



**Quality Assurance in PLAR  
Issues and Strategies  
for Post-secondary Institutions**

**Quality Assurance in PLAR  
Volume I**

**November 2007**

This work was funded by a contribution from the Canadian Council on Learning

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# **QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PLAR**

## **Issues and Strategies**

### **for Post-secondary Institutions**

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**November, 2007**

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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their appreciation to several organizations and individuals, all of whom made important contributions to this project. First, we express thanks to the Canadian Council on Learning for its financial support. We also wish to thank the institutions that formed the partnership to support this project for their human resources and in-kind contributions: the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and the College of Extended Learning, University of New Brunswick.

Many thanks go to the twenty-four focus group participants who shared their perspectives on the quality of their PLAR experiences. Also we appreciate the assistance given by focus group facilitators Beth Paynter at the University of New Brunswick and Paulette Traynor at the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology.

Members of the Immigrant Advisory Committee of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning generously took the time to talk with us and share their views on strategies to improve the quality of PLAR services. The input provided by the institutional experts at each of the partner institutions and the many authorities on PLAR in Canada and other countries was also invaluable.

We are grateful to the project's advisory committee, who assisted with online discussions and draft reviews of this report and the *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*. Gail Hall, Coordinator of the CAPLA Recognition for Learning Web site, was very helpful in organizing those discussions.

Finally, I would like to personally thank my colleagues Judith Potter, Kim Orynik, Marilyn Carkner, Martha Ireland, and Shirley Amichand for their hard work and support in all activities associated with this project – the *Quality Assurance in PLAR: Issues and Strategies for Post-secondary Institutions* report, the *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*, the *Quality Assurance in PLAR: Annotated Bibliography*, and the presentations prepared for sharing with other organizations in Canada, the European Union, and the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) during the knowledge-mobilization phase. The authors hope that these resources will help post-secondary institutions and government policy-makers develop robust quality assurance mechanisms for PLAR in Canada.

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## Executive Summary

In December 2005, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and the College of Extended Learning, University of New Brunswick formed a partnership to conduct research into quality assurance in prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) in post-secondary education. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) awarded the partners funding to support the preparation of an issues and strategies report, a guide to institutions, an annotated bibliography, and the dissemination of the project's findings through knowledge mobilization. This report is the fulfilment of the first of these commitments.

Empirical data collection was not within the parameters of funding for this project. Our research methodology included literature searches, semi-structured interviews with quality assurance experts at the partner institutions, focus groups with adult learners, and individual interviews with internationally educated professionals who had experienced PLAR. The purpose of these interviews was to help focus our literature research and identify issues and possible strategies for further analysis. In addition, the project established an advisory committee of educators involved in PLAR development and delivery across Canada. The professional insights gained from two structured online discussions with the committee members contributed significantly to this report.

For the purpose of this study, we defined PLAR as a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes relevant learning (knowledge and skills) that cannot be fully recognized by the traditional means of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, or accreditation. This learning may be acquired through a variety of non-formal and informal means such as work, independent study, or volunteering. The countries examined in this report share this definition although they use a variety of terms. Prior learning is acquired by youth and adults; however, this study focuses on PLAR for adults for the purpose of recognition by post-secondary institutions.

From our review of the literature on PLAR, our focus groups with adult learners, and our consultations with academic experts, immigrant professionals, and the advisory committee, we have made findings in four key areas of quality assurance in PLAR. They relate to:

1. defining quality assurance in PLAR;
2. the importance of quality assurance in PLAR;
3. a pattern of quality assurance mechanisms; and
4. two dimensions to institutional quality assurance

### **Defining Quality Assurance in PLAR**

There is no generally accepted definition of quality assurance in PLAR. For the purposes of this study, we adopted the following definition:

The establishment of and adherence to policies, processes, and assessment practices that ensure that the knowledge and skills of individual learners are recognized so that they can successfully engage in the subjects and levels of learning that contribute meaningfully to their educational and employment goals.

### **The Importance of Quality Assurance in PLAR**

The importance of having quality assurance in PLAR seems obvious. Students need to know that they are adequately prepared for future study and employment. Faculty need to know that academic standards are being maintained and that the process is an enriching one for students.

In addition, the context in which PLAR is currently operating is expanding globally, and, as it does, there is an increasing demand for criteria to assess its quality on the part of direct users and indirect beneficiaries. As employers expand their use of PLAR, either internally or in collaboration with educational institutions, their investments in the PLAR process become more obvious and they will demand evidence of its quality. Workers will want to know that the results of their assessments are valued by their employers. Regulatory bodies need to ensure that PLAR processes do not jeopardize public safety. All of these stakeholders must be able to rely on the results of PLAR. It is increasingly important that educational institutions be able to assure their partners and stakeholders that PLAR is a credible, valuable, and academically sound process.

### **A Pattern of Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

We examined the use of PLAR internationally and found a pattern in the various ways that quality assurance has been addressed. From this finding, we developed a quality assurance delivery framework based on five mechanisms that can operate independently or in combination:

1. legislation;
2. government policy;
3. collaborative mechanisms;
4. institution-based mechanisms; and
5. indirect stakeholder support.

#### ***Legislation***

Several countries, including the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands have passed legislation to ensure that prior learning is recognized by higher education institutions. Legislation tends to provide general direction, leaving the details of implementation up to government policy-makers or the education community. Quality assurance is not always addressed directly in legislation, but becomes an issue of accountability once the service is required. However, in some countries, such as Denmark, legislation has been used to assure quality. National legislation passed by the Czech Republic in August, 2007 establishes an inspection role for authorizing bodies.

#### ***Government Policy***

Government policy-makers have been attracted to PLAR because of its capacity to reduce education costs and promote access to post-secondary education and lifelong learning. Some governments have developed policies that encourage, or even require, access to PLAR services. Government policy in some countries, such as Australia, also addresses the issue of quality assurance in recognizing prior learning.

#### ***Collaboration***

In some countries, the implementation of PLAR has been initiated by members of the post-secondary education community rather than by governments. Cross-institutional collaboration was used to establish a common approach to PLAR and mechanisms to ensure its quality. In some instances, this collaboration has resulted in formal bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom, the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC), and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In other countries, informal types of collaboration and trans-national collaborations have also emerged.

#### ***Institution-based Mechanisms***

In most jurisdictions, the implementation of PLAR and the development of methods of quality assurance have been driven by the internal systems of post-secondary institutions. The United States



provides the clearest example of reliance on institutionally-based mechanisms to ensure quality. PLAR is unlegislated and institutions adopting PLAR operate without the guidance of government policy.

### ***Indirect Stakeholder Support***

Non-governmental organizations also play useful roles in promoting the quality of PLAR. One of the most influential has been the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the United States. The Council of the European Union is another example of an indirect stakeholder; it has had an important influence on the development of quality assurance in PLAR through research initiatives and, more recently, the development and publication of *Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2004).

### ***Combined Mechanisms***

France and Norway are examples of countries that have combined national PLAR legislation with institutionally based quality assurance. Two examples of a combination of government policy and institution-based mechanisms are Ireland and New Zealand.

### **Canada's Quality Assurance Mechanisms**

No provincial or territorial government has passed legislation to establish post-secondary PLAR as an individual right or to set PLAR quality standards. Nor are there stand-alone provincial policies on quality assurance. However, the governments of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec have developed general PLAR policy frameworks that either specify or embed elements of quality assurance, and Alberta is in the process of establishing one. Over the past 15 years, the federal government and all the provinces and territories have made some investment in PLAR initiation, pilot projects, research, and networking.

It is largely post-secondary institutions that determine when, how, and by whom PLAR will be managed. Collaboration is not widespread. There are no formal collaborative structures among colleges or universities, but there are a few notable examples of informal initiatives on the part of multi-stakeholder groups that incorporate quality assurance (e.g., the Association of Canadian Community Colleges' Recognition for Learning Affinity Group and the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network).

Indirect stakeholder support has been an important factor in the growth of PLAR in Canada. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, and the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers are examples of stakeholders that have promoted the use of PLAR by educational institutions and other groups.

### ***Two Dimensions to Institutional Quality Assurance***

There are two dimensions to quality assurance in PLAR at the institutional level: the first relates to policies and procedures, and the second, to assessment methods and tools. Our literature review and consultations with adult learners and institutional experts revealed four recurring perspectives relating to PLAR policies and procedures.

1. PLAR quality assurance should be part of institutions' existing program quality assurance mechanisms.
2. PLAR policies and procedures should be based on established principles.
3. Quality in PLAR procedures enhances quality in assessment decision-making.
4. Policies that require faculty and assessor training in PLAR are essential to quality assurance.

Despite the lack of research devoted to quality assurance in PLAR assessment methods and tools, Canadian practitioners and researchers have been aware of the importance of selecting and developing methods that best fit the purpose of particular assessment situations. Current Canadian practices can be divided into five main methods of assessment: written examinations in various formats, oral examinations, performance assessments, product assessments including portfolios, and external training program reviews.

### **General Conclusions**

The value that PLAR brings to learning and assessment processes is well documented. The challenge is to find ways to deliver it with quality assurance without creating an undue burden for learners and institutions. The quality assurance delivery mechanisms presented in this paper create a framework for designing PLAR strategies as well as for describing and analyzing them within and across jurisdictions.

A review of post-secondary institutions' general PLAR documentation demonstrates a mindfulness of the importance of quality; the documentation reveals the adoption of principles, policies, and procedures that embed many elements of quality assurance. However, this mindfulness has not been parlayed into explicit quality assurance policies, nor has it transitioned into mainstream quality assurance mechanisms. Colleges and universities rely primarily on the expertise of individual administrators, advisors, and faculty to provide clear, transparent procedures and valid, reliable decisions.

Overall, the attention paid to quality assurance in PLAR in Canada has been inadequate. There is a need for additional knowledge about PLAR – its risks and its potential. Additional research is also needed on how to improve PLAR practice and on PLAR's impact on learners and institutions.

### **Specific Conclusions**

1. The quality of prior learning assessment outcomes rests heavily on the qualifications of assessors – their ability to select or develop appropriate assessment tools, and to make reasonable judgments on submitted evidence. However, current post-secondary institutions do not rigorously examine faculty qualifications and practices in student assessment. Because many post-secondary faculty have no formal education in teaching or assessment, training in PLAR assessment methodologies and tools, as part of ongoing professional development, should be a critical component of institutional quality assurance.
2. Canadian institutions that actively engage in PLAR have incorporated elements of quality assurance into their PLAR practices; however, integrating PLAR into these institutions' existing academic quality assurance mechanisms (e.g., periodic program reviews) would improve its quality and the confidence of stakeholders.
3. Although integration would help to address quality assurance and raise stakeholder confidence, it is unlikely to be sufficient. Post-secondary institutions also need to develop robust measures through PLAR-specific quality assurance policies, procedures, and strategies.
4. Theoretical perspectives that acknowledge that prior learning is learner-constructed are compatible with PLAR and support the use of tools such as criterion-referenced learning outcomes and authentic assessment. Additional research is required on the theoretical underpinnings of PLAR and the impact of shifting the balance that determines who decides what learning "counts."
5. Traditional measures of quality (i.e., reliability and validity) are often difficult to apply. Clear measures of learning achievement need to be applied in all PLAR assessments even if this means finding new, more comprehensive, ways of defining quality. Such new criteria could combine traditional concepts of reliability and validity with explicit standards for assessment procedures and expected outcomes.

6. There is no generally accepted definition for quality assurance in PLAR in post-secondary education. The definition used in this paper should serve as a starting point for a much-needed discussion.

PLAR is an international practice that has evolved since the 1930s. After more than 70 years of experimentation and implementation throughout the world; there are lessons to be learned. There are strategies that have been proposed and implemented that Canadian institutions can adopt to improve the quality of assessments. A number of these strategies are presented in this report and in the companion volume, *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*.

### **Areas for Future Research**

The current lack of discourse on virtually every aspect of quality assurance in PLAR makes it difficult to identify priorities. However, throughout our research, a number of issues repeatedly emerged, which suggested the need for research in the following areas:

- How viable and valuable would a set of PLAR principles shared by Canada's 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions be?
- What is the quality of current post-secondary PLAR assessment methods and tools used by Canadian institutions?
- What are the potential effects of integrating PLAR into existing post-secondary quality assurance mechanisms?
- How could more permanent collaborations across institutions be achieved? Could a Canadian consortium be established to take a strategic approach to quality assurance in PLAR?
- What are the ethical issues and the potential impact of setting quality assurance standards for prior learning that exceed the quality of standards for classroom-based assessment?
- What should be the basis of determining quality assurance of assessments? How do the traditional concepts of validity and reliability apply to PLAR?
- What are the best assessment methodologies within particular contexts, and how can appropriate tools be developed?
- How does PLAR affect the long-term learning and employment activities of learners?
- What role can accreditation bodies play in promoting quality-assured PLAR in post-secondary programs?
- How critical is the role of advisors in the PLAR process?

New information in these areas could generate strategies to improve our understanding of the theoretical aspects of PLAR and our use of available mechanisms for quality assurance.

## Part One - Introduction

### BACKGROUND

In December 2005, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning, the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and the College of Extended Learning, University of New Brunswick formed a partnership to conduct research into quality assurance in PLAR in post-secondary education. The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) awarded the partners funding to support the preparation of an issues and strategies report, a *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*, an annotated bibliography, and the dissemination of the project's findings through knowledge mobilization. This report is the fulfillment of the first of these commitments.

For the purpose of this study, we defined PLAR as a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes relevant learning (knowledge and skills) that cannot be fully recognized by the traditional means of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, or accreditation. This learning may have been acquired through a variety of non-formal, or informal means such as work, independent study, or volunteering. The countries examined in this report share this definition although they use a variety of terms. Prior learning is acquired by youth and adults; however, this study focuses on PLAR for adults for the purpose of recognition by post-secondary institutions.

Quality assurance in post-secondary education has received growing attention in recent years as institutions and governments struggle to respond to education's increasingly global context, characterized by the development of national qualification frameworks and new practices in distance education, trans-national education, international education, foreign credential recognition, and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR).

For the most part, quality assurance mechanisms in higher education have focused on institutions' capacity to conduct research and fulfil teaching requirements, rather than on the assessment and verification of learning. The project partners shared a concern that limited attention to quality assurance in PLAR processes and assessments may contribute to its slow growth in Canadian post-secondary institutions. This concern is fuelled by reservations expressed by educators in many jurisdictions about the quality of prior learning and the ability of institutions to conduct assessments (Butler, 1993; Harriger, 1991; Mann, 1997; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Preston, 1981; Sadler, 1987; Simosko, 1991; Wheelahan et al., 2003).

The value of PLAR depends on its credibility. To support our position on the need to supply quality assurance, we refer in the following sections to a number of studies that describe its chief benefits and beneficiaries.

#### ***The Value of PLAR to Learners***

From an adult learner's perspective, an overwhelming benefit of PLAR is the sense of value it gives to learning acquired through life and work experience. According to a study of 1,000 adult learners by Aarts et al. (2003), PLAR enhances learners' self-esteem, confidence in their capacity to learn, and motivation to complete programs of study. It also promotes learners' access to post-secondary education. By awarding academic credit or advanced standing, it saves students time and money.

In a study of Canadian university students, Thomas, Collins, and Plett (2001) reported that PLAR was a significant factor in learners' decisions to return to formal education. Aarts et al. (2003) found that adult learners considered PLAR to be an important factor in their decisions to complete their programs. This finding is supported by Pearson (2000), who studied several hundred part-time students who were eligible for PLAR credits over a ten-year period as a result of

assessments of portfolios, which they had compiled to show evidence of their prior learning. Pearson's findings indicate a strong association between successful portfolio assessment and student persistence: PLAR doubled the odds of persistence for an average student.

Mullen (1995) found that students who participated in PLA had more effective study habits and attitudes than students who did not. Factors included in the study were promptness in completing academic assignments; lack of procrastination; freedom from wasteful delay and distraction; effective studying procedures; positive attitudes toward teachers and their classroom behaviour and methods; and acceptance of institutional objectives, practices, and requirements. Freers (1994) studied PLA at a community college in the United States and reported that 70% of respondents reported a greater number of employment opportunities as a result of the PLAR process and 55% attributed offers of better-paying jobs to PLAR. Furthermore, 69% anticipated an increase in the amount of salary that they would probably earn in their lifetime as a result of the process.

### ***The Value of PLAR to Institutions***

From an institutional perspective, PLAR has both academic and administrative value. Pearson's (2000) finding of a positive association between receiving credit for prior learning and student persistence demonstrates that PLAR has economic benefits for institutions as well as learners. Caldwell (1977) also reported that students who received one year's advanced standing through standardized testing of their prior learning were not disadvantaged in any way and graduated at the same rate as other students. These students also took advanced courses at the same rate and received the same range of grades as students who entered without advanced standing. Arnold (1998) provides a succinct statement of the views of university faculty: they believe that PLAR results in improved quality of teaching and learning through the facilitation of critical reflection, self-directed learning, and personal and career development.

From an administrative perspective, research suggests that PLAR has the potential to improve efficiency in the use of human and material educational resources. Because students are not required to attend courses for which they already have the required learning, duplication of learning is eliminated, and teaching staff and other resources can be reallocated as needed. In this manner, institutions can serve more learners. Evans (1995) concluded that faculty and management believe that PLAR enhances the image of educational institutions in terms of their capacity to serve adult learners.

These findings suggest that to the extent that post-secondary institutions are fiscally accountable to government and their communities, and accountable to graduates for the quality of their educational services, PLAR is a useful tool.

### ***The Value of PLAR to Government Policy-Makers***

From a government policy perspective, the value of PLAR rests in the opportunity it presents for governments to accelerate labour market entry and employment, facilitate immigrant integration and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, and promote strategies that support lifelong learning. Since the early 1990s, most Canadian provincial and territorial governments have directly supported PLAR initiatives in education by providing initial implementation support, sponsorship of special events, and funding for pilot projects, conferences, consultations, and networking.

### ***PLAR's Social Value***

In the field of adult education, PLAR is more than a vehicle for improving institutional access, granting academic credits or advanced standing, and recognizing occupational or employment potential. Thomas (2000) argues that the implications of PLAR are revolutionary because it highlights the difference between learning and education, and challenges the historic distinctions between the education of the young and the education of adults, and between formal and non-

formal education. According to Thomas, PLAR acknowledges the creation of "important" knowledge outside the educational system and calls into question the previously exclusive right of closed systems to control the learning environment. The implications of such a change of attitude are far-reaching for Canada's educational system and for Canadian society.

Michelson (1997) expresses an even more radical view: in the context of Recognition of Prior Learning's (RPL) potential to transform South Africa's former epistemology of apartheid. Michelson argues that recognition of prior learning "fosters radical social transformation because it destabilizes the division between 'intellectual' and merely 'manual' labour and thus undermines the hierarchies of class, race and gender that support and are supported by that divide." RPL recognizes that learning is acquired through immersion in human activity and not in socially isolated contexts" and "it challenges the monopoly of knowledge that is the hallmark of the traditional academy." In other words, the value of learning is not solely determined by traditional academia. She points out, however, that while RPL recognizes alternative sources of knowledge, it has not yet challenged the notion that the university is the sole legitimate arbiter for what is or is not creditable. It has therefore not provided an opportunity to enrich academic learning with alternative ways of knowing or to value knowledge for its difference from, rather than its similarity to, academic expertise." Michelson has applied the theories of Friere (1970) and Mezirow (1991) to the specific contest of interest groups: PLAR is presented as a means of reconstructing social, economic, and educational recognition structures of whole societies based on a collective reassessment of values and needs.

Harris (1999) shares Thomas and Michelson's view that PLAR is not fulfilling its potential as a catalyst for the expansion of learning recognition throughout the world. She aptly states that "The gatekeepers have widened the gates slightly in terms of greater flexibility regarding the site of knowledge production but care is taken not to let any actual outsider knowledge slip through unnoticed." Harris developed three models of RPL, one of which she labels "Trojan-horse" RPL for its capacity to value prior learning for what it is, rather than for how it meets the requirements of traditional academia. Such a change in attitude would translate into greater recognition of general credit by institutions, the development of other RPL processes that emphasize equivalency of learning, the modification of curriculum design processes, and pedagogical practices that critically engage participants in the integration of theory, practice, and curricula.

Based on the literature, it appears that some of the most important implications of PLAR for education are as follows: it promotes confidence in adults' learning capacities; it facilitates adult learner persistence in formal education; and, perhaps most significantly, it challenges the academy's traditional power to limit creditable learning to institutionally sponsored learning. To radical theorists, the greatest obstacle to PLAR has been society's continued acceptance of the academic credit as the primary currency for learning recognition, thereby limiting PLAR's potential as a tool for social transformation.

These commendations of PLAR, however, do not resolve a number of quality assurance concerns. The aims of this report are to identify key issues involved in defining and assessing the quality of PLAR, and to propose strategies to improve its quality and strengthen its value to stakeholders. We examine mechanisms used by different jurisdictions to achieve quality assurance and address two dimensions of PLAR: first, its policies and procedures, and, second, its assessment methods and tools. The primary audiences for this report are institutions interested in improving their PLAR practice and government policy-makers who have a role to play in ensuring accountability. We also anticipate that our findings will encourage educators to pursue further research and the development of new assessment methods and tools. We further hope that adult learners will come to know what to look for when applying to academic institutions for quality assessments of their prior learning.

## METHODOLOGY

Empirical data collection was not within the parameters of funding for this project. Our research methodology included literature searches, semi-structured interviews with quality assurance experts at the partner institutions, focus groups with adult learners, individual interviews with internationally educated professionals who had experienced PLAR, and online discussion sessions with educators involved in PLAR development and delivery. We focused on three subject areas: PLAR; quality assurance in post-secondary education; and quality assurance in assessment. Given the vast scope of these fields and the limited resources of the project, we restricted our research to sources that were directly relevant to quality assurance in PLAR processes, and assessment methods and tools.

We combined traditional literature searches in libraries and by means of document retrieval services with contemporary literature searches using search engines, Web sites and Internet communications with authors, experts, and institutions. To obtain relevant literature on quality assurance in post-secondary education and quality assurance in assessment, we relied primarily on referrals obtained from our semi-structured interviews and our Internet search. At St. Francis Xavier University library and UMI Microform, we obtained dissertations on PLAR, using the key words "PLA" and "PLAR." With the assistance of the library services of Ryerson University, we searched databases using ERIC, Academic Search Primer, ProQuest, ABI, and RDS Business Reference Suite for publications, using the key terms "prior learning," "quality assurance," and "PLAR." This search identified the following peer-reviewed journals, which were searched for relevant articles, using the key term "prior learning."

- *American Journal of Evaluation*
- *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*
- *British Educational Research Journal*
- *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*
- *Higher Education Research & Development*
- *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management*
- *Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education*
- *Quality Assurance in Education*
- *Quality in Higher Education*

The bibliographies of *PLAR State of the Field* (Wihak, 2005) and the *Inventory of Recognizing Non-formal and Informal Learning in Europe* (2005) were also searched for relevant literature.

We conducted a Web-based literature search of the sites of the following key international research organizations: the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Commission, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), using the key terms "APEL," "PLAR," "PLA," "RPL," "quality assurance," and "non-formal learning." These searches led us to literature on PLAR practices in several countries including Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The Web sites of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) and the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC) were searched using the same key terms. The Web sites of several universities and colleges across Canada were searched for publications on quality assurance and PLAR.

The collection of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) was searched for all publications and unpublished reports on quality assurance in PLAR, particularly in Canada and the United States. International authors of publications that could not be readily located were contacted directly via the Internet to obtain the publications and locate relevant literature noted in their bibliographies. We reviewed all literature on PLAR and quality assurance in post-secondary education identified in this search to determine its relevance to the questions established as the basis for our research.

In addition to the literature search, we held focus groups at each of the partner institutions with adult learners who had experience with PLAR. A total of 24 learners (5 male and 19 female) participated in three semi-structured discussions on the quality of their PLAR experiences. They came from a range of educational programs, including nursing, business administration, social work, dietetics, political science, dental hygiene, corrections, office education, building systems, educational assistance, and hotel and restaurant management. The focus group held at Ryerson University was comprised of internationally educated professionals who engaged in portfolio-based PLAR as part of bridging programs which helped them transition to working in the Canadian context. The protocol and questions used in these focus groups and a report synthesizing the results are included in Appendix A. The input provided by focus group participants informed our analysis and our development of suggested strategies to improve PLAR.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews with educators from each of our institutional partners who were identified as experts in quality assurance. These interviews provided additional insight into existing quality assurance mechanisms and their potential application to PLAR. The names and positions of the interviewees and the questions guiding these interviews are included in Appendix B. Their contribution is also represented throughout this report and played a critical role in our conclusions and suggested strategies.

Interviews were also held with internationally educated professionals who had experience with PLAR. These PLAR candidates encountered particular difficulties in demonstrating their prior learning. To gain their input, the project's lead partner, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL), interviewed members of its Immigrant Advisory Committee on an individual basis. The questions guiding these discussions and a report synthesizing the results are included in Appendix C. The information obtained from these interviews also informed our analysis and our development of suggested strategies.

The project established an advisory committee of PLAR practitioners across Canada. Two structured online discussions with the committee were used to obtain professional insights. The advisory committee's membership is included in Appendix D.

The following questions guided our research and analysis:

- What do we mean by quality assurance in PLAR?
- What key issues does the research reveal about quality assurance in PLAR?
- What are the implications of these issues?
- What specific strategies can we use to improve the quality of prior learning assessments?
- What areas should be targeted for further academic and applied research?

Before entering into a detailed discussion of quality assurance in PLAR, it is necessary to clarify the key terminology used in this report.

## **TERMINOLOGY**

Internationally, "post-secondary" is not a commonly used modifier of "education". "Higher" "vocational," and, "tertiary" are often preferred. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this project, we have used the most common Canadian term – "post-secondary education" – to refer to formal education at public colleges, universities, university/colleges, and institutes recognized by relevant provincial authorities across Canada.

PLAR has many different names throughout the world. They even vary across provinces in Canada. Common international acronyms are APEL, APL, RDA, RPL, PLA, PLAR, VAE, and EVC. Some international organizations use the term – "recognition of non-formal and informal learning". For Canadian activities, we use the term that is most commonly used in Canada, "prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). An acronym glossary in Appendix E helps to clarify the terminology used throughout this report.



## THE CURRENT CONTEXT IN CANADA

PLAR first emerged in Canada at a small number of colleges in the late 1970s and early 1980s. An overview of its historical development is presented in Appendix F. It illustrates the various catalysts of PLAR development and the contexts in which strategies for quality assurance must operate. In most provinces, government policy has been a significant force in promoting (sometimes driving) PLAR implementation, generally in the interest of increasing access to education, accelerating labour market entry, and improving social cohesion. In provinces such as British Columbia, financial incentives were used to entice institutions to implement PLAR; in other provinces, such as Ontario and Quebec, mandatory PLAR services in colleges were introduced. Some institutions offer PLAR as a means of increasing access; others use it to promote lifelong learning. In some cases, institutions support PLAR for its value in boosting individual learner confidence and reflective abilities.

Today, three provinces (Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Quebec) have government policy frameworks relating to PLAR, and Alberta is in the process of establishing one. These frameworks provide the rationale for government policy support for PLAR and include statements of principles and guidelines for educational institutions. Over the past 15 years, the federal government and all provinces and territories have invested to some degree in funding initial implementations, pilot projects, research, and networking. Two provinces (Ontario and Quebec) provide ongoing funding for assessment delivery at colleges.

Notwithstanding government policy involvement, it is largely post-secondary institutions that determine when, how, and by whom PLAR will be managed. Most community colleges offer PLAR in at least some of their programs. It is still not readily available at universities, although, increasingly, there are related institutional policies. Some universities are implementing PLAR in a limited number of programs; a very few offer it in all programs.

Reliable data on the number of assessments conducted by Canada's post-secondary institutions are unavailable. Where data are available, they suggest that in Canada, as in other countries, PLAR activity falls below expectations despite the establishment of government and institutional policies. Two cross-Canada studies on PLAR (in 1999 and 2003) found low numbers of assessments in all of the colleges involved. A review of Ontario's college statistics yields similar results (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2005). In 2003, the OECD reported that, in Canada, the national and provincial rhetoric about the importance of PLAR has not been matched by comparable institutional activity at the local level. This finding is supported by observations in other recent Canadian reports (Wihak, 2007).

## Part Two – Research Findings

From our review of the literature on PLAR, our focus groups with adult learners, and our consultations with academic experts, we have made findings in four key areas relating to quality assurance, which will be discussed in the following sections:

1. defining quality assurance in PLAR;
2. the importance of quality assurance in PLAR;
3. a pattern of quality assurance mechanisms; and
4. two dimensions to institutional quality assurance.

### DEFINING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PLAR

There is no generally accepted definition of quality assurance in PLAR. The meaning of “quality” can vary according to the interests of particular stakeholders (Harvey & Green, 1993). For example, the government’s interest in PLAR as a means to reduce the costs of education and accelerate the production of a workforce that meet labour demands, is different from an educator’s interest (PLAR encourages graduates to have confidence in their prior learning and capacity to perform). These interests both reflect reasonable expectations, but they involve different standards for determining quality. The fact that PLAR can serve both interests creates a challenging context in which to establish quality standards.

To determine what constitutes quality assurance in PLAR, we need to be clear about PLAR’s purpose. There is general agreement among PLAR proponents that the purpose of PLAR in post-secondary education is:

To recognize the existing knowledge and skills of individual adult learners so that they can successfully engage in the subjects and levels of learning that contribute meaningfully to their educational and employment goals.

For the purposes of this study, quality assurance in PLAR is similarly defined as:

The establishment of and adherence to policies, processes, and assessment practices that ensure that the knowledge and skills of individual learners are recognized so that they can successfully engage in the subjects and levels of learning that contribute meaningfully to their educational and employment goals.

This definition focuses on the learner as the most important stakeholder in PLAR and indicates the direction that quality assurance strategies should take. It also provides the necessary flexibility to interpret the context of recognition as both personal and public.

Research to determine the defining characteristics of quality assurance in PLAR is active internationally. For example, *Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* were developed with the support of the Council for the European Union in 2004. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training reports that since their publication a number of European countries have used these principles for national initiatives and have found them to provide a useful checklist for the development of high quality, credible approaches to validation of prior learning. More detailed guidelines, which identify the key elements of quality assurance, are currently being drafted (CEDEFOP, 2007). At this stage, these guidelines include the following:

1. Quality assurance policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training systems.
2. Quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions.

3. Quality assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions or programs by external monitoring bodies or agencies.
4. External monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance should be subject to regular review.
5. Quality assurance should include context, input, process, and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.
6. Quality assurance systems should include the following elements:
  - clear and measurable objectives and standards;
  - guidelines for implementation including stakeholder involvement;
  - appropriate resources;
  - consistent evaluation methods (including self-assessments and external reviews);
  - feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement; and
  - widely accessible evaluation results.
7. Quality assurance initiatives at international, national, and regional levels should be coordinated in order to ensure coherence, synergy, and system-wide analysis.
8. Quality assurance should involve co-operation among all education and training levels and systems, and should involve all relevant stakeholders, within Member States and across community stakeholders.
9. Quality assurance guidelines at the community level may provide a reference for developing evaluation criteria and peer learning initiatives.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PLAR**

The importance of having quality assurance in PLAR seems obvious. Students need to know that they are adequately prepared for future study and employment. Faculty need to know that academic standards are being maintained and that the process is an enriching one for students.

In addition, the context in which PLAR is currently implemented is expanding globally, and as it does, there is an increasing demand for criteria to assess its quality on the part of direct users and indirect beneficiaries. As employers expand their use of PLAR, either internally or in collaboration with educational institutions, their investments in the PLAR process become more obvious and they will demand evidence that the quality of the process is a priority. Workers will want to know that the results of their assessments are valued by their employers. Regulatory bodies must ensure that PLAR processes do not jeopardize public safety. All of these stakeholders must be able to rely on the results of PLAR. It is increasingly important that educational institutions be able to assure their partners and stakeholders that PLAR is a credible, academically sound and valued process.

During our consultations we found that quality assurance is not a major concern of adult learners. Interviewees and focus group participants for example, tended to assume that their assessors were qualified to assess their prior learning. However, inadequate quality assurance in PLAR has been a persistent concern expressed by post-secondary educators and researchers throughout the world. In a survey conducted in Australia by Wheelahan et al. (2003), concern about quality assurance in the outcomes of RPL assessments are identified as the key anxiety among educators. Assessments were seen as too subjective and variable. Eighty per cent of teaching staff and 71% of administrative staff surveyed called for clearer quality assurance mechanisms. Hargreaves (2002) also reported a lack of confidence in the PLAR process and the high risks associated with invalid judgments as barriers to RPL implementation.

In a study of the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in Ireland, researchers concluded that faculty concerns about the quality of APEL assessments can lead to excessive assessment and overly cautious policies and procedures that exacerbate the already time-consuming, labour-intensive assessment strategies. The study noted that academic resistance to APEL can also lead to requests for unnecessary documentation, as well as restrictions on the type of evidence accepted. Further, some PLAR assessment methods require sophisticated conceptual skills not required by traditional learning and teaching modes, exposing a possible contradiction in levels of learning involved in APEL assessments (Murphy, 2004).

In the United States, a common concern is that PLAR will lower standards, and thus place institutional credibility and the integrity of credentials at risk (Butler, 1993; Halberstadt, 1986; Harriger, 1991; Merriam & Brockett, 1997; Preston, 1981) or set learners up for subsequent academic failure (Harriger, 1991). Mann (1997) also notes that in the United States, the issue of standards and quality control keep some educators from fully embracing PLA, and that negative or indifferent attitudes threaten the sustainability and efficiency of PLAR services.

Cohen and Whittaker (1994) contend that the issue of quality in PLA "is more a problem of implementation than one of a lack of practices and procedures for maintaining standards" (p. 37). Sadler (1987) calls for a strong assessment framework as the basis for solid and sound qualitative APEL judgments in the United Kingdom. Simosko (1991) argues that the reliability, validity, and credibility of the APEL process are chief concerns of the academic community and that traditional measures of reliability are inadequate. A concern that PLAR may lead to a decline in standards in educational institutions also served as an impetus for the development of Saskatchewan's *Recognizing Prior Learning Provincial Policy Framework* (2004).

All of these concerns speak to the need for rigorous, transparent mechanisms of quality assurance.

## **A PATTERN OF QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS**

In a study on the recognition of formal, informal, and non-formal education in 12 European countries (REFINE Project, 2006), the European Commission found that, for the most part, there were no special quality assurance arrangements in place and that quality assurance "is a neglected aspect of the practice" (p. 5). Evans (1999) however, contends that quality assurance has been addressed in the research, and our review of international PLAR research supports this observation.

We examined the use of PLAR internationally and found a pattern in the various ways that quality assurance has been addressed. From this finding, we developed a quality assurance delivery framework based on five mechanisms that can operate independently or in combination.

1. legislation;
2. government policy;
3. collaborative mechanisms;
4. institution-based mechanisms; and
5. indirect stakeholder support.

The following sections provide brief descriptions and examples of each mechanism.

### ***International Quality Assurance Delivery Mechanisms***

#### **i. Legislation**

Several countries, including Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands have passed legislation to ensure that prior learning is recognized by institutions. In Estonia for example, legislation mandating the recognition of prior learning was passed in 2003, and on this basis, 50% of bachelor, applied, and master's degrees can be awarded through PLAR. It is up to higher education institutions to establish internal policies and procedures. Institutions such as the University of Tartu have developed PLAR infrastructures and assessment activities (Valk, 2007).

Legislation tends to provide a general direction, leaving the details of implementation up to government policy-makers or the education community. In some countries such as Denmark, legislation has been used to assure PLAR quality.

#### Denmark

In 2004, a national policy paper on recognizing prior learning (RPL) was submitted jointly to the Danish parliament by the four ministers responsible for education. The policy included several elements of quality assurance in RPL, including the importance of transparency and reliable methods of assessment, the need for assessor training, and the integration of quality checks into the regular monitoring and evaluation system. The policy recommended that RPL be implemented in all sectors of the educational system (Government of Denmark, 2004) and was well received by the parliament. In 2005, a national framework and methodology for documenting and assessing prior learning was finalized. All Danish universities are required to provide RPL services. Formal legislation on RPL, scheduled for 2007, will give all individuals in adult and continuing education the right to assessment of their prior learning and will include quality assurance as an essential component of implementation.

National legislation establishing the recognition of prior learning in the Czech Republic, including criteria for assessing individual learning against qualifications standards using the country's new qualifications framework was also passed in 2007. It also establishes accountabilities that relate to quality assurance (Kadlec, 2006).

## ii. Government Policy

Government policy-makers have been attracted to PLAR because of its capacity to reduce education costs and promote access to post-secondary education and lifelong learning. Some governments have developed policies that encourage or even require access to PLAR services. Quality assurance is addressed in a variety of ways.

Australia provides an example of a government policy approach to quality assurance in recognizing prior learning (RPL).

#### Australia

The Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework was established in 1993 to create links across quality assurance processes (both institutional and governmental) and instruments of national policy. One of the elements of this framework is the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which is designed to bring work-based qualifications and academic qualifications together in a single system. In 2004, a set of *National Principles and Operating Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* became part of the AQF. These initiatives represent a larger agenda to develop readily available, transparent, and consistent RPL guidelines across the education sectors and to support RPL as an important part of education and training.

The RPL principles and guidelines are intended to encourage institutions to develop RPL policies and procedures that promote the quality, integrity, and reputation of Australian qualifications; diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning; and consistency in the principles that inform RPL processes. The guidelines are linked to other national initiatives including:

- the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC), which plays a key role in RPL quality assurance by monitoring institutions' recognition processes and activity levels;
- the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), an independent national agency that promotes, audits, and reports on quality assurance in higher education and examines RPL practices as part of their audits.

- The *Guidelines for Curriculum Developers* under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) which must be followed by education and training deliverers to obtain national course accreditation.
- The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which provides quality assurance resources to registered training organizations that are required to follow policies of the Australian Qualifications Framework.

### iii. Collaborative Mechanisms

In some countries, the implementation of PLAR has been initiated by members of the post-secondary education community rather than by the government. Cross-institutional collaboration was used to build common approaches to PLAR and mechanisms to ensure its quality. In some instances, this collaboration has resulted in formal bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom, the Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC), and the Scottish Qualifications Authority. More informal types of collaboration and trans-national collaborations have also emerged.

#### United Kingdom – Formal Collaboration

The United Kingdom provides several examples of the formal collaboration process. Its Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is an independent body established by subscribing universities and colleges in 1997 to provide integrated quality assurance services for institutions of higher education in the UK. In 2004, the QAA published *Guidelines on the Accreditation of Prior Learning*, which provide prompts to educational institutions develop APL policies and procedures in ways that maintain and enhance quality and standards. The Guidelines are not prescriptive; they provide principles and explanatory notes covering a range of issues in developing and delivering APL. They are directly aligned with the Agency's more general *Code of Practice for Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education*, which is used in peer reviews and audits to review quality and standards of over 300 institutions in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2004).

The Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) is a consortium of 37 institutions of higher education that provide expertise, professional development, research, and discussion forums on issues related to credit accumulation and transfer. In 1994, the SEEC formed an "APEL Network" and since that time has published reports and guides for its members on quality assurance in APEL procedures for undergraduate and postgraduate credentials (SEEC, 2002).

In 2004, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) published *Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* following a national debate in the post-secondary education community. RPL includes learning from all sources. The Guidelines support the implementation of RPL services across all education and training sectors for students 16 years or older in Scotland. They provide core principles as well as policies and procedures, for formative assessment of prior learning for personal/career development and summative assessment of prior learning for academic credit. They also contain detailed advice on how to ensure quality in RPL processes and decision-making (SQA, 2005). The Guidelines have no legislative or regulatory force, but they form a section of the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Handbook* and are considered fundamental to the success of the SCQF as a tool for promoting and enabling lifelong learning (SQA, 2007).

Despite these efforts over almost two decades, APL activity levels are still low in the UK. Merrifield et al. (2000) report that despite the expansion of the infrastructure in the higher education sector, two-thirds of the institutions of higher education with APL policies and procedures have less than 100 students who have undertaken APL. Studies conducted in 2002 by the SEEC also indicate how activity among part-time and full-time students is lower than expected. Garnett, Portwood, and Costley (2004) present an uninspiring view of APL in England as "an in-house university activity

marginalized and offered as little more than a token to such worthy causes as widening participation” (p. 5).

#### National Institute for the Assessment of Experiential Learning – Informal Collaboration

Informal collaboration is exemplified by the National Institute on the Assessment of Experiential Learning (NIAEL) in the United States. It sponsors an annual professional development conference led by Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey and funded by CAEL. The Institute includes presentations, discussions, and forums, which focus on quality assurance. The Institute creates an exemplary setting for informal collaboration by prior learning assessment (PLA) professionals from a range of institutions and has spawned more formal collaboration on subsequent initiatives.

#### Irish AP(E)L Network – Informal Collaboration

Informal collaboration also characterizes the Irish AP(E)L Network, a group of practitioners across Ireland involved in planning and implementing AP(E)L systems in their institutions. Members share data and documents, and liaise with the National Qualifications Authority (NQAI) and other education councils and institutions in the development of national policy regarding accreditation, access, progression, and transfer issues in higher education. The Network communicates through seminars and working groups using the internet and correspondence. It has recently re-configured into a number of networks as the work on AP(E)L evolves ([http://www.valex-apel.com/html/irish\\_aspects.html](http://www.valex-apel.com/html/irish_aspects.html)).

#### European Community – Trans-national Collaboration

Stemming from the more general collaborations facilitated by the European Commission and the OECD, another mechanism for the promotion of quality assurance has emerged – collaboration among countries with similar interests, who share the drive to improve the international mobility of their labour forces.

The Thematic Group on Transparency of Qualifications, Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning and Credit Transfer is an example of trans-national collaboration. The purpose of the group is to “facilitate the exchange of best practices and experiences throughout Europe in these fields, so as to improve trans-national cooperation and highlight the results and achievements of innovative projects” (<http://www.tg4transparency.com/>). In 2007, the Thematic Group is focusing on developing a compendium of relevant projects, reports and information. The group is managed by the Leonardo da Vinci Project and includes representatives from Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Norway, Romania, Slovak Republic, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the European Commission.

Another example of trans-national collaboration is the EuroguidVAL, also a Leonardo da Vinci project. The EuroguidVal project develops occupational standards, training standards, and training materials for APEL practitioners (assessors, counsellors, and external observers). Several European countries are represented in the project, which aims to define a common European framework of competencies for the initial and continuing training of APEL professionals.

#### **iv. Institution-based Mechanisms**

In most jurisdictions, the implementation of PLAR and the development of methods of quality assurance are driven by the internal systems of post-secondary education institutions. The United States provides the clearest example of reliance on institution-based mechanisms to ensure quality in the recognition of prior learning: in the United States, the assessment of prior learning is voluntary and unlegislated, and institutions operate without the guidance of government policy.

## United States

In the United States, colleges and universities that provide prior learning assessment (PLA) services to adult learners generally do not have quality assurance procedures designed specifically for PLA. The only external authorities involved in PLA standards and operations at American universities and colleges are regional accreditation bodies, some of whom provide regulations on whether and how institutions may provide PLA services. The Commission on Higher Education for the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, for example, supports the recognition of college-level prior learning and provides institutions with guidelines on characteristics of effective college PLA policies. An example of how some American universities address quality assurance in PLA is the University of Pennsylvania. Its policies and literature on credit by portfolio assessment include quality assurance issues (such as the need for clarity of information and transparency of process, and acceptable methods of assessment, standards and criteria. The University also directs PLA users to available supports. Details are available at <http://www.psu.edu/dept/oue/aappm/E-10.html> and [http://www.la.psu.edu/CLA-LAUS/pdf/Portfolio\\_Assessment.pdf](http://www.la.psu.edu/CLA-LAUS/pdf/Portfolio_Assessment.pdf).

### v. Indirect Stakeholder Support

Non-governmental organizations also play useful roles in promoting the quality of PLAR. One of the most influential has been CAEL in the United States. Since its inception in 1967, CAEL has been a national and international supporter, promoter, trainer, researcher, and publisher in the field of prior learning assessment. The Council commissioned a re-examination of its *Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Experiential Learning* (1977) in 1989 and again in 2006. The result is a contemporary set of five academic standards and five administrative standards for quality assurance.

### Combined Mechanisms

France and Norway are examples of countries that have combined national PLAR legislation with institutionally based quality assurance. Both countries have adopted the *Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation on Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2004). Quality assurance guidelines for these principles are currently under development.

#### France

PLAR's known origins can be traced back to 1934 when France enacted legislation on *validation des acquis professionnels* (VAP). The VAP law enabled engineers to gain university recognition for learning outside of the classroom. It formed the basis for broader development in 1985 (Keeton, 2001; Pouget & Osborne, 2004), and in 1993 the French government issued a decree that required universities to award academic credit through PLAR. The decree applied to individuals with five years of work experience in a related field. In 2002, the French government established *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) legislation to further promote the recognition of experiential learning using competencies (Pouget & Osborne, 2004).

The result of these developments is a national framework for recognizing and accrediting non-formal and informal learning at all universities in France. The framework emphasizes guidance and educational planning as integral parts of the process (Murphy, 2003). Implementation and quality assurance are the responsibility of individual institutions, but the common principles and guidelines developed by the European Union will be applied increasingly as time progresses.

#### Norway

Norway was the second European country to introduce recognition of prior learning by means of legislation (in 1952, in vocational training, and in 1976, in the field of adult education). In 2001, PLAR became part of a national Competency Reform Strategy. Amendments to the University and



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. By the end of 2001, over 24,000 people had taken part in pilot studies of various methods and tools; 15,000 had their prior learning charted and validated at the upper secondary school level and 2,600 at the post-secondary level. By 2002, the foundation of a national system for the documentation and validation of prior learning in both the workplace and the educational system was in place. The process varies according to the sector in which recognition is being sought. In higher education, assessment criteria, implementation strategies, and quality assurance are the responsibility of individual institutions. Emphasis is placed on selecting and adapting assessment methods that suit individual needs (Norwegian Institute for Adult Education, 2002).

Two examples of countries that combine national government policy and institution-based mechanisms are Ireland and New Zealand.

#### Ireland

Following several years of research and consultation, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) published *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training* (2005). A major objective is the recognition of all learning achievements, including those attained by alternative pathways, and the promotion of RPL for program admission, credit, and exemption. The NQAI has requested that universities use the guidelines in the development of their own procedures and recommends that RPL be fully integrated with the quality assurance procedures of providers and awarding bodies, using processes that are credible to all stakeholders. In March 2006, The Higher Education and Training Awards Council of Ireland, operating within the National Qualifications Framework, established the policy that learning achievements acquired outside higher education and training programs are eligible for assessment and recognition through undergraduate and graduate degrees including doctorates (Higher Education and Training Awards Council, 2006).

#### New Zealand

In 1993, the government of New Zealand adopted a national policy on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) that, in the interest of quality assurance, required all qualified education providers to apply for special accreditation to provide RPL services. That policy was subsequently revoked (Mills, 1996). In 2003, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) adopted the principle that skills and knowledge acquired outside formal education and training must be recognized, and as a result, assessments of prior learning have been integrated into the processes that flow from the National Qualifications Framework. The NZQA relies on the accreditation of training providers and on audit and moderation processes to ensure that RPL is conducted with quality assurance. Assessors are not required to have special qualifications for RPL. Instead, they are expected to be skilled in selecting and using diverse sources of evidence for all kinds of assessments. In terms of higher education, individual institutions are also responsible for implementing RPL and ensuring its quality. According to the NZQA, the RPL processes are rarely used (NZQA, 2004).

### ***Canadian Quality Assurance Delivery Mechanisms***

Having developed a quality assurance delivery framework based on international mechanisms, we applied it to the Canadian context. Quality assurance in PLAR has not been studied or critiqued in Canadian literature. Limited critical inquiry on more general aspects of PLAR does exist in Canada, but it has focused on the concept of PLAR and its current application in education (Spencer, 1999), its challenge to the integrity of experiential learning (Peruniak, 1993), and the lack of attention to its theoretical underpinnings (Van Kleef, 2006). Explicit attention to the quality of post-secondary operations, particularly assessment methods and tools, is lacking. However, our review also suggests that although Canadian quality assurance strategies are rarely explicit, existing policies and practices contain many elements directed at quality.

In applying the quality assurance delivery framework to PLAR in Canada, we considered three additional contextual factors.

**Type of institution:** For the purpose of this report, Canadian post-secondary institutions are defined as public universities (primarily degree-granting) and public colleges (primarily one-year certificates, and 2 and 3-year diplomas), even though these and other types of institutions offer different kinds of credentials. Universities are more independent of the influence of government than colleges.

**Governmental responsibility for education:** Because education in Canada is the constitutional responsibility of the ten provinces and three territories, the potential sources of government policy on PLAR are 13 different government authorities, each of which serves the interests of its particular region and may have its own perspective on the role that government should play in determining PLAR's place in society. Participation in PLAR by the federal government is generally conducted within the context of labour force development, which is a shared responsibility with the provinces.

**Focus of quality assurance measures:** Quality assurance measures should address both dimensions of PLAR: the quality of its policies and procedures, and the quality of the assessment methods and tools used to identify and measure prior learning.

## **i. Legislation**

No provincial government has passed legislation to establish post-secondary PLAR as an individual right or to set PLAR quality standards.

## **ii. Government Policy**

No provincial or territorial governments have stand-alone policies on quality assurance in PLAR. However, a number of provincial governments have developed general PLAR policies or policy frameworks that either include or imbed elements of quality assurance. Some of these policies were written in the mid-1990s and have not been updated; others are more recent and reflect the current government's interests. Five provinces (British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Saskatchewan) have at least at one time, developed PLAR policies that either address or embed quality assurance.

### **British Columbia**

In 1997, when the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology was given responsibility for PLAR, quality assurance was a priority, resulting in several initiatives aimed at strengthening the quality of the administrative and assessment processes. In 1999, a provincial policy was established and provided direction to all post-secondary institutions providing PLAR. Quality assurance was an integral component of the policy. From 1996 to 2001, the Centre reported annually to the Minister of Advanced Education, providing a province-wide perspective on quality assurance and other issues. In 2002, the provincial government withdrew from direct involvement in PLAR policy and transferred responsibility directly to institutions. Currently, the province does not have a policy on PLAR in post-secondary education.

### **Manitoba**

In 2001/2002, the government of Manitoba published *PLAR Policy Framework for PLAR*, designed to support a decentralized system of supports for recognizing adults' prior learning at universities and colleges across the province. The stated goals of the Framework embedded several quality assurance elements, including the development of PLAR policies and procedures, the use of outcomes-based curriculum, the delivery of portfolio development workshops, and the provision of expanded advisory

services for learners, as well as support mechanisms for institutional staff, including professional development in PLAR and coordination of PLAR activities through a provincial working group. By 2003, every post-secondary education institution in Manitoba had trained PLA advisors. By 2007, the Policy Framework was implemented, and PLAR is now implemented in numerous college and university programs.

## Ontario

In 1993, the province of Ontario established a policy requiring all public colleges to offer PLAR services to adult learners by 1996 (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 1996). A series of policies on issues such as transcription and residency, and an institutional policy resource guide, were published to assist with implementation. Colleges and universities are required to submit their PLAR policies and procedures to the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) for approval of degree programs, based on criteria established by the Board (2006). However, data on the number of submissions made are unavailable, and the extent to which PLAR policies and practices are scrutinized is unclear.

In 2005, Ontario Colleges (formerly ACAATO) established the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service. In 2007, the Service implemented a program quality assurance process audit system, designed to promote and monitor the quality of programs in Ontario's colleges. Among its five criteria is one that requires that credit for prior learning policies support program development and student achievement of program learning outcomes. This criterion ensures the existence and communication of provisions for awarding academic credit and exemptions as a result of recognizing prior learning. Another criterion requires that program learning outcomes be in place in all programs and that they be used for assessing prior learning.

## Quebec

Quebec has a long history of promoting PLAR in its *collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel* (Cegeps). More recently, the province has published *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and *General and Technical Frameworks for the Recognition of Prior Learning and Competencies in Vocational and Technical Training* (2005), which provide current information on the role of government policy in PLAR quality assurance. The provincial policy establishes individuals' right to recognition of their prior learning. The general policy framework outlines a set of principles to govern PLAR implementation in every region in Quebec, and these address several aspects of quality assurance (e.g., transparency, rigour, reliability, and adaptability). *Technical Frameworks* describes the processes and instruments to be used in the assessment of all prior learning, including standards for selecting assessment methods, conditions for recognition, and administrative and evaluation procedures.

Universities in Quebec are less engaged in PLAR. Our research identified only one university – the University of Sherbrooke – with a PLAR policy. The policy was passed in June 2007.

## Saskatchewan

In response to, among other concerns, the apprehension that RPL may lead to a decline in quality or standards in educational institutions, the government of Saskatchewan approved a *Provincial Policy Framework for Recognizing Prior Learning* in 2004. The Framework consists of eight guiding principles and an action plan to improve the province's learning recognition system. Quality assurance considerations are embedded throughout the plan. The policy framework, updated in 2005, is directed at colleges and universities, but participation is voluntary. See [http://www.aee.gov.sk.ca/rpl/docs/prov\\_frame\\_wk.pdf](http://www.aee.gov.sk.ca/rpl/docs/prov_frame_wk.pdf).

### iii. Collaborative Mechanisms

Collaboration on quality assurance in PLAR across institutions in Canada is not widespread. There are no formal collaborative structures among colleges or universities, but there are a few notable examples of informal initiatives that incorporate quality assurance.

#### Canadian Colleges – Informal Collaboration (national)

The Recognition of Learning Affinity Group is an Internet-based, voluntary, national network through which college PLAR advocates and practitioners work collectively to influence the development and delivery of resources, tools, training, and information across Canada. The Group believes it can share resources more easily and exert more influence on national issues and initiatives if they collaborate at a regional level. The Group's activities include reviewing national reports, research, and information on PLAR; promoting exchange and discussion; sharing resources among institutions offering PLAR services; and advocating for the adoption of national standards of practice for PLAR and its practitioners within the college system. The Affinity Group is coordinated by the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC).

#### Canadian Universities – Informal Collaboration

In 2007, ten universities from across Canada convened to share their PLAR policies and practices and discuss common challenges, remedies, quality assurance, and opportunities for collaboration. The experience resulted in the establishment, by the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL), of a Web-based data bank of institutional practices and a collective expression of interest in expansion and further collaboration. Further development of this initiative is in progress.

### iv. Institution-based Mechanisms

Quality assurance has largely been the responsibility of Canada's post-secondary institutions. Government policy-makers have generally provided general start-up or limited ongoing funding but have not become involved in setting quality assurance requirements. When PLAR was first introduced in Canada, institutions relied heavily on CAEL's *Assessing Learning: Standards, Principles, and Procedures* (1989) as a guide for quality assurance. In 1990, for example, Mohawk College established a *Credit for Prior Experiential Learning* policy based on the CAEL standards, which expresses the College's commitment to recognizing the equivalency of learning acquired through experience.

Although quality assurance was not often addressed specifically in the early years of PLAR, there were exceptions. In 1993, Algonquin College developed *Prior Learning Assessment Program for College-wide Implementation: Policies, Procedures and Guidelines*. The CAEL standards (1989) were the first item presented, followed by the College's own *Principles for Quality Assurance* for each step of the PLAR process.

Today, the majority of colleges offering PLAR services in Canada have written PLAR policies and procedures. Many of these institutions continue to rely on the CAEL standards as their basis for quality assurance. The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer's *Principles and Standards for Recognition of Prior Learning* is also endorsed by institutions such as Athabasca University. Only in a very few cases have institutions been explicit in developing quality assurance in PLAR.

One institution that has explicitly and systematically moved forward with PLAR quality assurance is the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology (SIAST). The Institute's goal is to have PLAR available in all programs to eligible learners. Currently 90 of the 170 programs offer PLAR-ready courses. About 900 assessments are conducted annually. The Institute provides faculty with professional development opportunities and a comprehensive set of quality assurance-infused tools. These include up-to-date, written policies; detailed procedures, forms, and templates; PLAR-ready course lists; resources for further reading; guidelines on selecting methods and tools; technical assessment standards; and advise on conducting assessments, grading, and recording assessments.

Learners are provided with a range of guidelines on how to learn about and apply for PLAR, conduct self-audit, select courses, and navigate the process. These tools all contribute to the quality assurance of the process and decision-making.

Some institutions develop a strategic plan to address quality assurance in PLAR activities. Red River College of Applied Science and Technology in Manitoba uses a PLAR Strategic and Operational Plan as a tool to integrate, implement, and expand PLAR across the College. One of the six key goals of the Strategic Plan is to ensure that programs include PLAR as an “integral part of curriculum development, assessment and delivery and apply best practice guidelines to ensure quality PLAR standards, processes and practices” (p. 1). Staff development is viewed through the same lens: “The College will ensure that staff will be knowledgeable and skilled in PLAR standards, processes and practices through access to training and resources to ensure quality practice” (p. 4). Collaboration with College stakeholders is also considered a quality issue: “The College will pursue partnerships and collaborate with regulatory and accrediting bodies, other educational institutions, business, industry and PLAR organizations at the local, provincial, national and international level to advance quality PLAR practice” (p. 4).

Overall, universities in Canada are less prepared for PLAR than colleges. A growing number of institutions have PLAR policies, but written procedures, faculty training, communication with learners, learning outcomes development, and monitoring are underdeveloped.

Two examples of universities that address quality assurance in PLAR are Athabasca University and the University of Winnipeg. These institutions have university-wide PLAR policies and procedures, assessor resources, tools and information guides for learners, limited infrastructure, and some human resources to promote good practice.

#### **v. Indirect Stakeholder Support**

In addition to certain government bodies and educational institutions, there are other types of organizations in Canada that support the implementation of PLAR in post-secondary education. Indirect stakeholders promote PLAR by conducting policy analyses, hosting consultations and conferences, coordinating projects, and participating in public education. They are used by governments to foster public-policy-based initiatives and have the potential to influence PLAR growth and development.

The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) is an example of a provincial indirect stakeholder. The Council is responsible for developing policies, guidelines, and procedures designed to facilitate transfer agreements among post-secondary institutions. As part of its mandate, it encourages institutions to deliver prior learning assessments that are recognized system-wide. In 2005, the Council funded research on best practices of PLAR in Alberta and in 2006, hosted a symposium on PLAR. Both initiatives were designed to promote quality assurance among PLAR practitioners. In 2006/07, the Council led an initiative to propose a PLAR Framework to the provincial government. This initiative is moving forward in 2007.

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is an example of a national indirect stakeholder. CAPLA is a membership-based, voluntary organization of PLAR practitioners and other interested stakeholders. It has encouraged the development of good PLAR practice in colleges and universities through the coordination of research projects and conferences, the publication of a *Declaration of Support* by PLAR proponents (2001), the management of an online community of PLAR practice, and the development of benchmarks for practitioners (2000).

The Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) is an example of a private sector indirect stakeholder – an enterprise that considers it part of its mandate to provide expertise and advisory support to educational institutions and their stakeholders in the development of quality assured PLAR services. CIRL provides advisory services on a cost-recovery basis, conducts research, and volunteers expert participation in local, provincial, and national projects.

## TWO DIMENSIONS TO INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

There are two dimensions to quality assurance in PLAR at the institutional level: the first relates to policies and procedures, and the second, to assessment methods and tools.

### *PLAR Policies and Procedures*

From our literature review and our consultations with adult learners and institutional experts on PLAR policies and procedures, we identified four recurring perspectives:

1. PLAR quality assurance should be part of an institution's existing program quality assurance mechanisms.
2. PLAR policies and procedures should reflect governing principles.
3. Quality in PLAR procedures enhances quality in assessment decision-making.
4. Policies that require faculty and assessor training in PLAR are essential to quality assurance.

#### **i. PLAR Quality Assurance as Part of Existing Mechanisms**

A frequent assertion by researchers on PLAR implementation in post-secondary education is that quality assurance in PLAR should be integrated into the quality assurance mechanisms already in place in post-secondary institutions (Adam, 2007; Johnson, 2005; Leney, 2007; Garnett, Portwood, & Costley, 2004; NQA of Ireland, 2005; REFINE, 2006; Saxton, 2000). Evans (2006) is adamant:

Whatever the set of procedures adopted, it is vital to ensure that the assessment of experiential learning and therefore APEL itself is seen as a mainstream activity of the institution. That is best secured by routing the assessment of experiential learning through the same set of institutional procedures as apply for formal assessments....Only then can it be seen to be valid and reliable academically, only then can its standing be assured and protected.

There is general agreement that PLAR-specific policies and procedures are necessary components of any PLAR service. However, Evans' assertion raises two questions: "What are Canada's mainstream quality assurance mechanisms?" and "Are they adequate for PLAR?"

Academic program quality assurance mechanisms across Canada's public colleges are similar. Most institutions conduct internal program reviews on a cyclical basis. External professional bodies accredit a number of professional programs. In some provinces, provincial quality review bodies approve new programs and major modifications to existing programs. In Ontario, for example, the College Credentials Validation Service and Program Quality Assurance Process Audit managed by Colleges Ontario are responsible for approving college programs and auditing colleges' quality assurance mechanisms. The Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission approves the quality of new or modified college (and university) program proposals and monitors institutional quality assurance mechanisms in the four Atlantic provinces. None of these external organizations directly addresses quality assurance in assessments of classroom-based or prior learning. This responsibility rests with individual institutions.

Quality assurance mechanisms in Canada's public universities often include formal quality assurance policies and operate through internal self-studies and external program reviews. Ongoing professional development courses and programs also add to the knowledge and skills of faculty members. Most universities have adopted the *Principles of Institutional Quality Assurance in Canadian Higher Education* published by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Some provinces also have quality assessment boards that review new university programs and in some cases, institutional quality assurance mechanisms. In Alberta, Ontario, and most recently British Columbia, these quality assessment boards have incorporated a requirement for institutional policies on PLAR

into their standards. Professional bodies also conduct program reviews in order to accredit university professional programs.

Although we were able to identify a handful of institutions that proactively follow written policies and procedures, and/or have incorporated PLAR into existing quality assurance mechanisms, the quality of PLAR is generally unmonitored and remains the responsibility of the individual faculties at both colleges and universities.

Nevertheless, our informal discussions with PLAR and quality assurance experts in Canadian colleges and universities did not suggest any insurmountable impediments to incorporating quality assurance in PLAR into existing college and university quality assurance processes. SIAST in Saskatchewan and Red River College in Manitoba are two examples of institutions that make extensive use of policies and procedures to ensure that PLAR quality assurance is integrated into their institutions' day-to-day operations. However, even these institutions have not gone that extra step and fully incorporated PLAR into mainstream quality assurance mechanisms.

## **ii. Principles-based Foundations**

Institutional PLAR policies and procedures are often principles-based. Principles are used to lay the groundwork for PLAR processes, as well as for assessment practices and evaluation of the evidence in support of recognition applications. One set of quality assurance standards commonly used in Canada is the standards for PLA established by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). The recently updated standards are as follows:

### **Ten Standards for Assessing Learning (2006)**

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.

A second, more generic, set of PLAR principles was developed by one of the partners in this project – the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL). CIRL examined PLAR policies held by governments, educational institutions, and regulatory bodies in 15 countries. The adoption of principles to guide legislative, policy, and procedural development was a common feature. CIRL undertook a critical review of these principles and synthesized the results in *PLAR Principles (2006)*, which is intended to provide a viable, stable vision of PLAR that can be used to develop criteria for valid PLAR processes for academic credit and other formal qualifications. These principles guide the

PLAR work by the Institute and have been successfully used by a growing number of Canadian organizations. They include:

- accessibility
- accountability
- criterion-referencing
- efficiency
- equity
- fairness
- legality
- quality
- right of appeal
- transparency, and
- validity and reliability

Our final example is provided by the countries in the European Union who have adopted the European Council's *Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2004). These Principles may be voluntarily adopted by member states of the European Union. They emphasize the need for quality assurance mechanisms that underpin PLAR processes, including professional development of assessors (Council of the European Union, 2004). The Principles do not prescribe particular methodological or institutional solutions but rather point to basic requirements, which the Council contends are of the utmost importance if confidence, impartiality and credibility are to be achieved.

These Principles are as follows:

- individual entitlements;
- obligations of stakeholders;
- confidence and trust; and
- credibility and legitimacy.

Other organizations include concepts such as collaboration, consistency, context, learner focus, flexibility, rigour, outcomes, and transferability in their statements of principles.

### **iii. Procedures and Decision-making**

PLAR proponents contend that quality assurance of PLAR procedures improves assessment decisions. "Quality-assured" PLAR procedures in this context are those that maximize a learner's opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills that meet articulated educational requirements.

Using CIRL's principles as our guide, we searched for procedures used by institutions in Canada and other countries that directly or indirectly contribute to the quality of assessment decision-making. We found many examples, which support a growing argument in the literature that the validity and reliability of assessments are dependent not only on appropriate assessment tools but also on appropriate procedures and outcomes. For example, procedures designed to provide candidates with explanations of the criteria upon which assessment decisions will be based reflect the principle of transparency. They also ensure that candidates are fully informed of the standards they are expected to meet and thus able to present sufficient evidence of relevant learning at the required depth and breadth. Part Five of this report presents a number of procedural strategies that enhance assessment decision-making, but a more comprehensive description is provided in this report's companion publication, *Quality Assurance in PLAR: Guidelines for Institutions*.

The project's focus group participants and immigrant interviewees identified clarity, accuracy, and sufficiency of information, as well as transparency of process, as key contributors to the quality of the PLAR process. The difficulties that the participants encountered commonly occurred in these areas, and created barriers to effective demonstrations of their learning.



Comprehensive principles, policies, and procedures undoubtedly make important contributions to quality in the PLAR process, but some PLAR researchers and proponents argue that the essence of quality resides in the qualifications of faculty and assessors.

#### **iv. Faculty and Assessors**

The literature refers to a wide range of knowledge and skills that faculty and other assessors engaged in PLAR should demonstrate. Writing on adult education and training, Foley (1995) argues that educators need to “seek out and use concepts and theories that strengthen our practice” (p. 8). PLAR practitioners need to examine and understand their own theoretical perspectives on adult learning and PLAR. To implement PLAR, they need to take into account contemporary arguments that learning involves the active construction of meaning – meaning that is context-influenced, socially mediated, and situated in the real world of the learner (Chappell, 2002). Educators need to be deliberate in using their theoretical perspectives in their practice.

Harlen (1994) asserts that, though initially time-consuming and costly, professional development is key to quality in assessment and thus should be a primary element of quality assurance. Cohen and Whittaker (1994) contend that, “the most vital elements in quality assurance are selection and training of assessors who can implement whatever standards have been set” (p. 45)

Heidegger and Peterson (2006) contend that Roth’s (1972) categorization of three types of competencies has relevance to APEL and the competencies necessary to be effective practitioners. These three classifications are content-related competencies (occupational knowledge and skills), social competencies (interpersonal skills), and personal competencies (values and attitudes). The comments of the focus groups of adult learners in this project support this characterization of assessor competencies. Participants generally assumed that their assessors were competent by virtue of their positions, but several found advisors to be powerless to help in certain program areas. Participants also reported that advisors and assessors had difficulty communicating with faculty and, at times, even demonstrated a lack of support for the idea of awarding credit for prior learning.

In a study that examines a range of theoretical perspectives that are aligned with PLAR, Van Kleef (2006) found that effective PLAR practitioners have a number of personal competencies including:

- an open attitude toward alternatives to traditional behaviourist-based assessment;
- a willingness to learn about PLAR and use it as a tool to understand adult learners’ needs;
- an ability to communicate their expectations clearly and provide a supportive environment throughout the PLAR process; and
- a capacity to contribute to research on PLAR, in order to address implementation challenges, resolve quality assurance concerns, improve their own professional practice, and contribute to the field of education.

Several countries have initiated measures to identify assessors’ qualifications. In a follow-up to *Common European Principles for the Identification and Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (2004), draft guidelines on the qualifications of assessors have been proposed. Assessors are expected to:

- be acknowledged as professionals in their sector (credibility);
- be familiar with the validation process (reliability);
- have no “personal” interest in the validation outcome (to guarantee impartiality and avoid conflicts of interest);
- be able to inspire trust and to create a proper psychological setting for the candidates;
- be committed to provide continuous feedback on the match between learning outcomes and validation standards/references (via support systems); and
- be given initial and continuing training in validation and quality assurance (mechanisms, tools, etc.).

A framework for defining the competencies of APEL guidance and support professionals is currently being drafted under the EuroguidVAL initiative funded by the European Union. The objective of the EuroguidVAL project is to create resources for the professionalization of practitioners in various sectors and at various levels. Twenty-eight proposed competencies are under consideration for practitioners (Konrad, 2006). Criteria for the learning outcomes of training are also under development.

In the Netherlands, a voluntary APL Quality Code (2006) was established with the support of the national cabinet and the commitment of all signatories. The signatories represent three major trade union federations, three high-profile employer associations, national private and public education bodies, municipal government groups, the national Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, eleven agricultural education centres, the Open University, and one department of the national government. The Code entitles individuals to receive APL and requires that APL providers be accredited. Providers must ensure that:

- the independence of assessors is guaranteed;
- the roles of supervisors and assessors are separate;
- supervisors have a proven track record of competence (they are able to outline procedures, and to interview, coach, and give feedback to individuals; they are professionals in their fields;
- assessors have a proven track record of competence (they are able to interview learners effectively, give feedback, and evaluate competencies; they are able to communicate assessment results; they are professionals in the fields in which they conduct assessments); and
- supervisors and assessors keep their professional skills up to date.

Two qualifications that are repeatedly cited in the literature on assessor qualifications are expertise in the subject matter under assessment, and solid knowledge of and support for PLAR. However, our consultations with institutional experts in quality assurance confirmed that college and university faculty do not generally have teaching degrees (Cranton & Caursetta, 2004) or formal qualifications in assessing learning. They must rely, to a considerable degree, on their own prior learning to appropriately assess learners' academic achievements. It is not difficult to understand that without advice and support, some faculty might feel ill-prepared to design and administer assessment tools to measure learning that they did not deliver. Evans (2006) notes that most university professors are more comfortable discussing content than process and that beyond research, most have had no preparation for their assessment roles in formal teaching or experiential learning. He contends that it is irresponsible to involve academics in the unfamiliar task of assessing prior learning without deliberate preparation.

The literature contains a number of references to institutions that have undertaken a strategic approach to PLAR professional development for faculty. Among the most notable are Red River College of Applied Science and Technology in Manitoba, Nova Scotia Community College, and the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology. In addition to providing other professional development activities, Red River College requires all faculty to complete a Certificate in Adult Education as a condition of their employment. Learning about PLAR is a component of this program, and faculty are required to implement a PLAR process to demonstrate their skills in facilitating adult learning. The College's strategy is intended to enable faculty to demonstrate their prior learning and at the same time, gain knowledge and skills in good assessment practices for PLAR with hands-on use of PLAR assessment tools. A number of courses in the certificate program address issues related to student assessment and evaluation. Red River College also offers training for PLAR practitioners on site and online. Since 2001, over 550 individuals have completed the PLAR basic and advanced training program.

Community colleges in other provinces such as Ontario also require new faculty to undertake professional development in teaching and learning over three or four years as a condition of employment. These programs include training in adult learning, teaching methodology, assessment, and in some cases, PLAR. Most universities provide professional development opportunities in teaching and assessment, but this form of training is generally voluntary and is not linked to performance expectations or tenure.

## ***Assessment Methods and Tools***

As stated earlier in this report, we were unable to find any published literature in Canada or elsewhere that offers a critical analysis of quality assurance in the selection/development of PLAR methods and tools. The only source we were able to locate was a table describing the strengths and weaknesses of various assessment methods developed in Ontario in 1996 during the research phase of a college-based implementation (Table 1 is presented later in this section). This lack of critical analysis represents a gap in the literature and research, given that post-secondary institutions are expected to embrace not only the concept but also the outcomes of PLAR. Because of the lack of PLAR-specific literature on quality assurance, we turned to the literature on quality assurance in the assessment of classroom-based learning in post-secondary education to identify issues that may also relate to PLAR.

### **i. Quality Assurance in the Assessment of Classroom-based Learning**

Two important issues emerged from our review of literature on assessing classroom-based learning: the first relates to theoretical perspectives on the assessment of learning, and the second, to the value of learning outcomes.

#### *Theoretical Perspectives on Assessment of Learning*

In a study of how people learn, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) identify several factors that have implications for assessment. They contend that attention to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that each individual learner brings to the classroom characterizes powerful learning environments. If learners' initial understandings are not engaged, they may fail to grasp new concepts and information or they may learn new material for test purposes and revert to their preconceptions afterwards. The implication is that teachers must draw out and work with learners' pre-existing understandings.

Pellegrino (2003) supports this view, noting that in future educational environments, "de-contextualized, drop-in-from-the-sky assessments consisting of isolated tasks and performances will have zero validity as indices of educational attainments. "In essence, assessment will need to transform itself to remain relevant and useful" (p. 12). Messick (1994) maintains that educators require an understanding of both traditional and contemporary forms of assessment following the fit-for-purpose principle; this openness to various means of assessment is a useful concept for practitioners who wish to achieve a realistic mix of de-contextualized structured assessment tools and performance-based tasks that take into account learners' previously acquired learning. Theories supporting authentic assessment are particularly supportive of PLAR.

Authentic assessment represents the measurement of an individual's ability to use previously acquired learning to perform tasks or solve problems by demonstrating meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills to real-life situations (Mueller, 2005). Mueller supports constructivist theories that learners construct their own meaning of the world, and he contends that learners must have the opportunity to demonstrate that they have constructed meanings that meet learning expectations.

Growing interest in authentic assessment represents a shift away from testing for knowledge of program content. Instead, instructors identify the tasks that students will encounter when they graduate and, on that basis, develop curricula that provide for the acquisition of essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Assessments are used to construct and apply student learning and, in so doing, provide direct evidence of learning achievements. According to Mueller (2005), these fundamental steps differ from traditional educational planning, which involves the identification of a body of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are the subject of teaching and subsequent assessments.

Authentic assessment is not without its limitations. It is sometimes used to measure minutia rather than broad learning outcomes. It tends to sacrifice breadth of learning for depth. Sadler (1987) contends that these shortcomings can be addressed through the use of multiple modes of assessment and a number of performance tasks. However, this solution, combined with the individualized nature of performance-based assessments, can make assessment situations less authentic, and more time-

consuming, costly, and reliant on assessor judgment than standardized testing mechanisms. Sadler suggests that the problem of subjectivity in assessment can be addressed by basing assessments on clearly articulated standards that draw upon the professional ability of competent teachers to make qualitative judgments about learner performance.

### *The Value of Learning Outcomes*

A key to the successful application of authentic assessment theory is the use of standards that clearly present program expectations (Mueller, 2005). Two mechanisms that can be used to facilitate measurement of learning achievements are taxonomies that ensure a consistent, structural framework for assessing different types of learning and learning outcomes statements.

Most PLAR proponents agree that PLAR is most effective when required knowledge and skills are expressed in terms of learning outcomes. Learning outcomes, which are expressions of what a learner needs to know and be able to do at the end of a learning activity, provide criteria-referenced learning standards and bring transparency to the assessment process. They also allow learners to reflect realistically on their likelihood of success in PLAR in advance of assessment. This project's focus group participants noted the importance of well-constructed learning outcomes.

However, not all educators use criterion-referencing. Murphy (2003) notes that difficulties have been reported when APEL is applied in educational contexts where norm-referencing, rather than criterion-referencing, is the basis of assessment. Moreover, not all educators support the use of learning outcomes in PLAR. Spencer (2005) expresses concern that learning theories associated with learning outcomes are behavioural and thus less effective in some programs than others. According to the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the most common complaint is that learning outcomes may inhibit innovation and creativity, and impinge on institutional autonomy.

From the INQAAHE's perspective, however, these concerns have not been substantiated, and are basically anxieties and fears. The INQAAHE argues that many reputable institutions in Australia, England, the United States, and Europe are successfully using learning outcomes as part of their teaching and learning practices. They have also been incorporated in the *European Network for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (EANQA) Standards and Guidelines*. In a 2007 report on outcomes and theories of quality assurance, the INQAAHE concluded that learning outcomes are likely to be the building blocks for the design of an open, transparent, flexible system of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that since they are learner-centred, they are also critical for assessing prior learning.

Many Canadian colleges also use learning outcomes in the design of their programs and as criteria for PLAR. Although there is a lack of data available on the extent to which universities have moved in this direction, the Council of Ontario Universities has recently revised its program review requirements to include learning outcomes as part of universities' quality assurance mechanisms. Universities in Ontario are currently re-examining their curriculum to ensure implementation in all of their programs (Council of Ontario Universities, 2006).

Mueller's support for the use of learning outcomes is consistent with Bloom's taxonomy, a widely known classification system that forms the basis for the "knowledge, skills, and attitudes" structure of many post-secondary learning methods and evaluations (Chapman, 2006). Butler (2002) examines Bloom's taxonomy in terms of its utility in spheres other than formal education and concludes that, with modifications, it is also useful in the conceptualization of informal learning. Bloom's taxonomy provides a stable foundation for the development of appropriate methods for identifying and measuring prior learning using authentic assessment.

Another useful taxonomy is the Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (SOLO) taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982). The SOLO taxonomy identifies three levels of quantitative learning and two levels of qualitative learning. It describes stages of increasing complexity in a student's understanding of a subject. Biggs and Collis contend that the SOLO taxonomy is applicable to any subject area and can be

used to design learning outcomes, as well as to assess learning achievements in a more holistic way than other methods of assessment.

The above-mentioned theoretical perspectives on assessment and learning outcomes can be applied to quality assurance in PLAR; such practices help maximize a learner's opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills. The concept of "fitness for purpose" is particularly useful for practitioners trying to decide on appropriate methods and tools to assess prior learning. Mueller's (2005) perspectives on authentic assessment are also helpful in aligning the concept of knowledge construction with the realities of educational standards expressed through learning outcomes. Taken together, these theories create a framework for PLAR in which real life is the curriculum, and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired represent authentic learning. Since PLAR is intended to assess this authentic learning, it seems appropriate to use methods of assessment that are as authentic as possible (Van Kleef, 2006).

At the same time, however, it is worth noting that PLAR and authentic assessment theory differ insofar as authentic assessment methods are intended to be integrated with teaching, learning, and other assessment practices throughout the course of formal learning programs. Because PLAR is intended to identify and verify learning that has already taken place, it is distinct from teaching and learning that take place in formal settings over time. This presents a challenge for educators who, during prior learning assessments, must find ways to identify the nature, currency, sufficiency, and authenticity of a candidate's prior learning without firsthand knowledge of the context in which it was acquired.

This review is not intended to be comprehensive. There are undoubtedly other valuable theoretical perspectives that could be brought to bear on our consideration of quality assurance in PLAR. This is another area of PLAR that is in urgent need of research. Evans (1999) argues that too much of the current literature is devoted to sharing practice strategies rather than examining the fundamental theoretical underpinning of assessment principles. There is a need for closer analysis of and, research on the concept of PLAR and the issues of quality that emerge when what counts toward a credential shifts away from teacher control. Konrad (2001) notes that a fundamental critique of PLAR is that the current literature is under-theorized, lacking any systematic relationship to modern approaches to adult learning, especially constructivism and situated learning.

## **ii. Quality Assurance of PLAR Methods and Tools Used in Canada**

Despite the lack of research devoted to quality assurance in PLAR assessment methods and tools, Canadian practitioners and researchers have been mindful of the importance of selecting and developing methods that best fit the purpose of particular assessment situations. Koenig and Wolfson (1994) echo CAEL's (2000) and Wong's (1996) perspectives that the selection of appropriate PLAR methods is important for quality assurance. For example, interviews enable more personalized assessment and are learner focused. However, they require a skilful assessor; they can give undue advantage to articulate learners; and they can be time-consuming and stressful.

Several Canadian post-secondary institutions, such as the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, Red River College in Manitoba, and Humber College in Ontario, publish training materials that include guidance on assessment method and tool selection. Current Canadian practices can be grouped into five main methods of assessment: written examinations in various formats, oral examinations, performance assessments, product assessments, portfolio evaluations, and external training program review.

Table 1 is a typical example of the kinds of assessments methods that have been used in Canadian post-secondary institutions for over a decade. It is a synthesis of professional development literature from several post-secondary institutions in Ontario (Central Region PLA Pilot Project Team - Centennial College, Mohawk College, St. Lawrence College, Loyalist College, and Humber College), and it reflects the literature and practices of institutions in other provinces as well. Slightly different versions can be found in the PLAR policies and procedural manuals of various post-secondary institutions. Identifying

the strengths and weaknesses of each assessment method is one way of assisting faculty in the selection of the best method for any particular situation.

**Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Assessment Methods**

ASSESSMENT METHOD	DESCRIPTION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<b>WRITTEN EXAMINATIONS</b>			
Multiple choice	Candidates select the appropriate answer from several possible responses.	Efficient and reliable. Allow a wide sampling of content.	Question construction can be difficult and time consuming.
True/False	Candidates state whether statements are true or false.	Many items can be administered during a limited time period.	May encourage guessing.
Matching	Candidates select a second statement that best fits with each presented statement.	Easy to administer and score.	Multiple choice requires recognition of a pre-constructed response.
Fill-in-the-blank	Candidates complete phrases or sentences by filling in the blanks.	Scoring is objective. Measure knowledge keyed to specific learning outcomes/competencies. Can be written to test all levels of the cognitive taxonomy.	True/false has a chance score of 50% unless adjusted and facts may not be categorically true or false. Not appropriate for higher level thinking, performance or attitudinal outcomes.
Short answer	Candidates provide short answers to questions or complete sentences.	Require recollection of correct answer. Relatively easy to construct. Guessing is minimized. Allow wide sampling of content. Test candidate ability to organize, compose and write rather than merely recognize or recall.	Difficult to score. Tend to emphasize factual knowledge, rather than higher thinking skills, performance or attitudes.
Essay	Candidates respond to questions or directions by organizing and writing an answer.	Easy to prepare. Candidates use their own words. Measure complex cognitive learning. Eliminate guessing.	Testing is limited to a narrow sampling of content. May encourage "padding". Difficult to evaluate objectively or achieve reliability in scoring and requires good scoring guides/model answers and clear criteria. Favours candidates with high language skills.

ASSESSMENT METHOD	DESCRIPTION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Situation-based problem solving	Candidates organize and write a response to a problem usually presented in a real-life context.	Able to measure complex, cognitive learning. Candidates use their own words.  Relate learning to real world situations.  May test several competencies at once.	Time-consuming and difficult to construct.  Difficult to achieve reliability in scoring and requires good scoring guides.  May reduce the range of content that can be sampled.
Standardized exam	Exam designed for large scale application.  Often multiple-choice and true/false format.  Many are norm-referenced.	Can often be graded by computer.  Can compare performance across organizations and jurisdictions. Are considered more objective than other methods	Are culturally bound, limiting objectivity.  Subject to error in selecting answer out of sequence. Ratio of correct to incorrect answer design limits quality of assessment tool.
<b>ORAL EXAMINATIONS</b>			
Structured oral test	Candidates respond to pre-set questions (and answers).  Notes are kept on responses.	Tend to be more reliable than an unstructured oral test.  Provide direct assessment of specific knowledge and skills.	Require training in interviewing skills and rating scales.  Can cause candidate anxiety.  May advantage candidates with strong verbal skills and comfort in speaking.
One to one interview	A face to face interview during which questions may flow from candidates' responses.	Allow for a more complete assessment than pre-set questions.  Useful in combination with portfolio assessment.	Require training in interviewing skills and rating scales.
Panel interview	Candidates are interviewed by several examiners.	Moderate subjectivity.	Costly to conduct. Group process must be planned.
<b>PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENTS</b>			
Simulation (e.g. Objective Structured Clinical Examination - OSCE)	Candidate performs in a simulated real life situation	Provide "controlled" sample of real life/work activity.  Allow testing of complex integrated skills.	Require clear criteria and standardized test conditions.  May be costly.
Presentation	Candidate verbally presents learning.	Provides candidate control over demonstration.	Depend on candidate confidence.
Skills demonstration	Candidate physically presents learning.	Clear demonstration of skill level and problem-solving ability in relevant contexts.  Excellent for measuring application and synthesis levels of the taxonomy.	Can be costly and time consuming.

ASSESSMENT METHOD	DESCRIPTION	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Role play	Actors or peers take on roles to simulate a problem	Practical – replicating “real world” skills as much as possible.	In group work, may not be a fair assessment of each individual’s ability.  Can create performance pressure unrelated to skills being assessed.
Observation	Observer assesses behavior in a natural setting. Criteria for assessment is set in advance.	Opportunity to observe the real practice context  Often more comfortable for candidates than simulation.  Allow for collaboration with employees.	Complicated to set up.  Can be time consuming and costly.  A rating sheet is critical to prevent unfair test conditions.  Can involve unplanned, uncontrolled events.
PRODUCT ASSESSMENTS			
Work sample	A sample of work is provided by candidate.	Provides a real life context.  Direct, practical and learner-centered.  Useful when knowledge and skills are difficult to observe during product creation.	A rating sheet is critical to prevent unfair test conditions.  Don’t allow for observation of process.
Portfolio	An organized collection of materials that present and verify skills and knowledge acquired experientially.	Enable reflection on learning.  May demonstrate cross-cutting knowledge and skills.	May require supplementing with interviews.  May favour candidates with strong writing skills.  Require assessor training.
Self-evaluation	Learners respond in writing to criteria set for evaluating their learning	Uses critical reflection.  Can be used in conjunction with other methods.  Congruent with adult education philosophy.	May not be appropriate for use alone.  May favour candidates with strong writing skills.
External training program review	Assessment of workplace training and occupational training programs for academic equivalency and credit.	Eliminates assessment of individual achievements based on successful completion of program.  Essentially credit transfer.	Can be costly.  Training programs often don’t have sufficient structure to justify academic credit.

As Table 1 illustrates, assessment practices in Canadian post-secondary institutions favour institutionally developed assessment methods, and there is a wide variety of methods from which to choose when determining the best way to identify and measure prior learning. The abiding concern, however, is that if these assessment tools are not adapted to the specific context of PLAR, the quality of assessment results will be inadequate.



### **iii. A Need for Contemporary Standards of Quality for Assessment Methods and Tools**

In post-secondary education, validity and reliability are concepts commonly used in assuring the quality of learning assessment tools. Validity is most commonly defined as the extent to which tests measure what they purport to measure. Reliability refers to the extent to which repeated tests produce the same result.

Validity and reliability are difficult concepts to apply to many types of student evaluation that universities and colleges use to assess student achievement. Internally developed assessment tools that are not tested for validity and reliability are common. In liberal arts programs and upper levels of other programs, student assessments are often based on the faculty's judgment of products such as essays and project reports, without the benefit of documented criteria or clearly stated learning expectations (e.g., learning outcomes).

It may be that the "fitness for purpose" principle is met by this method of assessment, but it is also possible that the validity of the results is destroyed, since the validity of any assessment result is conditional on the fit between the purpose for which the assessment was designed and the use of the results (Ungerleider, 2006).

Given the difficulty of applying traditional concepts of validity and reliability, Linn et al. (1991) argue that there is a need to rethink the criteria by which the quality of educational assessments are judged. Harlen (1994) reminds us that assessment of learning is inherently inexact since 100% reliability and validity can never be achieved and that educators must treat assessment as an indicator rather than an exact measurement of what students know and can do.

While re-envisioning quality assurance in assessment in higher education is well beyond the scope of this project, the idea that traditional concepts of quality assurance may be inadequate for classroom-based learning has implications for prior learning assessments as well. In particular, it raises doubts about the adequacy of PLAR's integration into institutions' existing quality assurance mechanisms.

As noted by Brennan and Dobbyn (2000), "the challenge for institutions is to find the right balance of validation procedures, which will ensure the maintenance of standards without developing excessively bureaucratic processes. We must seek to professionalize rather than mechanize the assessment of what is necessarily individual articulation of learning." The appropriateness of tools used to identify and measure learning depends on the purpose of assessment. It is useful to reiterate here that the focus of this report is on the assessment of prior learning for the purpose of granting access to education and awarding academic credit.

One approach to improving quality assurance methodology in assessing prior learning is suggested by Baartman, Bastiaens, and Kirschner (2004) in the context of competency assessment. It involves the expansion of criteria for quality assurance in competency assessment to include such considerations as:

- authenticity (degree of resemblance of an assessment to the criteria);
- cognitive complexity (level of cognitive skills elicited by an assessment task);
- meaningfulness (of the assessment result to candidate's future);
- fairness (extent to which the decision is protected from bias);
- transparency (clarity of purpose and scoring criteria);
- educational consequences (effects of the assessment on learning);
- directness (degree to which assessors can interpret the results without translation from theory into practice);
- cost and efficiency (time and resources needed to carry out the assessment compared to the benefits); and
- comparability (in the consistency and responsible way assessments are carried out).

Baartman et al. (2004) argue that new criteria such as these may do more justice to the unique character of competency assessment.

These considerations open a door in the exploration of quality assurance in PLAR assessment methods and tools in Canada. They suggest that the quality of assessment extends well beyond the validity and reliability of assessment tools alone. Our lack of a more robust concept of quality of PLAR assessment methods and tools is a critical gap in the research on PLAR, but is, at the same time, an area of great potential for confirming PLAR's academic integrity.

## Part Three – Conclusions

### GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The value that PLAR brings to learning and assessment processes is well documented. The challenge is to find ways to deliver it with quality assurance without creating an undue burden for learners and institutions. There are at least five key mechanisms that can be used to promote quality assurance in PLAR: legislation, government policy, collaborative mechanisms, institution-based mechanisms, and indirect stakeholder support. Together, they create a framework for designing, describing, and analyzing PLAR strategies within and across jurisdictions.

In Canada, government policy has been an important influence in the development of PLAR quality assurance through the promotion of principles-based implementation and funding support for pilots. It is institution-based mechanisms, however, that have been the primary drivers of PLAR and its quality assurance. Legislation has not been used to promote quality, and limited success has been achieved in establishing a shared vision of PLAR through inter-institutional collaboration. A review of post-secondary institutions' general PLAR documentation demonstrates a mindfulness of the importance of quality through the adoption of principles, policies, and procedures that embed many elements of quality assurance. However, this mindfulness has not been parlayed into explicit quality assurance policies, nor has it transitioned into mainstream quality assurance mechanisms. Colleges and universities rely primarily on the expertise of individual administrators, advisors, and faculty to provide clear, transparent procedures and valid, reliable decisions. A few provincial quality assurance boards address PLAR in their mandates, but they do not scrutinize institutions' PLAR activities in any depth. Indirect stakeholders are some of the strongest supporters of PLAR in Canada, but, apart from the development of a benchmarking guide sponsored by CAPLA (Day, 2000), there is little evidence of indirect stakeholders directly contributing to quality assurance measures in institutions.

Overall, the attention paid to quality assurance in PLAR in Canada has been inadequate. There is a need for additional knowledge about PLAR – its risks and its potential. Additional research is also needed on how to improve PLAR practice and on PLAR's impact on learners and institutions. New opportunities to conduct this kind of research are emerging. In 2006, legislation was introduced to create the Ontario Higher Education Quality Council, which has been given the mandate to improve the quality and accessibility of post-secondary education. The Council's first review and research plan acknowledges the need to identify students' prior learning.

### SPECIFIC CONCLUSIONS

1. The quality of prior learning assessment outcomes rests heavily on the qualifications of assessors – their ability to select or develop appropriate assessment tools and to make reasonable judgments on submitted evidence. However, current post-secondary institutions do not rigorously examine faculty qualifications and practices in student assessment. Because many post-secondary faculty members have no formal education in teaching or assessment (and universities are generally without systems of assessing the prior experiential learning of their faculty), training in PLAR assessment methodologies and tools, as part of ongoing professional development, should be a critical component of institutional quality assurance.

The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, Red River College of Applied Science and Technology, and Nova Scotia Community College all require their faculty to receive training in adult learning theory, assessment, and other elements of teaching and evaluation as conditions of employment. They are positive models for universities and other colleges that wish to improve the quality of their assessments of students generally and PLAR candidates specifically.

2. Canadian institutions that actively engage in PLAR have incorporated elements of quality assurance into their PLAR practices; however, integrating PLAR into institutions' existing

academic quality assurance mechanisms (e.g., periodic program reviews) could improve its quality and the confidence of stakeholders.

3. Although integration would help to address quality assurance and raise stakeholder confidence, it is unlikely to be sufficient. Post-secondary institutions also need to develop robust measures for PLAR-specific quality assurance policies, procedures, and strategies. Quality assurance of PLAR assessment methods and tools is less advanced than that of general PLAR policies and procedures. In the coming months and years, research and development in assessment strategies will be critical if we want PLAR to become a significant component of Canada's strategy for lifelong learning.
4. Theoretical perspectives that acknowledge prior learning that is learner-constructed are compatible with PLAR. Such perspectives support the use of tools such as criterion-referenced learning outcomes and authentic assessment. Additional research is required on the theoretical underpinnings of PLAR and the impact of shifting the balance on who determines what learning "counts."
5. Traditional measures of quality (i.e., reliability and validity) are often difficult to apply. Their application to the assessment of prior learning is no exception. Clear measures of learning achievement need to be applied in all PLAR assessments even if this means finding new, more expansive, ways of defining quality. Such new criteria could combine traditional concepts of reliability and validity with explicit standards for assessment procedures and expected outcomes.
6. There is no generally accepted definition for quality assurance in PLAR in post-secondary education. Very few documents on quality assurance actually define it. The following definition proved satisfactory for our research and analysis, and provides a useful starting point for a much-needed discussion. It focuses on individual learners as the primary stakeholders in PLAR and their goals as the basis for learning. This definition addresses the two main dimensions to quality assurance – policies and procedures, and assessment methods and tools:

Quality assurance in PLAR is the establishment of and adherence to policies, processes, and assessment practices that ensure that the knowledge and skills of individual learners are recognized so that they can successfully engage in the subjects and levels of learning that contribute meaningfully to their educational and employment goals.

PLAR is an international practice that has evolved since the 1930s. After 73 years of experimentation and implementation throughout the world, there are lessons to be learned. There are strategies that Canadian institutions can adopt to improve the quality of assessments as learning experiences and indicators of past learning. A number of these strategies are presented in the next section of this report and in the companion volume, *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*.

## Part Four – Strategies to Improve Quality

Strategies to improve quality are presented under the headings of the five mechanisms outlined in the quality assurance delivery framework described in Part Three of this report: legislation, government policy, collaborative mechanisms, institution-based mechanisms, and indirect stakeholder support. We reviewed a number of international practices that we considered unlikely to succeed in Canada. These include such strategies as the passage of federal legislation on PLAR in post-secondary education, the establishment of institutional accreditation, and undergraduate degree programs in PLAR.

However, our research, consultations, and partner discussions revealed a number of strategies that could make important contributions to the quality of PLAR processes, methods, and tools. We are not suggesting that the implementation of all of these strategies is appropriate in every jurisdiction but rather that they represent promising possibilities that should be explored by Canadian government policy-makers and post-secondary institutions.

### LEGISLATION

- Provincial governments assess the potential for legislation and/or regulations requiring public post-secondary institutions and program quality assessment boards to integrate PLAR quality assurance measures into their existing quality assurance mechanisms.

### GOVERNMENT POLICY

- Provincial governments integrate PLAR as an important component of their government policies on lifelong learning, and establish or modify written provincial PLAR policies so that quality assurance measures for PLAR are specifically required at public universities and colleges.

Canada's provincial Ministers of Education have recently taken a step in this direction. In 2007, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada issued a statement expressing their expectation that all post-secondary institutions in Canada will work to develop, enhance, and maintain quality assurance standards and procedures that reflect best practices. With regard to new degree programs, the Ministers recommend that institutions publish their academic policies on prior learning assessment, ensure appropriate forms of assessment of prior learning for admission to programs, and make available "full, accurate and truthful material" regarding prior learning assessment policies. This announcement opens the door to the development of a shared pan-Canadian set of principles to anchor PLAR across Canada's universities and colleges, although it falls short of calling for PLAR's use as a tool to grant academic credit.

- Provincial governments require that public post-secondary institutions publish quality assurance reports describing mechanisms used to ensure the quality of their PLAR policies, processes, methods, and tools, and that they make these reports publicly available.
- Provincial governments require quality assessment boards (i.e., the British Columbia Degree Quality Assessment Board, the Campus Alberta Quality Council, the Ontario College Program Quality Assurance Process Audit, the Ontario Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board, the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee, the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, and the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission) to report annually and explicitly on institutional performance in assuring PLAR quality.
- Provincial governments and other funding bodies (e.g., Ontario Higher Education Quality Council) allocate funds for research on quality assurance in PLAR assessment methods and tools used in specific contexts.

- Provincial governments integrate quality assurance considerations into funding criteria for college and university projects with PLAR components, including bridging programs for new Canadians and employment preparation projects.
- Provincial fair access offices, such as Ontario's Office of the Fairness Commissioner, incorporate quality-assured PLAR into their fairness accountability measures. (Legislation to this effect is pending in Manitoba and Nova Scotia.)

## **COLLABORATIVE MECHANISMS**

- Universities and colleges collaborate within and across jurisdictions to establish opportunities for faculty to enrol post-secondary PLAR practitioner certificate programs such as those offered at SIAST in Saskatchewan, the PLA Centre in Nova Scotia, and Red River College in Manitoba.
- Universities and colleges within a jurisdiction collaborate to establish a PLAR quality code of practice that promotes quality in assessment methods and tools, and professional development.
- Universities and colleges take proactive steps to collaborate in joint research on quality assurance in PLAR assessment methods and tools.
- Institutional associations (e.g., AUCC and ACCC) add PLAR to their quality assurance principles and include PLAR in the work of relevant subcommittees, networks, and affinity groups.
- Accreditation bodies issue policy statements recognizing the value of prior learning and add PLAR as an accreditation requirement for university and college professional programs.

## **INSTITUTION-BASED MECHANISMS**

The following strategies address both dimensions of quality assurance in PLAR: policies and procedures, and assessment methods and tools.

### ***Institutional Policies and Procedures***

Quality assurance policies and procedures cover all PLAR services from providing initial client information to systematic tracking of assessment results. The following represent policies and procedures that anchor good practice and in turn contribute to quality in assessment decision-making. They are based on our research of the literature and our consultations with learners during the focus groups. More detailed strategies are included in this report's companion document, *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*.

#### **Foundational Policies**

- Establish a principles-based approach to PLAR and quality assurance, and issue a clear statement of institutional commitment to both.
- Establish educational planning as a key purpose and core component of PLAR.
- Incorporate PLAR into existing quality assurance mechanisms, including periodic program reviews, external peer reviews, and student feedback.
- Prepare robust, explicit, quality-assurance-specific policies and procedures governing the PLAR process, and the selection and development of appropriate assessment methods and tools (i.e. a quality management system).

- Recognize the importance of individually based advisory services for learners, particularly in activities related to interpretation of learning outcomes, ongoing portfolio development, and post-assessment follow-up.
- Establish assessment procedures that take into account common needs of adult learners.
- Establish clear definitions for PLAR and quality assurance to ensure transparency and promote a common understanding among stakeholders.
- Communicate all PLAR quality assurance measures to adult learners and other internal and external stakeholders through explicit descriptions of quality assurance in institutional publications and online mechanisms.

#### Criteria for Assessment

- Establish clear learning standards against which assessors will judge prior learning (e.g., learning outcomes); communicate these to learners.
- Establish criteria upon which assessors will judge prior learning (e.g., its relevance, breadth, depth, currency, sufficiency, and authenticity).
- Establish criteria upon which faculty are expected to select assessment tools (e.g., “fitness for purpose”). Define and explain each criterion to assist assessors in making appropriate tool selections.
- Anchor the quality of individual assessments by establishing a robust concept of validity and reliability that takes into account assessment procedures and post-assessment outcomes. This broader concept acknowledges the impact of process and outcomes on the quality of assessments; recognition of this impact is lacking in the traditional concept of quality of assessment methods and tools.

### ***Institutional Assessment Methods and Tools***

The following strategies begin with a learner’s decision to undertake assessment and end with record-keeping following decisions. They involve establishing a protocol detailing activities conducted before, during, and following assessments that will lead to valid and reliable outcomes, and provide appropriate recording and learner feedback. More detailed information on these and additional strategies are provided in this report’s companion volume, *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions*.

- Ensure that learners have clear and consistent written guidelines for providing evidence of various types (e.g. work samples).
- Base the selection of method on what an assessment is supposed to measure (“fitness for purpose” principle).
- Ensure that the selected assessment tools are culturally inclusive and at appropriate language and literacy levels.
- Ensure that the number of assessments is not excessive.
- Ensure that assessment tools are designed to elicit the appropriate balance of applied and theoretical learning.
- Ensure that assessments address all required dimensions of expected learning – cognitive, psychomotor, and affective.

- Ensure that assessors understand concepts of adult learning and the importance of contextualized assessment.
- Ensure that assessors have expertise in the subject matter and knowledge of PLAR.
- Use grading instruments to guide decision-making.
- Provide written decisions with reasons to unsuccessful candidates.
- Debrief new assessors and randomly debrief candidates.
- Establish recording protocols.

### ***Indirect Stakeholder Support***

- Support initiatives that disseminate quality assurance issues and best practices.
- Participate in research on quality assurance in PLAR.
- Establish information banks on quality assurance in PLAR.
- Conduct inventories of organizations with PLAR-specific quality assurance policies and practices.
- Support practitioner networking.

In the final analysis, assessments are the products of human judgment: "Objective assessments are the convergence of the subjective judgments of qualified assessors who have a minimum of reasons for bias" (Keeton, 1985). However, if qualified assessors are provided with full information from informed individuals and well-constructed tools to measure learning against clearly stated and meaningful standards, the results will meet the highest possible standard of quality. It is because prior learning assessment and recognition inevitably involves qualitative, human judgment that the support strategies presented in this report are so important to finding enduring solutions to the challenge of quality assurance in PLAR.

There is an irony in the presentation of these strategies. A number of educators and researchers argue that current mechanisms to ensure the quality of assessments of classroom-based learning lack many of the quality assurance strategies we have identified. Yet there is no audible call among educators for remedial action. It raises a question for future discussion within the education community: "Are the quality assurance strategies presented in this report creating standards for PLAR that unfairly exceed current expectations of classroom-based assessment?"



## Part Five – Areas for Further Research

The current lack of discourse on virtually every aspect of quality assurance in PLAR makes it difficult to identify priorities. However, throughout our research, a number of issues repeatedly emerged, which suggest the need for research in the following areas:

### **PAN-CANADIAN AREAS OF RESEARCH**

- How viable and valuable would a set of PLAR principles shared by Canada's 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions be?
- What is the quality of current post-secondary PLAR assessment methods and tools used by Canadian institutions?
- What are the potential effects of integrating PLAR into existing post-secondary quality assurance mechanisms?
- How could more permanent collaborations across institutions be achieved? Should a Canadian consortium be established to take a strategic approach to quality assurance in PLAR?

### **PEDAGOGICAL/ANDRAGOGICAL AREAS OF RESEARCH**

- What are the ethical issues and potential effects of setting quality assurance standards for prior learning that exceed the quality of standards for classroom-based assessment?
- What are the pedagogical barriers to improving quality assurance in PLAR?
- What should be the basis of determining quality assurance of assessments? How do the traditional concepts of validity and reliability apply to PLAR?

### **OPERATIONAL AREAS OF RESEARCH**

- How could the concepts of moderation and audit in PLAR be applied in the Canadian post-secondary context without causing undue burdens for faculty?
- What is the impact of team-based assessment on PLAR quality?
- What are the best assessment methodologies within particular contexts, and how can appropriate tools be developed?
- How does PLAR affect the long-term learning and employment activities of learners?
- What role can external assessors play in the PLAR process?
- What role can accreditation bodies play in promoting quality-assured PLAR in post-secondary programs?
- How critical is the role of advisors in the PLAR process?

New information in these areas could generate strategies to improve our understanding of the theoretical aspects of PLAR and our use of available mechanisms for quality assurance.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Heyns (2004) notes,

It is critical that RPL is seen to be a process which not only values different forms of learning and gives formal recognition regardless of how the learning was achieved, but also passes the test of intellectual scrutiny in terms of the integrity and the validity of the process and becomes integral to education and training practice, particularly in the ways we assess. (p. 73)

While this statement refers to recognition of prior learning in South Africa, it applies equally to every country interested in recognizing the knowledge and skills of its people. For Canada, it highlights the importance of clarity in discussing what we mean by quality assurance in PLAR and how we intend to achieve it.

The issues, strategies, and areas for further research contained in this report are presented in the spirit of contributing to the growth and development of quality-assured, time-tested PLAR services in Canadian post-secondary institutions. We welcome and encourage further commentary.

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## Appendix A – Focus Group Protocol, Report and Questions

### Focus Group Protocol

#### Purpose of the Protocol

The following protocol is designed to ensure focused, meaningful discussion, effective recording, data analysis and reporting and will be used by the Moderator of this session.

#### Purpose of the Focus Group

1. To obtain learner insights on the quality of the PLAR process they experienced
2. To obtain learner insights into how to improve the quality of the PLAR process

#### Selection and Number of Participants

The institutional representatives of the Quality Assurance in PLAR Project partnership will identify and invite individual learners who have gone through a prior learning assessment during the last two years. The selection process will take into account diversity of programs and PLAR methods and tools. An effort will be made to obtain a gender mix.

Each institutional partner will conduct one focus group session. Organizers will attempt to include 6-8 participants.

#### Role of the Moderator and Recorder

Focus group Moderators will be selected by each institutional partner. The Moderator's goal is to facilitate discussion among focus group participants.

The Recorder in each session will be the Coordinator of the Project. She will accompany the Moderator to take notes, and analyse and report the outcomes of the session.

#### Expected Outcomes

At the end of the sessions, a written analysis prepared by the Recorder should address participant perspectives on:

- How well they were prepared for the PLAR assessment.
- Whether they were able to demonstrate their learning.
- The quality of the assessment process.
- The quality of the assessment tools.
- How the PLAR process could be improved.

#### Questions for Participants

A series of pre-set questions will be posed to the participants (see attachment). The probing questions below each main question are designed to assist the Moderator in generating further discussion. They will not be used at the outset of discussion but rather used, only if necessary, to supplement and encourage participants to further express themselves.

## **Session Agenda**

The Moderator will be a person experienced in conducting focus groups. The session will take approximately 2 hours. The following items should be included in the agenda:

- Introduction of the Moderator and Recorder
- Explanation of purpose of the focus groups in general and specifically for this session.
- Brief explanation of the project focussing not so much on existing problems but on possible improvements
- Assurances that confidentiality will be respected, but otherwise acknowledgements will be published in the final report
- Brief participant introductions
- Establishment of ground rules; everyone listens respectfully to all viewpoints; no participant dominates the conversation; differing viewpoints are quite welcome but rebuttals are not
- In concluding the session, the Moderator will present some summary comments and ask for feedback on them
- Participants will be thanked for their assistance in the study.

The Moderator and Recorder will watch for and ensure recording of non-verbal cues and communication.

## **Analyzing and Reporting**

Immediately after the session, the Moderator and Recorder will meet to discuss immediate reactions/first impressions regarding themes, discussion threads, ambiguities, attitudes, key words etc.

The Moderator is responsible for analyzing the range of responses, the common points of view, new ideas, unspoken messages, and comments expressing the big picture rather than the details of a single experience. The report will address the issues presented in the expected outcomes for the session as well as any additional topics that arise during the discussions. No names will appear in the report however the program discipline, method of assessment, and participant gender will be recorded.

If participants request a copy of the focus group report, it will be provided.

## **Report on Focus Groups**

### **Overview**

One focus group session was held at each of the institutional partner locations – Ryerson University, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, and University of New Brunswick. The project coordinator (CIRL) and partner institutions assumed the roles of moderator and reporter.

The protocol was followed in all respects with two exceptions:

- The adult learners who participated in the Chang School focus group were students enrolled in bridging programs for internationally educated professionals rather than in postsecondary programs.
- The University of New Brunswick focus group was conducted with five adult learners instead of the target of six to eight participants.

A total of five male and nineteen female adult learners participated in the discussions. They were from a wide range of programs including nursing, business administration, social work, dietetics, political science, dental hygiene, corrections, office education, building systems, educational assistance, and hotel and restaurant management.

This report addresses the five expected outcomes of the focus group sessions.

- How well participants were prepared for their PLAR assessment
- Whether participants were able to demonstrate their prior learning
- The quality of the assessment process
- The quality of the assessment tools
- How the PLAR process could be improved

### **How Well Participants Were Prepared for Their PLAR Assessment**

Learner preparedness for PLAR varied across programs and institutions. Although all three institutions had produced written or online materials on PLAR, they were not always readily accessible or easy to understand. Information obtained directly from staff was sometimes inconsistent and confusing. At two of the institutions, participants reported encounters with faculty demonstrating negative views about PLAR. Some learners did not learn about PLAR until after they were enrolled in their programs.

Overall, there is a need for clearer, more consistent information on PLAR early in the process. Learners who received the greatest level of human support through advising services, appeared to be the most prepared. Program-specific materials appeared to work well.

### **Whether Participants Were Able to Demonstrate Their Prior Learning**

Responses regarding the opportunity to actually demonstrate prior learning were mixed but were positive overall. Most participants thought their assessments were conducted fairly. Some learners found the learning outcome statements to be unclear. Human support went a long way to providing clarification.

Forms of recognition included program and course credit, exemptions, and self-recognition. At one institution, two participants received their entire credentials through PLAR. There were no concerns expressed about the amount of recognition given.

### **The Quality of the Assessment Process**

There were no reported concerns about the qualifications of assessors. Participants appeared to assume that assessors were qualified to evaluate their prior learning. Two participants never met their assessors and had no idea what their qualifications were.

A variety of assessment methods were used. They included demonstrations, written examinations, interviews, video tapes, product assessments, and assessment of portfolios or evidence files. Some learners received regular support from faculty or other institutional staff; others worked independently throughout the process. Again, advising was viewed as an important support mechanism throughout the assessment process.

Most participants who responded to this issue considered the methods used to be appropriate. One learner felt that greater flexibility in selecting the method would have been better. One participant noted that conducting practical demonstrations in the workplace was a particularly useful assessment strategy.

### **The Quality of the Assessment Tools**

Learners did not comment specifically on the quality of assessment tools. They appeared to identify more clearly with the method of assessment rather than the tools themselves. This distinction is perhaps more meaningful to researchers and practitioners than learners.

### **How the PLAR Process Could be Improved**

At two institutions, appeals were not available. Learners reported that providing an appeal mechanism would make the process more fair.

At one institution all participants felt that the PLAR standards were inconsistently applied.

Learning outcome statements should be more clear.

Lack of feedback following assessment was a common complaint at two institutions.

Faculty and staff associated with PLAR should be well-informed and have a positive attitude toward PLAR.



## FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How well do you think you were prepared for your PLAR assessment?

Probes:

- a. Did you receive the course learning outcomes? How helpful were they?
- b. What written information were you given in advance?
- c. What kind of advisory support in preparing?
- d. Were you given an opportunity to self-assess before deciding to proceed? Was this or would this have been helpful?
- e. Were you given any choices in how you might demonstrate your prior learning?

2. Were you able to demonstrate your prior learning?

Probes:

- a. Were the assessment documents/activities easy to understand?
- b. How well-suited was the assessment method used?
- c. What elements worked well, if any?
- d. What other methods would have worked as well or better?
- e. How do you feel about matching your learning to specific outcomes?
- f. How confident were you in the ability of the assessor(s) to assess your prior learning?

3. Now that some time has passed, what do you think of your PLAR experience in terms of its quality?

Probes:

- a. Was the assessment conducted fairly?
- b. Were the standards applied appropriately?
- c. Were you given the information you needed in advance?
- d. Were the assessors appropriately qualified?
- e. How do you think the quality of the assessment could be improved?

(NB. These questions were modified slightly for the focus group at the G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, Ryerson University.)

## Appendix B – Experts and Interview Questions

### Experts

Dr. Angelo Belcastro, Vice President (Academic), University of New Brunswick  
Barbara Bremner, Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology  
Beverley Black, Quality Assurance Assistant, Office of the Vice President, University of New Brunswick  
Dr. Desmond Glynn, Program Director, Faculty of Arts, Ryerson University  
Dr. Karaline Montgomery, Special Assistant to the Vice President Academic, Queen's University  
Dr. Mehmet Zeytinoglu, Vice Chair, Academic Standards Committee, Ryerson University

### Questions:

1. What is your role in the area of QA at your institution?
2. Does your institution have a specific quality assurance strategy?
3. What written standards does your institution have in place to ensure the quality of assessment of student learning? (e.g. statements of principles, policies, procedures)
4. What processes does your institution have in place to ensure the quality of assessments of student learning?
5. What kind of qualifications do faculty typically have to develop assessment tools and deliver assessments?
6. What kind of professional development activities does your institution engage in to ensure that faculty have the appropriate skills to develop and deliver assessments of student learning?
7. Does your institution monitor the program success of PLAR candidates?
8. Do you think quality assurance concerns constitute a key barrier to PLAR implementation?
9. What do you think are important components of a valid, reliable PLAR process?
10. What do you think could be done to assure faculty about the academic integrity of PLAR?
11. Is there anyone else you think we should interview?
12. Is there any specific literature you think would be helpful?

## Appendix C – Immigrant Advisory Questions

1. How well do you think you were prepared for your PLAR assessment?

Probes:

- a. Did you receive criteria against which your learning would be judged? How helpful were they?
- b. What written information were you given in advance?
- c. What kind of advisory support in preparing?
- d. Were you given an opportunity to self-assess before deciding to proceed? Was this or would this have been helpful?
- e. Were you given any choices in how you might demonstrate your prior learning?

2. Were you able to demonstrate your prior learning?

Probes:

- a. Were the assessment documents/activities easy to understand?
- b. How well-suited was the assessment method used?
- c. What elements worked well, if any?
- d. What other methods would have worked as well or better?
- e. How do you feel about matching your learning to specific outcomes?
- f. How confident were you in the ability of the assessor(s) to assess your prior learning?

3. Now that some time has passed, what do you think of your PLAR experience in terms of its quality?

Probes:

- a. Was the assessment conducted fairly?
- b. Were the standards applied appropriately?
- c. Were you given the information you needed in advance?
- d. Were the assessors appropriately qualified?
- e. How do you think the quality of the assessment could be improved?

4. What particular barriers do you think you faced because your prior learning was acquired in another country?

Probes:

- a. Were there cultural differences in the content of your learning?
- b. Were assessment practices different?

## **Report on Interviews with Immigrant Advisory Committee Members**

### **Overview**

Individual, confidential interviews were conducted with five members (three female and two male) of the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning's Immigrant Advisory Committee. Each interviewee had undertaken at least one prior learning assessment. Their professional backgrounds were in business, computer science, nursing, and physiotherapy. Assessment methods included demonstrations, written exams, structured interviews, and telephone interviews. Interviewees were not asked to prepare a portfolio or evidence file. Their assessments involved colleges, universities, a regulatory body, and employers. Discussions were guided by four pre-set questions. The following is a synthesis of the results.

### **Level of Preparation for PLAR Assessment**

Four out of five interviewees reported that they were adequately prepared for their assessments. Information was provided in written or online formats in advance. Advisory support was provided as part of the process. One interviewee was particularly impressed with the level of human support received. Another respondent felt that inadequate information was provided, which contributed to an initial unsuccessful assessment. No interviewees were given an opportunity to self-assess in advance of their prior learning assessment. No one was invited to provide input on the method to be used.

### **Demonstration of Prior Learning**

All interviewees were ultimately successful in demonstrating their prior learning. One respondent felt that the assessment documentation lacked clarity. Two individuals considered the methodologies to be less than ideal, in both cases suggesting that a demonstration would have provided better evidence than the written examinations they were required to complete. One respondent thought their assessment was not sufficiently rigorous. A second interviewee felt that the number of assessments were excessive for the level of required learning. Matching their learning to specific standards was considered appropriate by all respondents.

One interviewee questioned the qualifications of their assessor. The others assumed their assessors were qualified or their assessment did not directly involve an assessor.

### **Overall Quality of the PLAR Experience**

All interviewees had overall comments about the quality of the PLAR process. Most respondents considered it to be a positive experience from which they benefited academically or in terms of employment. One respondent felt that the overall process had not been fair. Suggestions for improvement addressed the need for clearer and more information, and preparation courses in advance of assessment. Other suggestions related to ensuring that assessments were appropriate to the level of learning required and the type of skills assessors were looking for. One respondent suggested that assessments need to be less costly and less time-consuming. Assessing agencies partnering with more experienced organizations was an additional suggestion.

### **Barriers**

All five respondents considered language to be a challenge in obtaining recognition of their prior learning. One interviewee considered cultural differences to be a factor. Also the length of time that had passed since their formal education was completed was seen as an impediment in one case.

## Appendix D – Advisory Committee

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## Appendix E – Acronym Glossary

ACAT	Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers
ACCC	Association of Community Colleges of Canada
ACE	American Council on Education
APEL	Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQFAB	Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board
AUCC	Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
CAEL	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
CAPLA	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CCL	Canadian Council on Learning
CIRL	Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning
CLEP	College Level Examination Program
CREDIT	College Credit Recommendation Program
EUCEN	European Union
EVC	Recognition of Informally Acquired Skills
GED	General Education Development
HRDC	Human Resources Development Canada
MPLAN	Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network
NIAEL	National Institute for the Assessment of Experiential Learning
NCVER	National Council for Vocational Education Research
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEQAB	Post-secondary Education Quality Assessment Board
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
PLAN	Prior Learning Assessment Network
PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RDA	Reconnaissance des acquis
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SCOTCAT	Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SEEC	Southern England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer
SIAST	Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Sciences and Technology
VAE	Validation des acquis de l'expérience
VAP	Validation des acquis professionnels
VET	Vocational Education and Training

## Appendix F – Historical Context of PLAR in Canada

Knowles (1977) wrote that, "... an understanding of the present state of the field of adult education is sought through understanding its origins and patterns of growth". This is a sensible approach to take in the case of PLAR and the issue of quality assurance. The following brief history of PLAR's development in Canada extends our understanding of its evolution as an academic activity and helps to clarify the context in which quality assurance measures must be developed.

### PLAR'S HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

There are no publications that specifically record the conditions that prompted PLAR's introduction to Canada, but examination of the events of the past 15 years suggests that government policy-makers have played a key role in the development of the infrastructure of this educational practice. It was not always the case. PLAR initiatives began in Canada in 1978 with the implementation of two pilot projects in Energy Systems Engineering Technology and Data Processing at Mohawk College of Applied Arts and Technology in Hamilton, Ontario (Burke, 1995). By 1985, Mohawk College had implemented a Credential for Experiential Learning policy.

#### ✉ Manitoba

During the same period, Red River College of Applied Science and Technology in Manitoba also became involved in PLAR. In 1980, the college embarked on a project in the college's diploma nursing program. This was expanded to the faculties of dental assisting in 1981 and early childhood education in 1983. By 1984, Red River College had an experiential learning policy which was expanded in 1994 to cover institution-wide prior learning assessment policies and procedures (Aarts et al., 1999).

In 1995, provincial funding to establish PLAR services was allocated to Red River College and in 2001, other institutions received funding for projects as part of a provincial policy framework which established access to education and continuous learning at all public post-secondary institutions a policy priority (Manitoba Advanced Education and Training, 2001). Permanent funding was allocated to additional post secondary institutions in 2004.

#### ✉ Quebec

The development of prior learning assessment in most post-secondary institutions followed a less pedagogical path than Manitoba, beginning in Quebec in 1982, when a Commission of Inquiry on Vocational and Socio-cultural Training for Adults followed up on a 1975 position of the Conseil supérieur de l' éducation and recommended that the Government of Quebec use PLA to facilitate adult learner access to their educational system. In 1985, the provincial government made reconnaissance des acquis (RDA) a government policy priority, established the right to obtain credits for non-academic learning, and initiated a funding structure to support its coordination, development, and delivery in all Cegeps (Isabelle, 1988).

In 2000, the recognition of prior learning was identified by the Conseil supérieur de l' éducation as a political and social responsibility and recommended that a coordinated system of PLA be gradually integrated across the province. In 2002, the government of Quebec produced a *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* and an accompanying *Action Plan*, which underscored the government's intention to make PLAR a cornerstone of its policy on lifelong learning. Explicit plans were set to achieve the overall objective of implementing "a diversified series of organizational methods to ensure access to recognition of prior learning services in every region of Quebec." In 2005, a set of principles and a more detailed technical framework were published including the steps of the process and key instruments to be used in every prior learning assessment. Quebec's colleges began to receive the same levels of government funding for prior learning assessments as they were receiving for course delivery. In 2006, PLAR became the subject of a re-

vitalization initiative in the Cegeps in Montreal. Quebec universities, which are more independent than Cegeps, were not part of these initiatives and for the most part have not developed PLAR strategies. One exception is the University of Sherbrooke which in the spring of 2007 passed its first Senate policy on PLAR.

#### **Ontario**

Another province to embark on a government policy approach to PLAR was Ontario. First Nations Technical Institute and Mohawk College had introduced PLAR in some programs in the early 1980's but other institutions had little or no experience. In 1989, a government-appointed Task Force on Access to Professions and Trades (Cummings, 1989) made several recommendations that the province establish a mechanism to provide systematic assessments of the prior education and experiential learning of individuals through the creation of a universally accessible Prior Learning Assessment Network (PLAN).

In 1992, the Ontario government responded to the Cummings report and a subsequent Vision 2000 (1990) report by establishing a Prior Learning Assessment Secretariat with a 3-year mandate to implement PLA services in all of Ontario's 25 colleges of applied arts and technology. Subsidies were provided to the institutions for hiring full-time PLA facilitators responsible for establishing PLA services for all adult students and college applicants. A series of additional policies and a policy resource document were made available to guide implementation. In 2003, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities incorporated the provincial PLAR policy into a new Framework for Programs of Instruction, which includes a funding formula for colleges offering PLAR services and directives on assessment fees. Today, most colleges offer PLAR to adult learners at least in some programs.

During the early 1990s the Council of Ontario Universities explored the possibility of implementing PLA. However, long term action was limited and today only a few institutions actively engage in PLAR in more than a few programs. There is no government policy on PLAR at Ontario universities as they are independent legal entities.

Over the past several years, the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration has initiated over 70 bridging training projects for immigrants, a number of which require college partners to integrate PLAR into the process of determining eligibility. These programs are designed to accelerate foreign-trained professionals' entry into the Ontario labour market and identify future training needs.

The state of the field of PLAR in Ontario is essentially unknown as no data have been collected since the mid-1990s with the exception of assessment statistics collected for funding purposes.

#### **British Columbia**

In the early 1990s, the province of British Columbia began to explore the use of PLAR in its post-secondary education system. By 1995 a province-wide model had been developed to establish a baseline for PLA delivery and in 1996, the provincial government provided institutions with financial incentives to "seed" implementation. Many of the institutions responded and several institutions began offering PLA through pilot projects that took root and produced more permanent policies, procedures, and financial funding arrangements. The Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) was given responsibility for provincial coordination, institutional professional development, and networking.

In 2002, the provincial government transferred responsibility for PLA to individual institutions and the Ministry ceased its PLA activities. Currently there is no provincial policy framework for PLAR although most colleges provide assessments in at least some programs. A few universities offer PLAR but for the most part, it is not an institution-wide practice. Two exceptions are Thompson Rivers University and Royal Roads University both of which offer PLAR through portfolios and a variety of other assessment methodologies.



## 📁 Saskatchewan

In 1996 SIAST established a formal PLA Policy, followed in 1999 by the establishment of a PLA Coordinator and dedicated development funds to support the expansion of PLA. In 2002, the provincial government in Saskatchewan, in cooperation with the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, launched a PLAR Enhancement Funding Initiative to advance PLAR in that province's post-secondary learning system. By 2003, the government had become proactive in promoting PLAR by activating internet access to resources, documents and other recognizing learning materials, as well as funding professional development activities to enhance institutional capacity to deliver PLAR services. (Tam, 2003).

In 2004, Saskatchewan's Provincial Legislature approved an *RPL Provincial Policy Framework* including guiding principles and an action plan to monitor internal institutional activity and improve the quality of services. The Framework's goal is to ensure that established RPL outcomes will be recognized by individuals/associations, employers/industry, education/training providers, professional regulatory bodies/associations, and credit awarded will be transferable between different organizations. A *Recognizing Prior Learning Referral Guide* was subsequently published and is regularly updated (2006) to provide information on RPL opportunities in Saskatchewan's educational institutions. A *Facilitator's Guide to Reflection and Portfolio Development* was also published in 2005 to assist facilitators in guiding adult learners through the portfolio development process.

PLAR is active in the province's largest public college, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST). In 2007, SIAST and five regional colleges had policies and procedures in place to provide PLAR services in many programs both on campus and via the web. SIAST currently has 90 programs offering PLAR, 30 of which have their own PLAR preparation guidelines for learners. The province's two universities have also adopted the provincial *Policy Framework*. Although implementation is considerably slower, it is available in a few disciplines. For example, the Adult Education and Human Resource Development program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina uses PLAR for advanced standing in its Bachelor of Adult Education and Training degree.

## 📁 Alberta

In Alberta, PLAR grew slowly in post-secondary education during the 1990s but in recent years policy interest has grown considerably. In 2005, Alberta Advanced Education and the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) commissioned a study by the Barrington Research Group to inform policy development and develop a coordinated prior learning assessment strategy. ACAT subsequently published *Principles and Standards for the Recognition of Prior Learning* for adoption by post-secondary institutions (Barrington Research Group, 2005). In 2007, the Alberta government announced plans to establish an Alberta Policy Framework on PLAR.

Athabasca University has been a leader in PLAR services including program-based assessment, consulting and advising other institutions, and research. In 2005, 62% of post-secondary education institutions in Alberta had PLAR policies although like other provinces, activity levels were reported to be low with only 1-2% of students reported receiving credit.

## 📁 Newfoundland

Canada's Atlantic provinces have also approached PLA from a government policy perspective and Newfoundland and Labrador is no exception. In 1994, following a pilot project in Early Childhood Education, the province of Newfoundland and Labrador began development of a provincial PLA policy and strategic plan that culminated in provincial guidelines in 1998 (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 1998). The policy and activities waned over the years but in early 2007, the College of the North Atlantic published a concept paper to establish a PLAR Centre and strategic plan. It is expected that the Centre's mandate will include servicing non-students with the development of career plans through portfolio development (both employability and academic portfolios). A full-time PLAR Facilitator will be responsible for the implementation, coordination, promotion, and monitoring of all

PLAR activities and procedures within the college system. Located in various regions of the province, PLAR Advisors will be responsible for implementing PLAR practices and procedures to ensure standards and quality. PLAR Advisors will be the local resource persons to provide faculty, staff and the community with training, advice and guidance in implementing a PLAR system. PLAR Advisors will also counsel current, potential and non-students on appropriate assessment methods, the portfolio development process, and conduct essential workplace skills assessments.

The province's only university, Memorial University has a "challenge for credit" policy which is applied at the discretion of each program for academic credit up to a maximum of six credit hours. At this time, no data is available on the level of PLAR activity at the province's university or college.

#### **New Brunswick**

The Province of New Brunswick began to investigate PLAR in the mid-1990s. Government and institutional policies evolved slowly but in 2005, facilitating access to post-secondary education through PLAR was identified as an essential component of New Brunswick's provincial *Policy on Adult and Lifelong Learning* (2005). Implementation has not been undertaken, but the Province's network of institutions under the New Brunswick Community College have moved forward on their own with a system-wide PLAR policy that permits up to 100% of program acquisition through PLAR.

The University of New Brunswick implemented a PLA policy in 1998. It is administered by the College of Extended Learning and provides support to applicants and assessors. To date, only the Adult Education undergraduate program has a formal PLAR component. In 2006, the University of New Brunswick conducted a longitudinal study of PLAR from 1998 to 2004.

#### **Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia began to experiment with PLAR in the 1990s. In 1996, the PLA Centre, Halifax was established as an independent, collaborative, community-based organization that provides advisory and support services to adult learners in transition. This well-known and respected organization emphasizes self-recognition of learning through portfolio development for personal development and planning but has also engaged in PLAR projects to facilitate admission to university programs. In 2000, the Government of Nova Scotia recruited 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 as aging demographics created increased rates of retirement. The PLA Centre was retained to provide the University with a basis for considering admission of such candidates using its Portfolio Learning program. Since 2000, executives continue to gain entrance to the MPA (M) through the portfolio process.

The province's public college, Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) also began to experiment with PLAR in the 1990s and in 1999 established a goal of being Canada's "portfolio college" at which all students and faculty are expected to engage in portfolio development. In 2005, the College commenced a PLA action plan that included implementation of projects and frameworks designed to advance individuals' education and employment through prior learning assessment (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2005). A new academic policy making RPL available to all learners, is to be published in 2007.

#### **Prince Edward Island**

The province of Prince Edward Island has undertaken a government policy position on PLA. In 2002, the PEI Department of Education issued a statement of its support for PLA in principle and its commitment to encourage learning communities to become better connected through the formal recognition of prior learning (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2002). In 2004, the government initiated a plan to use PLAR to help address skill shortages in that province's apprenticeship system (Prince Edward Island Provincial Apprenticeship Board, 2004).

At the institutional level, in 2007 the Senate of the University of Prince Edward Island gave approval in principle to the introduction of PLAR procedures using portfolios as the primary assessment tool for all UPEI courses. Policies and procedures have been put in place. Although quality assurance is not an explicit focus of the University's documentation, several elements of good quality assurance practice are included in the procedures (e.g. right to appeal, appropriate record keeping).

The province's only college, Holland College has recently converted its internal competency-based assessment system to a curriculum-based model that uses learning outcomes to assess learning. In February 2007, the College established a formal PLAR policy that will form the basis of a program-based PLAR assessment system. A controlled launch has commenced with five programs, facilitator training and assessor training planned for the fall of 2007. Assessments will become available to enrolled students as well as external course and program applicants.

### **The Territories**

Participation in PLAR at post-secondary institutions did not develop in the Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut until the early 2000s. None of these territories have developed government policies on PLAR but over the last few years, a number of their post-secondary institutions have developed services. Yukon College has a PLAR policy and offers assessment at the discretion of individual programs. The College's successful participation as a partner in Athabasca University's Gateways PLAR project has generated support for PLAR's expansion. Aurora College in the Northwest Territories also has a PLAR policy and has provided assessments. Early in 2007, Nunavut Arctic College received \$4 million to develop PLAR at the College over a three-year project period. As such, it will be the richest funded PLAR project in Canadian college history.

### **National Support for PLAR**

At the national level, Canada's federal government has supported the implementation of PLAR services as a labour force development strategy since 1994. In that year, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) published its first national Newsletter on PLA and, in 1995, funded the first of six national conferences on PLAR. In 2002, HRDC integrated PLAR into Canada's national labour force development long-term agenda by including it in its Innovation Strategy, a 21<sup>st</sup> century plan to ensure equality of opportunity and economic innovation (Human Resources Development Canada, 2002). In this strategy, HRDC identified demographic changes, technological development, global competition, and immigration as critical factors influencing Canada's future. Recognition of prior learning was highlighted as a tool that would remove a significant barrier to full participation and mobility in the Canadian labour market. In 2007, PLAR projects are supported by several federal program areas including PLAR's potential to identify and recognize the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of immigrants who find themselves unemployed and underemployed in Canada's labour force.

The national Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC) has also registered its support for PLAR. In 1999, it completed an agreement by all member colleges to maximize recognition and transfer of learning acquired through formal education, workplace training and work and life experience. The Pan-Canadian Protocol on Mobility and Transferability (1999) covers "all forms of formal and informal learning". "Various methods of demonstrating or achieving equivalency may be employed such as program reviews of work place training, competency tests, challenge examinations, and other forms of prior learning assessment."