to her Degree program and awarded her 240 credits at Level 8. That meant Ann could enter halfway through an Honours Degree program.

“It was great to be able to go in at this level of a degree program. It was really encouraging that my previous learning had been credited and recognized.” After 12 months' study, Ann gained 120 credits at Level 9, the Ordinary Degree level. “By then I was hooked and decided to go for broke and try for an Honours degree.” After another 12 months' study, Ann gained a further 120 credits at Level 10 and was awarded her prized BA Honours Degree. Ann decided to use her learning to benefit the community she grew up in, and she is now working in health and community care in the Highlands.

(Adapted from SCQF website: <http://www.scqf.org.uk/cs06.asp>)

## THE NETHERLANDS

### INITIATIVES

Erkenning Verworven Competenties (EVC) – recognition of non-formal and informal learning

### LEAD ORGANIZATIONS

- Centre for Identification of International Competencies
- Empowerment Centre, EVC
- Knowledge Centre, EVC
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Social Affairs
- Regional information desks

### POLICY CONTEXT

EVC has been implemented as a means of carrying out the Netherlands' commitment to the Lisbon Strategy and its own interests in increasing the overall education level of the Dutch population, becoming more competitive internationally, addressing skill shortages and increasing labour market mobility.

The national government started to attend to EVC (recognition of informally acquired skills) in the early 1990s. Reports in 1994 and 2000 led to government support for experimentation by education, industry and other stakeholder groups. During this period an important shift occurred in public policy from an emphasis on recognition of credentials to recognition of competencies. EVC began to be viewed as a tool not only for encouraging a return to education but also as a way of recognizing the workplace as a place of learning. Implementation began on a project basis in a variety of sectors. Currently, a joint initiative of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour Market Policy called *Learning and Working* (2005-2007) is a key government-driven initiative in which EVC implementation is an important component. Under this initiative, the government allocated € 16.1 million in

2006 to support EVC. The annual budget for 2007-2010 is € 11 million. In 2006, trade unions spent an additional € 8.75 million and employers invested the same amount.

At the end of 2006 a quality code of practice was developed by the EVC Knowledge Centre. A covenant regarding the implementation of this code and which committed signatories to the terms of the code was signed in November 2006. Signatories are several national stakeholder groups including employers, labour, education, private EVC suppliers and government. This code is intended to promote transparency, consistency and quality in EVC procedures.

In relation to the identification of international competencies, the government of the Netherlands recently commenced a recognition project based on the view that credential assessment alone is insufficient in identifying the prior learning of immigrants. The Centre for Identification of International Competencies was launched in 2005.

### **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the *Learning & Working* Project Unit was to stimulate the development of 20,000 EVC procedures (PLAR assessments) by October 1, 2007 and 50,000 by 2010. A number of sectoral and regional partners agreed to carry out a certain number of EVC procedures through 45 different agreements with government. In 20 of these agreements, regional partners agreed to set up EVC delivery structures and career advising services. This will be expanded to 40 of these regional offices in the coming years. Specific objectives of the EVC initiative are to:

- Offer subsidies to education institutes to develop EVC. For example, in 2006-2008 the *Learning and Working* Project Unit established a temporary subsidy (in total €15 million) for tertiary vocational education institutes to start EVC-focused projects.
- Approach new sectors to develop EVC opportunities and procedures.
- Develop a digital portfolio which is linked to Europass in agreement with other organizations.
- Work to identify and remove barriers to EVC.

- Set up agreements through the EVC Knowledge Centre with six employment sectors about the number of EVC procedures and EVC's integration into collective labour agreements.
- Disseminate information through the EVC Knowledge Centre's website. This knowledge centre is subsidized by the *Learning and Working* Project Unit in the period 2006-2011 with a total grant of € 7 million.

The specific goal of the Centre for the Identification of International Competencies is to improve the employability of highly skilled immigrants by demonstrating their prior learning in ways that are recognizable by educational institutions and EVC assessing bodies.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

The Netherlands does not have legislation requiring educational institutions, employers or (with one exception) occupations to provide EVC procedures. In 2004, legislation was passed that established teacher competencies and today, specific centres are authorized to assess teacher candidates who do not necessarily have full certificated qualifications. Assessments may include portfolios, interviews and authentic assessment strategies such as observation and development of lesson plans. If an individual is found to have the required competencies, they receive recognition and can work as a teacher. If not all competencies are demonstrated, an individualized education plan is offered and can be completed while the individual is teaching.

Universities and other higher education organizations have the right to decide whether to offer EVC or not. EVC services do exist but implementation can be uneven across institutions and across programs within institutions. Employers are also currently engaged to a limited degree but activity levels are growing.

In 2005, a temporary regulation was passed to provide € 5.7 million in financial support to cooperative ventures in EVC among municipalities, senior secondary vocational schools and regional employer organizations. A second regulation was issued by the Minister of Education, Culture, and Science to stimulate EVC activity levels in the higher vocational education sector by providing temporary funds for organizational costs to improve linkages between education and work using EVC. Projects involving at least 200

employees and people seeking employment were potentially eligible for funding of up to € 150,000. Total funding for projects stemming from the two regulations was € 6.8 million.

### **Key partners/collaborators**

- Centres of Expertise on Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market
- Employers
- Higher vocational education institutions
- Secondary vocational schools
- Trade unions

### **Target population**

The target population is adults interested in improving their skills, entering occupations with international credentials or changing careers. Early school leavers with work experience are also targeted.

### **Delivery mechanisms**

In 2001, the government of the Netherlands established several initiatives to promote EVC in employment, education and transitions between these two sectors. One of these initiatives was the establishment of a national EVC knowledge centre, known as EVC Kenniscentrum. Led by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Knowledge Centre has the mandate to collect information on EVC, distribute its knowledge and research on good practices in education, and in the labour market, and promote the use of EVC procedures. The Knowledge Centre is building a network of accredited assessor organizations and is responsible for the content of the EVC Quality Code. It has also established a register of EVC providers, and developed sample EVC reports (issued following assessments), portfolios and other evaluation instruments. The Centre is responsible for developing model methodology to evaluate the quality of supervisors and assessors, conducting research on the impact of the EVC Quality Code, and preparing recommendations on how to take EVC forward. In January 2008, the Centre's mandate was extended for another three years with an annual budget of € 1 million.

A range of stakeholder groups are becoming involved in EVC including employers and trade unions. A number of collective agreements contain provisions that give workers the right to EVC based on competence scans and personal development plans. Industrial sectors include retail, construction, childcare, the metal industry, legal assistance, welfare and social services and the financial sector. EVC is viewed as a means of stimulating worker employability and improving employers' understanding of workers' competencies.

An example of the use of EVC in the workplace is managed by Kenteq, a private consulting and training organization in the areas of mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and ICT. In cooperation with educational institutions and other stakeholders, Kenteq assesses the competencies of workers whose practical competencies exceed those required by their jobs: 627 in 2004, 455 in 2005 and 650 in 2006. Each successful candidate receives an APL certificate through Kenteq's Examination Committee. It is intended that this certificate will gain currency for individuals when they seek further education, training or improvements in their employment circumstances.

Some individual employers use EVC to recognize the skills of their workers. Heinz for example, compared internal training program competencies with those listed in the national qualifications framework. Methods such as portfolios, quick scans, interviews, tests in the workplace and assignments were used. In total, 28 employees underwent an EVC procedure following which three candidates received senior, secondary vocational education diplomas at Level 1. Eleven candidates received diplomas at Level 2, and 14 candidates only needed to follow a shortened education program to receive the diploma. The project concluded that Heinz internal training is closely linked to the senior secondary vocational study program in food technology at expert Level 2.

A third government sponsored initiative was the Empowerment Centre EVC, operated by Central Organization Work and Income (CWI), funded in part by the European Social Fund (ESF). Eighteen organizations worked together to implement EVC for disadvantaged, target groups. Portfolios were used to help individuals recognize their own knowledge and skills. This project was completed in December 2007.

The voluntary sector is also increasingly participating in EVC, offering portfolio assessments of competencies acquired through volunteer work such as scouting. A budget of € 200,000 was granted to facilitate these activities for 2007-2008.

The Centre for Identification of International Competencies which was launched in 2005 assists highly skilled immigrants to develop digital portfolios designed to improve their employability using methodologies acceptable to accredited assessment organizations and educational institutions.

The Open University of the Netherlands received a grant of € 200,000 in 2006 to develop a system of EVC for all its courses. In September 2007 EVC was introduced for all new students in all courses.

### **Funding structures and levels**

The cost of workplace EVC activities are covered by employers, a government fund or local authorities. Employees rarely contribute to these costs. If candidates indicate their preparedness to enroll in a program of study, some EVC providers do not charge for their services although this is discouraged by the EVC. Actual costs of EVC procedures vary according to the time involved and expertise required for the assessment and advising processes. Government estimates indicate that an average EVC procedure costs between € 400 and € 1,500. A recent OECD report (2007) notes that in establishing the cost of an EVC procedure it is important to take into account the number of hours it costs an employee to participate, generally between 8 and 20 hours, as well as the time needed by management. On the other hand, large companies have calculated that the number of hours gained through EVC, through the shortening of educational courses, far outweighs the direct out-of-pocket costs of EVC.

Effective January 2007, organizations that pay for EVC procedures undertaken by accredited providers can receive a tax benefit of € 300. Individuals who pay for their own EVC procedure can deduct the expenses from their taxes. EVC procedures undertaken by educational institutions at the time of student admissions are generally considered part of the program and there is no additional charge for assessment.

## **Quality assurance**

The experimentation encouraged by the government in the 1990s led to a wide variety of practices which can be confusing to prospective users. However, there are a number of mechanisms that contribute to the quality of EVC procedures. Two evaluating organizations accredit education-related EVC providers: the Knowledge Centre for Examination (KCE) evaluates EVC arrangements for senior secondary vocational training, and organizations appointed by Netherlands-Flemish Accreditation (NVAO) evaluate EVC arrangements for higher education. The Quality Code for APL (2004) is used by EVC providers. Participating institutions are required to develop their own quality processes subject to review by an evaluating organization.

In business sectors and the field of labour market integration, governing bodies are allowed to choose an evaluating organization from a list of organizations drawn up by the partners who signed the Quality Code. It is expected that in the long run, all quality assurance will be carried out by organizations registered as accredited suppliers of EVC.

For EVC taking place under the supervision of employers and trade unions, the delivering organizations may appoint an organization to review and monitor the quality of their assessors. There is no governance of the quality of EVC procedures undertaken by organizations that do not participate in the Quality Code and do not belong to the category of “recognized EVC supplier”.

The EVC Knowledge Centre has developed a competency profile for EVC assessors and is working toward a system of professional accreditation. In January 2007, the Centre drafted new standards for the assessment of EVC providers, which will be used by organizations wishing to become accredited and by evaluating organizations.

A number of education and examination institutes are also developing a system of certification for assessors, test constructors and quality managers, and will seek ISO certification.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

It is estimated that by 2002, approximately 6,000 persons within 500 organizations had followed an EVC procedure. The EVC Knowledge Centre estimates that the numbers



have doubled since 2002 due to the rising popularity of EVC among employers. It is estimated that almost 40% of the EVC procedures are aimed at providing individuals with a nationally recognized diploma; in approximately 30% of cases, concrete follow-up activities have been organized to further develop the individual's competences.

According to the EVC Knowledge Centre, an annual target of 20,000 EVC procedures was established. By January 2008, about 16,000 had been achieved.

Within the health and social care sector, EVC has been used as a recruitment tool for about 1,000 individuals and this number is expected to increase rapidly. In the metal sector, EVC is used to improve the skills of current staff and in promoting career development. Approximately 10% of organizations in the metal and electronics sector (mostly large metal companies) currently use EVC and this is also expected to grow. In the building industry EVC is mostly used to help employees move on to related sectors.

A further example of the use of EVC by an employer is the Ministry of Defense's Verkennen van Competenties project (2005). This project is intended to use systematic and cross-sector EVC portfolio procedures in a work environment. Individuals can update and supplement their own competency portfolios; employers have a list of competencies that can be deployed in various departments within their organizations. External organizations can search to fill vacancies and career counsellors can use it to organize workers' personal development plans. This competency-based approach levels the playing field in the valuation of learning in military and civilian life. The target group consists of 15,000 people leaving or continuing in the military and 5,000 new recruits.

The Centre for Identification of International Competencies is operational but struggling with the challenge of finding/developing methodologies that combine competency assessment and credential assessment.

## **ISSUES**

The literature identifies several issues arising from EVC implementation in the Netherlands:

## Educational Institutions

- Viewed by some as a potential threat to institutional independence
- Associated with competencies rather than traditional content
- Concern about cost of custom-made procedures
- Limited institutional ties to industry and trade unions
- Potential threat to institutional credibility (giving credits away)

## Employers

- Fear of costs and then losing workers to other employers
- Concern that it will lead to higher wage demands
- Requires time from management
- Concern about adequacy of assessment

## Employees

- Concerns about time, efforts and cost
- Fear of the assessment process; lack of confidence

## **RESOURCES AND REFERENCES**

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## **UNITED STATES**

### **INITIATIVE**

Prior learning assessment

### **LEAD ORGANIZATIONS**

- American Council on Education (ACE)
- College Board
- Colleges and universities

### **POLICY CONTEXT**

The assessment of prior learning began to take shape in the United States following a report by the Carnegie Commission (1971) that promoted adult learning and credit for learning acquired outside of formal educational institutions. In 1974, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and ten institutions of higher education joined forces to explore ways to assess learning acquired through work and life experience. Through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, the combination of student demographics, the adult education movement, growing linkages between education and economic development, and technological changes, created an increasingly hospitable environment for recognizing prior learning in education and in the workplace.

Today, the practice is known as “prior learning assessment” (PLA) or at some institutions APL. There is no legislation requiring educational institutions or any other organization to offer PLA services, and it is for the most part an unregulated practice. However, PLA is conducted by many colleges and universities as well as employers. Development has been facilitated by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). ACE is the national body responsible for coordinating higher education institutions across the country. CAEL is a national, non-profit organization that works with educational institutions, employers, labour organizations and other stakeholders to promote creative, effective adult learning strategies.

In a recent publication, CAEL noted a growing interest among policy makers in the concept of PLA. A survey undertaken by CAEL in 2006 suggested that more than half of all states have at least one agency or entity that has supported or encouraged the use of PLA methods in higher education. Evidence of this support included:

- General support statements indicating that the students' experience outside the college classroom can be evaluated for college credit
- State post-secondary education agencies specifying which PLA methods are accepted and how many credits can be accepted through PLA methods
- Portfolio review policies and procedures
- Regular reporting of PLA credits through the various methods
- The degree to which different campuses/institutions can establish their own PLA policies
- Joint articulation agreements between state-wide community colleges and universities detailing PLA policies
- Reference to PLA policies developed by CAEL or the regional accrediting agency

Based on our review of available documentation, occupational regulatory bodies and community-based organizations do not appear to be involved in PLA to the extent that they are in Canada, and there does not appear to be a focus on using PLA to assess the learning of immigrants.

## **SPECIFIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Organizational goals vary. Typically, colleges and universities use PLA to increase enrollments and promote access for non-traditional learners. Employers use PLA to promote training. Individuals use it to access and shorten educational programs, and to enhance employment opportunities.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Legislative/regulatory actions**

PLA is not governed by legislation. However, some of the six regional accreditation commissions located across the country have issued policies on PLA. These commissions

are responsible for monitoring the quality of higher education in the U.S. through a formal accreditation process.

Examples of existing state level policies and/or initiatives in Connecticut, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont include the following:

- In Connecticut, both the Board of Governors for Higher Education and the Board of Trustees of Community-technical Colleges have PLA policies requiring institutions proposing to award credit for prior experiential learning to develop written policies and procedures in accordance with their standards. The standards include the following methods for awarding credit: standardized tests, nationally recognized evaluations for credit recommendations accepted by the Board, individualized written or oral tests designed and administered by qualified faculty, and portfolio review.
- In addition, the Board of Trustees of Community-technical Colleges has supported and encouraged the use of a variety of mechanisms for awarding college credit for demonstrated competence gained through non traditional learning experiences, including instructional programs offered by non-collegiate organizations (e.g., corporate training programs, public and private vocational programs, hospital-based nursing and allied health educational programs).
- The Oregon University System's Joint Boards Articulation Commission has recommended that compliance with Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (NASC) and CAEL's Ten Standards of Assessing Prior learning related to proficiency-based assessment be required for credits granted for prior experiential learning or other options. These credits will be accepted for elective credit and may apply to specific requirements in a student's major.
- The "Job Ready Pennsylvania" Package, set up by the Pennsylvania State Legislature in 2006, and representing an unprecedented commitment of \$91 million in new funds has had the effect of leveraging approximately \$2 billion in the commonwealth's workforce and education systems. The purpose of this program is to ensure that workers have the skills they need to compete in the global economy, increase options for students to receive post-secondary education and boost the skills of high school graduates. PLAR or recognition that adults deserve credit for college-level learning no matter how or where it was acquired is an element of this strategy.
- The Community College of Rhode Island, the University of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island College have a formal PLA agreement. Under this agreement, these institutions accept as transfer credits those credits awarded by other institutions through the assessment of a student's military experience or through the assessment of other prior learning experiences as documented in a student's portfolio.

**Key partners/collaborators**

- Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)
- Employers
- Labour organizations
- Regional accreditation commissions

**Target population**

American institutions primarily target adult learners returning to school, and employed, unemployed and under-employed workers.

**Delivery mechanisms**

There are several methods of assessing prior learning in the U.S. Traditional assessments by portfolio or other types of individual challenge processes are used by colleges and universities.

Two additional forms of assessment are program review and standardized testing. Program review involves the evaluation of education and training programs offered outside the sponsorship of formal educational institutions. Training programs offered by employers and labour unions for example, are evaluated for comparability to academic credits in programs offered by colleges and universities. Many of these evaluations are conducted by the College Credit Recommendation Service of the ACE. ACE evaluations are published in a National Guide to Educational Credit for Training Programs. Results of ACE evaluations of military programs are published in a Guide to the Evaluation of Educational Experiences in the Armed Services. Colleges and universities use the credit recommendations in these guides to award academic credit.

Standardized testing is also used extensively in the U.S. as a form of PLA. The College-level Examination Program (CLEP) is a collection of five examinations in English Composition, Humanities, Mathematics, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences and History. CLEP is used to validate non-traditional learning by determining its equality to what is usually taught during the first year or two of college. About 30 additional subject examinations correspond to specific college courses taught across the country. Many colleges and universities accept CLEP credits. Other standardized examinations in dozens

of subjects and for which credits are awarded by colleges and universities include the Thomas Edison College Examination Program (TECEP), the Defence Activity for Non-traditional Education Support (DANTES), the New York University Language Examinations and the Advanced Placement program (AP) exams administered by the College Board (a non-profit association of colleges and universities).

ACE also operates a Credit by Examination Program which evaluates exams used for granting professional licenses and certificates to see whether their results reflect the same level of achievement as traditional college class work. Credit recommendations are published in a Guide to Educational Credit by Examination. The guide is distributed to college and university officials on a regular basis and can be used to grant academic credit.

An additional service offered by ACE is the GED Testing Service. These tests are designed to measure the general academic skills and knowledge normally acquired through a four-year program of high school study. Nearly 15% of all high school diplomas issued each year in the U.S. are acquired through this testing process.

There are a number of higher education institutions that have been serving the adult learner population for many years and they have developed their own brand of PLA methodologies. For example, the Community College of Vermont offers a portfolio development course for APL credit. Following completion of their portfolios, students submit them to the Vermont State Colleges Office of External Programs for assessment by specially arranged advanced standing committees. These committees recommend college transfer credits which can be used at any college within the State College system as well as at other institutions within and outside Vermont. There is no maximum to the number of credits allowed and candidates do not have to be enrolled in degree programs at the time of their assessment. Portfolios are also prepared for career advancement, to qualify for pay increases, to meet personal goals or simply to identify college-level learning. Since its inception in 1976, over 6,000 adults have gone through the program.

Thomas Edison State College programs are designed for self-directed adult learners. Students initially use self-assessment guides and electronic portfolios to demonstrate their

prior learning on a course by course basis. Students are encouraged to locate courses from any regionally accredited college or university that reflect their prior learning. They then prepare their portfolios based on the course outlines associated with those courses. Thomas Edison conducts assessments of these portfolios and grants academic credit where the required learning has been satisfactorily demonstrated.

Employers may also provide or facilitate the assessment of workers' prior learning through their human resource or training departments. Projects are often initiated with assistance from CAEL which acts in a consulting capacity. CAEL also develops materials for assessment programs, conducts training for staff involved in PLA and sponsors research related to assessment.

### **Funding structures and levels**

Funding for PLA services is generally the responsibility of individual educational institutions. Assessment fees are normally charged to the individuals undertaking assessment.

### **Quality assurance**

Educational institutions and workplaces are responsible for the quality of their own PLA assessments and services. However, the U.S. has a national system of accreditation for colleges and universities which can influence their PLA processes. Six regional Commissions are voluntary, non-governmental membership associations that define, maintain and promote excellence across institutions by accrediting whole institutions. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education and the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Higher Education Commission are two examples of Commissions that sets out principles, standards and guidelines for awarding credit for experiential learning through PLA.

CAEL has also played an important role in facilitating quality assurance in PLA. In 1989, CAEL published ten academic and administrative standards for assessing prior learning in colleges and universities. These have been used extensively by institutions and by accreditation commissions as a foundation for their PLA policies and procedures. These guidelines were updated and re-published by CAEL in 2006.



CAEL conducts training for organizations interested in offering PLA services. CAEL has also recently developed a web-based PLA training program (five workshops, each with four to six modules) in collaboration with the Office of Distance Learning at DePaul University in Illinois. It provides PLA practitioners with basic tools to develop the skills and procedures needed for assessing adults' prior learning.

CAEL has also produced an Adult Learning Focused Institution (ALFI) toolkit that provides colleges and universities with evaluation tools to administer and gauge the extent to which they are serving the needs of adult learners. An institutional self-assessment survey and a student survey provide information on, among other things, institutional capacity and success in assessing the prior learning of their students.

The National Institute for the Assessment of Experiential Learning (NIAEL) is an additional facilitator of quality assurance in PLA for post-secondary institutions. Sponsored by Thomas Edison State College, the Institute is an annual professional development event for college and university faculty and staff from across the country.

### **OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS**

Research into PLAR activities is limited but a recent CAEL survey reports that 66% of college and university administrators accept portfolio assessments for academic credit. This is an increase from 55% ten years ago.

Standardized tests are heavily used as indicators of prior learning. About 616,000 individuals completed the GED in 2006. Thousands of corporate courses and programs have been assessed for credit recommendations. About 2,900 colleges grant credit or advanced standing for CLEP examinations.

### **ISSUES**

PLA has been the subject of academic inquiry through several doctoral dissertations undertaken at universities throughout the country. These studies tend to focus on practices and attitudes of faculty, staff and students at colleges and universities. Generally, findings indicate a low level of uptake of PLA among institutions and concerns centered on awareness, time required/workload, cost and quality.

## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

American Council on Education website available at <http://www.acenet.edu//AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>

College Board website available at <http://www.collegeboard.com/testing/>

Community College of Vermont website available at <http://www.ccv.edu/apl>

Council for Adult and Experiential Learning website available at <http://www.cael.org/pla.htm>

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**APPENDIX D**

**Standards and Principles for PLAR**

# Prior Learning Assessment

## Ten Standards for Assessing Learning

1. Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
3. Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
4. The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
5. Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
6. If awards are for credit, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies, procedures, and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and the state of the assessment arts.

Taken from *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures (Second Edition)* by Morry Fiddler, Catherine Marienau, and Urban Whitaker, 2006. Chicago, Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

Source: [www.cael.org](http://www.cael.org)



## PRINCIPLES FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR) FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT OR OTHER FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS

### Definition of PLAR

PLAR is based on a belief/value system that supports opportunities for individuals to have all relevant learning recognized and counted towards a qualification. It is consistent with other strategies that support diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning.

Prior learning may be acquired through academic study, work, or other formal and informal learning activities. When used to earn formal qualifications, PLAR is a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes learning (knowledge and skills) that cannot be fully recognized through the traditional mechanisms of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, or accreditation.

### PLAR Principles

Principles are concepts that can guide policy and practice. The following PLAR principles were developed by the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) following extensive examination and synthesis of PLAR principles and processes used by educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and governments across Canada and in other countries. These principles can be used to develop criteria for valid PLAR processes for academic credit or other formal qualifications.

#### Accessibility

PLAR is a tool for facilitating access – access to education, employment, promotion, and occupational licensing/certification. The purpose of PLAR is to provide alternative mechanisms to identify, verify, and recognize knowledge and skills acquired through non-sponsored learning (e.g. work).

#### Accountability

Many organizations are accountable to the public and to government for their operations. This accountability requires formal policies and practices that frame PLAR activities and ensure evaluation of the process and its outcomes.

#### Criterion-referencing

Prior learning assessment and recognition is criterion-referenced. That is, candidate knowledge and skills must be identified and measured against pre-set standards. Standards ensure consistent results even if assessment methods and tools vary.

#### Efficiency

Pressures created by uncertainties in applicant volume and the high cost of assessment require efficient PLAR processes to ensure affordability for candidates and assessing agencies.

#### Equity

PLAR is intended to treat candidates equally without discrimination based on the source of their learning. To be equitable, the PLAR process should hold candidates to the same standard of competency or qualification as individuals who have not undertaken PLAR. PLAR should not involve assessment processes that are more rigorous than assessment of knowledge and skills through more traditional means.

**Fairness**

In order to maximize candidates' opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and judgment, the PLAR process should reflect sensitivity to relevant adult learning theory. This principle is also the foundation for other principles such as access, equity, transparency, and right of appeal.

**Legality**

Many organizations engaged in PLAR are responsible for ensuring compliance with legislation. PLAR should fit within the legal frameworks that guide organizational operations.

**Quality**

The quality of the PLAR process relates to the relevance, level, currency, and sufficiency of candidates' prior learning. The qualifications of prior learning assessors should reflect an expertise in PLAR and the subject area of the assessment.

**Right of Appeal**

Candidates should have the right to appeal unsuccessful assessments of their prior learning through a formal process.

**Transparency**

In democratic societies, the public has a right to be informed about processes and decisions that have an impact on their lives. Details on the PLAR process, its purpose, criteria and steps, and the factors upon which PLAR decisions are made, should be made available to candidates.

**Validity and Reliability**

Measurement experts agree that assessment tool validity is tied to the purposes for which an assessment is used. Thus, a test might be valid for one purpose but inappropriate for other purposes. The results of assessments should be constant over time and assessors. The reliability and validity of PLAR methods and tools are critical to its credibility and should be evaluated.

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Source: [www.cirl.org](http://www.cirl.org)

## **EUROPEAN GUIDELINES**

The fundamental principles underpinning validation:

8. Validation must be voluntary.
9. The privacy of individuals should be respected.
10. Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed.
11. Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation.
12. Systems should contain mechanism for guidance and counselling of individuals.
13. Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance.
14. The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.
15. Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation.
16. The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest.
17. The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

Source: European Guidelines on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning, First Draft November 2007. Education and Culture (EU) and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).

**APPENDIX E**

**Halifax Declaration for the  
Recognition of Prior Learning**

**2001**



# Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning 2001\*

## Preamble

Throughout the planning and implementation stages of the Recognizing Learning - Building Canada's future prosperity. A Call to Action! conference, organizers consulted with stakeholders from a wide range of groups and organizations across Canada involved with prior learning assessment (PLA) and qualification recognition (QR)\*\*. In addition, the conference's National Advisory Committee (business, labour and community groups, the education and training sector, groups seeking equity, federal, provincial/territorial government representatives and other national organizations) brought their expertise and ideas to the table.

Without exception, there was overwhelming support for a 'legacy' outcome from the Recognizing Learning conference! As the event began to take shape over an eighteen month period, the desire to articulate some concrete direction for the future became clear. To that end, several processes and activities were put in place to solicit the views of the conference participants and their ideas for a plan of action. The conference participant survey and an on-site focus group, along with workshop discussions recorded throughout the three days, provided an independent 'action research' project focused upon the event. The results of these activities and consultations form the basis of this "Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning". It is hoped that the leadership, passion and commitment of the conference participants to the field of prior learning assessment and qualification recognition, as articulated in the Declaration, will provide a vision and action plan for future development in Canada.

## The Declaration...

We, the participants of the Joint National Conference for Prior Learning Assessment and Qualification Recognition, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, October 28-31, 2001 affirm the following principles and actions.

## We believe that...

**A. The recognition of prior learning is fundamental to a lifelong learning culture.** Within such a culture, society's formal educational institutions are only a part of the resources for the education of the individual. The home, the community, the workplace, one's social and recreational activities and other aspects of life are all settings for learning activities.

The 21st century represents an extraordinary economic environment that includes significant demographic shifts, restructuring of economies and institutions, critical skills shortages, global competition for skilled workers, increased immigration and the relentless progress of technology. In order to maintain quality of life and achieve our goals for economic prosperity, we must support and recognize continuous lifelong learning in all its forms. In so doing, we promote full labour market participation, social inclusion, individual empowerment and equity for all people.

When individuals are able to demonstrate that they have obtained the necessary knowledge and skills, regardless of where or how that learning has been acquired, appropriate learning credentials must be awarded. Educational institutions, occupational bodies and employers should provide such recognition and accreditation.

**B. All learning should be recognized or considered for recognition by educational, professional and work organizations.** People who move to Canada or move within the country should have a fair opportunity to have their credentials recognized. It is understood that courses, programs and evaluation practices will vary from place to place, institution to institution and from country to country. But such differences cannot be used to discount the overall learning outcomes derived from such experiences and opportunities. Credentials gained from learning in one setting should be recognized in other settings, thereby becoming stepping stones rather than obstacles to labour market participation, career advancement or further learning. The non-recognition of prior learning - domestic, international, formal or informal- is costly to the individual, the economy and to society at large.

**C. Canadians including immigrants to Canada should have the right to have their prior learning assessed and recognized.** We are aware that the recognition of international qualifications and the assessment of prior learning is a complex undertaking and one which requires competent and knowledgeable advisors, facilitators and assessors. We also know that over the past decade Canada, through innovative and successful pilot projects and programs, has developed a variety of effective methodologies and techniques to recognize learning in all its forms and settings. Policy and systems support now need to be put in place to further enhance this work and to provide accessible and flexible applications of these approaches. With national/ provincial/territorial leadership and collaborative participation by other sectoral and community stakeholders, the development and utilization of resources, strategies and tools can be done in a consistent and efficient way so that everyone can benefit.

## **In order for these principles to be realized the following actions are necessary:**

**1. Dedicated funding for the recognition of prior learning must be provided.** Post-secondary educational institutions will need incentives to attend to the recognition, educational and training needs of adult Canadians and newcomers to Canada, because of existing funding models and capacity limitations. Without dedicated funding for adult learning programs, counseling and assessment services, adults run the risk of not having their existing learning recognized and assessed. This serves not only as a disincentive within a lifelong learning culture, but may actually require adult learners to start back at the beginning, each time they return to the formal educational system or commence new training programs.

The same holds true for occupational bodies, which have limited funds to develop appropriate evaluation systems for those seeking certification and licensure and for employers who want to build upon rather than duplicate what their employees already know and can do. Greater understanding of and information about recognition and assessment practices of both formally and informally acquired knowledge and skills is needed, along with overall coordination amongst a wide range of stakeholders. There are many successful examples such as bridging programs and credit for workplace training that have helped to reduce the problem of the duplication of learning. These must be woven into the fabric of Canada's learning recognition system. Resources used for the recognition of learning must be made available to those who require them.

**2. National Standards and criteria for practice must be developed and maintained in order to ensure high quality PLAR/QR services and programs and the widespread recognition of their outcomes.** In order to ensure that the assessment of prior learning is done in an effective, efficient and equitable way, it is imperative that standards of practice and accreditation for international credential evaluation and prior learning assessment and recognition be developed and implemented. Such standards are quite common in the evaluation of student learning in the elementary and secondary educational system and they must be developed for the adult learning recognition system. Nationally acceptable standards and quality practices must be made available so that the recognition of learning becomes the platform upon which Canada's adult learning culture and training system is based. We can learn from international standards and best practices of evaluation. In this way, transferability and labour mobility will be achieved and/or enhanced.

**3. National leadership must be identified and supported.** There must be a national voice that speaks to the recognition of prior learning in Canada. An existing organization such as the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) or some new collaborative body is needed so that the adult learning recognition system becomes the platform upon which a lifelong learning culture is based. In particular, advocacy and support must be provided on a national scale. This would ensure that Canada's adult learning, international credential and qualification recognition system is made available to newcomers to Canada, early in the immigration process, thereby facilitating fair and equitable access to the Canadian labour force or to further education/training opportunities required to fill possible skill gaps. The business case for the cost-benefit advantages of recognizing learning must also be further developed and articulated as part of a sustainable labour force development strategy in Canada.

**4. The federal government must provide leadership and support in order to develop and sustain these important initiatives.** The Government of Canada has an important role to play through the coordination of its various departments and the provision of the necessary financial resources to advance and sustain the recognition agenda across the country. Provincial and territorial governments also have key roles to play, along with other stakeholders with decision-making authority such as regulatory bodies.

Both orders of government must invest in an adult learning system. Collaboration amongst governments and other stakeholders to support the recognition of learning will ensure that Canada remains a fair and equitable society - one in which

all its citizens have access to the learning recognition and credentialing systems and hence to a meaningful attachment to the labour force. While respecting the jurisdictional reality, such cooperation and leadership will build capacity within communities and promote growth and prosperity for individual Canadians and the country as a whole.

While a number of these actions will take several years to implement, a start must be made now. The 'recognizing learning' field is clearly ready to move to a new level of activity and impact. The 'recognizing learning' imperatives of our economic and social circumstances demand new levels of leadership, commitment and support.

As members of this Recognizing Learning community with representatives from business, labour, professional associations, credential recognition bodies, occupational bodies, groups seeking equity, education and training providers, settlement services and governments, we commit ourselves to the principles and actions stated above. We will continue to play an active role within our communities to advance the recognition of prior learning and look forward to meeting again in 2003, to review progress toward this important national goal.

## Notes

This Declaration is based primarily on the 'Call to Action' survey results which may be found on the conference web site at [www.placentre.ns.ca](http://www.placentre.ns.ca). Additional commentary provides context and was derived from many sources throughout the conference, including 'action research' findings, focus group discussions and workshop notes. While we believe that the Halifax Declaration is an accurate reflection of those who participated in these 'opinion-gathering' activities, it does not necessarily represent the views of every conference participant, each member of the National Advisory Committee or the organizations and governments they represent.

\* \*

The term 'recognition of prior learning' as referenced in this Declaration, is used in an inclusive way and represents recognition practices undertaken in the fields of both prior learning assessment and qualification recognition. Qualification recognition includes but is not limited to, international credential recognition.

Source: [www.placentre.ns.ca](http://www.placentre.ns.ca)

## APPENDIX F

# IMPEDIMENTS TO ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPATION

**Van Kleef, J. (2006). Building PLAR through theory: The case for implementing prior learning assessment and recognition in adult education practice settings. Unpublished Master of Adult Education thesis. St. Francis Xavier University.**

## IMPEDIMENTS TO ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPATION

Impediments to adult learner participation in PLAR have been documented in several studies in Canada and the United States. In the largest Canadian study ever undertaken, Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Lamarre, et al. (2003) found some of the most significant factors were that the PLAR process is too time-consuming (38%) and complicated (33%). The most commonly reported reason for non-participation was that it was “not a good time for their families or themselves” (37%) (p. 49). The study’s researchers considered this expression of difficulty with personal and family circumstances to be an important contributing factor to non-participation – possibly suggesting that, for many people, existing PLAR processes just will not work for them. Added to these factors was the mistaken perception by almost 30% of respondents that they had thought that experience alone would be sufficient evidence to be awarded credit. Similarly, 36% of respondents reported that the cost of assessments would also have to be reduced before they would consider undertaking PLAR.

Factors affecting adult learners who are considering or engaging in PLAR are similar to those which they face in returning to formal postsecondary education. Cross (1981) has written extensively on barriers to education, including prior learning assessment, and offers a useful framework for discussing barriers to PLAR. She suggests that there are three types of barriers to education: situational, institutional, and dispositional. Situational barriers are circumstances that have a negative impact on the lives of adult learners, such as lack of financial resources to attend college. Institutional barriers are day-to-day operating procedures of an education provider, such as limited course offerings and rigid class schedules. Dispositional barriers could also be called psychological barriers, such as a learner’s lack of self-esteem. Barriers faced by learners before and during the PLAR process are reasonably well documented and can be easily referenced by using Cross’s categories.

**Situational barriers** that have been identified are: lack of time, lack of money to undertake PLAR, the pressures of work, and home responsibilities (Smith, 2002), fatigue, and the lack of child care, transportation, place to study, and family emotional support (Cross, 1981; Smith, 2002).

Institutional barriers to PLAR include

- low awareness among administrators, faculty and students (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner-Howarth, et al., 1999; Harriger, 1991; Raulf, 1992; Thomas, 2001);
- insufficient information such as course outlines, calendars and sample portfolios (Kent, 1996);
- lack of learner counseling and feedback from faculty following assessment (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Lamarre, et al., 2003; Thomas, 2001; Wheelehan et al., 2003);
- inconsistent PLAR policies and their application (Harriger, 1991; Thomas, 2001);
- PLAR availability limited to specific programs or a percentage of a program (Freers, 1994; Raulf, 1992);
- inadequate availability of class time for subsequent courses (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner-Howarth, et al., 1999; Harriger, 1991);
- negative attitudes by faculty (Harriger, 1991; Raulf, 1992; Wolfson, 1996);
- high assessment fees (Cross, 1981);
- inconsistent PLAR assessment fees (Topping, 1996);
- subsequent loss of full-time student status and associated financial aid, complex and time-consuming PLAR processes, and limited assessment method options (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Lamarre, et al., 2003; Wheelehan et al., 2003)

Dispositional barriers to PLAR include:

- low learner self-confidence, (Topping, 1996);
- concerns about age and classroom environments, and learner perceptions that PLAR is too difficult, time-consuming (Kent, 1996); and undervalued by institutions and employers (Fisher, 1991).
- An additional dispositional barrier may be lack of interest. While there are no data available on the extent to which lack of interest in PLAR affects participation, it does reduce participation in education (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2002) and it is important that educators not assume that every adult interested in returning to formal education is also interested in undertaking PLAR. Further research is needed in this area.

## IMPEDIMENTS TO INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION

The literature on factors impeding institutional participation in PLAR is limited and has not previously been synthesized. However, a review of the research suggests that a typology similar to Cross's can be developed to help educators understand the full range of impediments facing institutions. Institutions experience at least three types of impediments to offering PLAR: structural, conceptual, and contextual.

**Structural Impediments** are administrative and academic policies, practices and conditions (or lack thereof), that impede an institution's ability to undertake PLAR. They include:

- lack of or inconsistent PLAR policies, procedures and guidelines (Raulf, 1992; Topping, 1996); poor integration of PLAR into institutional budget processes (Sheckley & Warnet, 1983; Raulf, 1992);
- slow and bureaucratic PLAR procedures (Smith, 2004; Wheelehan et al., 2003);
- rigid course and program scheduling mechanisms that diminish PLAR's capacity to save learners time or shorten their programs (Raulf, 1992; Smith, 2004);
- low awareness among faculty and administrators (Raulf, 1992; Topping, 1996);
- lack of senior level support for the concept of PLAR (Keeton & Tate, 1978);
- resistance from faculty in learning new measurement procedures (Haberstadt, 1986);
- internal conflicts over who should be responsible for conducting assessments (Evans, 1995);
- inadequate planning for assessor remuneration (Harriger, 1991; MacTaggart & Knapp, 1981; Meyer, 1975; Wheelehan et al., 2003);
- the need to target faculty and staff professional development activities (McIntyre, 1981; Smith, 2004).

The literature also presents the following impediments: the need to allocate time and financial resources to support learners through the process (Dennison, 1995; Smith, 2004); and finance research and evaluation (Raulf, 1992).

**Conceptual Impediments** are philosophies, beliefs and attitudes (or lack thereof) about adult learning, adult education, and PLAR that impede an institution's ability to undertake PLAR. They include:

- a lack of theoretical underpinnings on PLAR (Topping, 1996);
- conceptual confusion surrounding the definition of PLAR and its purpose (Topping, 1996; Wheelehan et al., 2003; Smith, 2004);
- doubts that learning which occurs outside the sponsorship of an institution can be translated into academic credit (Harriger, 1991; Topping, 1996; Wolfson, 1996);
- the destabilizing effect of learning that faculty require additional training to conduct appropriate assessments (Halberstadt, 1986);
- the belief that PLAR threatens faculty job security (Fisher, 1991; Halberstadt, 1986);
- the view that only prior learning that matches the exact content of courses and programs should be credited (Harriger, 1991);
- the belief that PLAR is only appropriate at the undergraduate level (Swiczewicz, 1990; Tate, 1996).

Also included are concerns that the quality of PLAR cannot be assured, will lower standards, and place institutional credibility at risk (Butler, 1993; Halberstadt, 1986, Harriger, 1991, Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Preston, 1981; Wheelehan et al., 2003); the belief that postsecondary institutions are intended to focus primarily on teaching and learning and only secondarily the issuing of credentials (Swiczewicz, 1990); the belief that classroom experience is essential to college-level learning (Harriger, 1991; Swiczewicz, 1990; Topping, 1996); concern that PLAR sets learners up for subsequent academic failure (Harriger, 1991); the belief that adult learners are no different from youth and require no special teaching and learning strategies (Topping, 1996); and apathy by faculty and administrators about accommodating the special needs of adult learners (Harriger, 1991; Raulf, 1992; Topping, 1996).

**Contextual Impediments** are aspects of an institution's daily interface with the external world that impede its ability to undertake PLAR. They include

- low awareness among the public (Wheelehan et al., 2003);



- resistance from professional bodies and workplaces (Smith, 2004);
- public policy on education and training that ignore PLAR or promote other priorities, other institutions that do not support PLAR, and inadequate public funding for assessment development, delivery and assessor professional development (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner-Howarth, et al., 1999; Wheelehan et al., 2003);
- insufficient authority to generate revenues due to government-set tuition caps, fee caps, and funding formulae that discourage PLAR delivery (Wheelehan et al., 2003);
- government funding policies that cancel student financial aid upon successful completion of PLAR (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner-Howarth, et al., 1999).

No doubt, there are additional barriers that have not been well documented, such as institutional policies that charge learners tuition on top of prior learning assessment fees for courses in which PLAR is undertaken (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Ebner-Howarth, et al., 1999; Raulf, 1992).

The above research demonstrates that PLAR impediments facing adult learners and institutional barriers are multi-dimensional. Further research on these factors, as well as comparative research on the factors affecting participation in adult education in general, would be valuable contributions to the research in both fields.

## APPENDIX G

### LIST OF PLA CENTRE BOARD MEMBERS; LIST OF EXPERT CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

#### PLA Centre Board Members

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Biss, John	CCL	Ottawa, ON
Bloom, Michael	Conference Board	Ottawa, ON
Blower, Deb	Red River College	Winnipeg, MB
Burton, Lenore	Canada Education Savings Program	Ottawa, ON
Cappon, Paul	CCL	Ottawa, ON
Carter Rose, Shelley	NSCC	Halifax, NS
Conrad, Diane	Athabasca University	Edmonton, AB
Daniels, Leona	Industry, Training and Partnerships	Winnipeg, MB
Davison, Phil	PLA Centre Associate	Halifax, NS
Der Hooge, Justus	Education, Social Affairs and Employment	The Netherlands
Flanagan, Kathleen	ALKC - CCL Learning Centre	Fredericton, NB

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Location</b>
Fortier, Guy	Quebec Ministry of Education	Montreal, QC
Hayes, Brigid	Independent Consultant	Ottawa, ON
Hodgkinson, Douglas	CCL	Victoria, BC
Howell, Sandi	Government of MB Competitiveness, Training and Trade	Winnipeg, MB
Kenny, Mary	Can. Home Builders' Association of Alberta	Calgary, AB
Konrad, John	Konrad Associates International	London, UK
MacDonald, David	Learning Branch, HRSDC	Ottawa, ON
McGill, Alexia	Agenda Managers	Halifax, NS
Millar, Robin	Centre for Education and Work	Winnipeg, MB
Miller, Sunday	GODSun & Associates	Halifax, NS
Morrissey, Mary	PLA Centre Consultant	Halifax, NS
Myers, Douglas	PLA Centre	Halifax, NS
Patry, Robert	CCL	Ottawa, ON
Pigram, Bill	Middlesex County	Strathroy, ON
Potter, Judith	University of New Brunswick	Fredericton, NB
Sangster, Derwyn	WLKC – CCL Learning Centre	Ottawa, ON
Stanton-Jean, Michele	University of Quebec	Montreal, QC
Stephens, Alex	WLKC - CCL Learning Centre	Ottawa, ON
Taylor, Maurice	University of Ottawa	Ottawa, ON

Name	Organization	Location
Toupin, Lynne	Human Resources Council	Ottawa, ON
Wheller, Mark	EMCN	Edmonton, AB
Williams, Rick	PRAXIS Research & Consulting	Halifax, NS
Woodsworth, Patrick	Regroupement des colleges du Montréal métropolitain	Montreal, QC
Zakos, Paul	FNTI	Belleville, ON
Wefers Bettink, Paul	HRSDC	Ottawa, ON