

DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION
EDUCATION POLICY COMMITTEE

Group of National Experts on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning

RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING
COUNTRY NOTE FOR CANADA

This document is the Country Note produced for Canada within the context of the EDPC activity on Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning. It is one in a series of 16 Country Notes prepared after a review visit – either Thematic Review or Comparative Policy Analysis or both – in each of the participating countries to this activity. This Country Note was prepared by the following team of experts: Tom Leney, QCA, London, UK (Rapporteur), Maria-João Freitas, Ministry of Education of Madeira, Funchal, Portugal and Patrick Werquin, OECD, Directorate for Education, Paris (Project Leader); and is based on a study visit which took place from 16-25 January 2008, as well as background documents prepared to support the visit.

The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of Canada, the OECD Secretariat or its member countries.

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RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

List of RNFIL Country Notes

A series of 16 Country Notes were produced within the context of the EDPC activity on *Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning*. These Country Notes were prepared after a review visit – either a Thematic Review or Comparative Policy Analysis or both – to each of the countries participating in this activity. The series of notes is being made available on OLIS under the code EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2. The list of codes for individual country notes is detailed as follows:

- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART1 – Country Note – Australia
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART2 – Country Note – Belgium (Flemish Community)
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART3 – Country Note – Canada
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART4 – Country Note – Chile
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART5 – Country Note – Germany
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART6 – Country Note – Hungary
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART7 – Country Note – Ireland
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART8 – Country Note – Italy
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART9 – Country Note – Korea
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART10 – Country Note – Mexico
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART11 – Country Note – Netherlands
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART12 – Country Note – Norway
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART13 – Country Note – Slovenia
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART14 – Country Note – South Africa
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART15 – Country Note – Spain
- EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART17 – Country Note – United Kingdom

All the 16 countries involved in a review visit, as well as 7 additional participating countries that decided not to be reviewed, provided a Country Background Report to the Secretariat in preparation for the visit and as background documentation for the preparation of the final International Synthesis Report [see EDU/EDPC RNFIL(2008)1]. The different Country Background Reports and Country Notes will be provided in separate instalments in order to guarantee flexibility (for a given country the PART number will be the same). Please note that there is no EDU/EDPC/RNFIL(2008)2/PART16.

The final International Synthesis Report which will be prepared by the Secretariat and will draw on both the Country Background Reports and the Country Notes.

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THEMATIC REVIEW (OECD) FOR CANADA: RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

1 Introduction

1. This thematic review of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Canada concentrates, necessarily, on the level of the provincial and territorial jurisdictions for policy and the institutional/establishment level for implementation. This is because the ten Canadian provinces have full responsibility for educational matters, while the territories have a lesser degree of autonomy. Key policies on recognition, where such policies exist, are therefore developed or developing at the provincial and territorial levels, not the federal level, and implemented largely by education and training providers and other local agencies, who have a strong measure of operational autonomy.

2. Even so, as this review will show, some communities of practice exist across the provinces and territories concerning the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, supported by several significant research projects and pan-Canadian initiatives. Over a decade or longer, this has helped to generate some debate, yet without a clear national agenda, on the role and usefulness of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). This is the most common term used across English-speaking Canada, and *la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences (RAC)* in Quebec. Policy development and the extent to which PLAR is used in practice both vary in different parts of Canada.

3. The major role of the review is analysis and policy recommendations. Assessing the evidence concerning what is happening at the levels of both policy and practice is therefore the object of the review. There is no pan-Canada quantitative data available on the take-up or usage of recognition, and only a few provinces collect data systematically. While the report uses the available quantitative data, the emphasis in the report has to be placed on a qualitative analysis of policy measures and case studies of take up and usage.

4. The Canadian provinces and territories have all undertaken careful and forward-looking analysis of their current and future labour market shortages and skills gaps and shortages, and in this respect have identified some major challenges. The provinces and territories have all traced the need to both make best use of available skills and to amplify the skills available in the context of (for most provinces and territories) a rapidly ageing population and (for all provinces and territories) an equally inescapable present and future need to depend on the contribution of the skills of migrants, both Canadian and international, moving across borders into provincial and territorial labour markets. This is in the light of favourable economic development scenarios, fed by steady or high growth levels, a skills-based economy and natural resources that are now being tapped extensively.

5. Furthermore, while Canada performs creditably on most international comparisons such as PISA and indicators of productivity and quality of life, all regions and provinces and territories are concerned to tackle social exclusion. By self-definition they face the challenge to improve social cohesion and inclusion, by reaching groups currently marginalised or excluded from the mainstream of the labour market, from the benefits of education and training, and from the success indicators of modern Canadian society. In parallel,

Canadians have an increasing awareness of the importance of the values and beliefs of indigenous groups to Canadian society as a whole.

6. The thematic review explores the recognition of non-formal and informal learning with these challenges in mind. As well as analysing the status quo, the authors will reach conclusions about how recognition can further help to meet the challenges identified during the review visit.

7. As already indicated, the terminology varies between provinces and territories and sometimes between sectors, and this can cause confusion. Even PLAR can be a rather confusing term. It has a specific usage to describe activities that relate to assessing learning gained outside formal settings. However, it is often also referred to in broader way, to include processes that enable the recognition of formal qualifications or credits gained elsewhere, for transfer purposes.

8. The thematic review is intended as a reflection that analyses evidence and informs policy makers in Canada and, also, the wider OECD community that is interested in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

2 Sources of data and limitation

9. The OECD team spent seven working days in Canada, in addition to time travelling from one province to another. The information and data for this report are:

1. The outcomes of the meetings and visits held in the province.
2. The original reports provided by the provinces and one territory for the OECD project.
3. The provinces' Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) Pan-Canadian Overview.
4. The research reports that have been produced in Canada on PLAR.
5. A range of documents that participants provided in the meetings across Canada.

10. Among the limitations of the report, it is worth mentioning that the OECD team spent a day or less in each province. Discussions were held with all the provinces except New Brunswick, which sent papers, and a telephone conference with the representative of the Department of Education, Culture and Employment of the Northwest Territories. We met with a range of officials from the provincial ministries and departments, from schools, colleges, universities and adult learning centres, and with experts. Several discussions involved employer organisations, social partners and project leaders. In several provinces we visited post-secondary institutions, including universities and colleges.

3 PLAR in Canada – Governance

11. The constitutional status and consensually dominant idea of provincial jurisdiction is important to grasp in order to understand the development of PLAR, as well as other education policies in Canada. The provinces have jurisdiction and are responsible for all education policies¹. Thus, ministers are responsible for education in the provinces and territories and there is no department of education at the federal level.

¹ For education policies and practice the implication is similar to the subsidiarity principle in European Union treaties, whereby responsibility remains with the member states and is not transferred in any way to the organisms of the EU. In Canada, jurisdiction for education policies resides at the provincial, not at the federal, level. Another European analogy would be the prevailing situation in Belgium, with its Community-based ministries of education.

On the other hand, the three territories have a somewhat lesser degree of autonomy from the federal level, but have territorial ministers responsible for education. The aboriginals living on reserves are under the direct responsibility of the federal government, through land treaties and other arrangements. As a later section of this thematic review will show, a consequence of jurisdiction is that the provinces and territories are at rather different stages of development of their policies and actions in relation to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and are also on somewhat differing policy trajectories.

12. In addition, Canada is among the countries that have decentralised many responsibilities to the institutional level in schools, colleges and universities. This double commitment to decentralisation – provincial/territorial responsibility for policy and funding, with many management decisions taken locally by relatively autonomous provider institutions – explains at least in part many of the undoubted current successes in Canada's education system, as evidenced by indicators such as the PISA and PIRLS surveys². It is probably accurate to describe the 'Canadian way' for education as including a strong belief in practical understandings to create real solutions to local challenges, placing emphasis on the local levels of activity. In a thorough way, the education system is decentralised.

13. At the same time, PLAR is at the interface with labour market and economic policies, for which the federal government has responsibilities. Thus, the federal level has encouraged and funded some significant activities relating to PLAR. Departments with an involvement in PLAR are Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) on the labour market aspects, and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) as concerns immigrants and skills. HRSDC, for example, funded the research report *A Slice of the Iceberg*³, published in 1999 and then a follow-up study. The report uses case studies to provide an assessment of the use of PLAR in Canada and asks whether current practice increases the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, and the follow-up explores the views of learners. HRSDC has also been supportive of the OECD RNFIL activity working in close collaboration with CMEC.

14. The mechanism that the provinces and territories have developed to liaise with each other on education policies is the provincial and territorial ministers' Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC⁴). CMEC has undertaken several enabling and encouraging activities that have helped to bring PLAR clearly onto the provinces', territories' and public agendas. For example, CMEC has produced an inventory of PLAR practices and policies from the perspective of the provinces and territories. CMEC has agreed to a statement recommending universities to make greater use of PLAR. Also, CMEC is the coordinator of the current OECD activity on RNFIL, of which this thematic review is a component.

15. All the meetings across Canada were organised by the provincial education ministries and departments who were working with CMEC: in several cases the OECD team in Canada met PLAR champions working at the local or provincial level. From visiting the provinces and hearing evidence from the territories, it became clear that professional communities of practice provide a supportive network linking many professionals involved in PLAR in Canada. In the decentralised system of governance described above, communities of practice provide networks that can cross jurisdictions to share knowledge and to support (sometimes, defend) or champion the development of PLAR. However they are not mandated by any jurisdiction to represent them or to develop PLAR policies for the provinces and

² See for example *PISA 2006 Science Competences for Tomorrow's World, Volume 1 Analysis*. OECD, 2008. It is also notable that in the recent PIRLS study of 10-year olds reading competences, several Canadian provinces were among the highest scorers internationally.

³ *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, 1999, and *Feedback from Learners: A Second Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, 2003. Both studies were funded by HRSDC.

⁴ For information, see www.cmec.ca

territories of Canada. In this respect the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is prominent.

16. The jurisdictions for education in Canada's ten provinces and three territories have undoubtedly achieved noteworthy success in many aspects of education policy, although not all provinces and territories are equally successful in regard to PLAR policies. Nevertheless, for some aspects of developing policies and practice for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, provinces and territories acting on their own seem to face challenges that are proving to be difficult to resolve on their own. Since Canada is substantially dependent on the skills and qualifications that immigrants bring to meet its labour market needs, a clear example of this is the extensive task that the smaller and even the larger provinces and territories face in setting up their own machinery for recognising the wide range of skills and qualifications that immigrants bring with them from a large number of different countries across the world. It is difficult to see how each province and territory can devote the resources that this task entails.

17. Accepting that the jurisdiction for education lies with the provinces and territories, it seems clear that the provincial and territorial government stakeholders in PLAR should recognise the need to find official and cross-provincial/territorial avenues to discuss and learn from one another more effectively in connection with the development of recognition policies and practice. Here, it is worth noting that OECD acts as a forum for countries to learn from each other. This is to suggest that better liaison can lead to a stronger element of policy learning⁵ between provinces and territories in PLAR. CMEC is a standing body for liaison between provincial and territorial ministries and departments concerning education policies and developments. Although CMEC has taken some initiatives for PLAR, it has no regular arrangements in respect of PLAR.

***Policy recommendation:** Given that it has a clear role to play within the context of jurisdiction, CMEC can facilitate peer learning between the provinces and territories on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This could be achieved through a ministerial agreement that PLAR be added to the educational themes that CMEC confers on, through its system of working committees.*

4 The emphasis on PLAR in Canada – Drivers and actors

18. Globally, Canadians are with a few others among the founders and strongest voices in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

19. Many common issues have been identified across the sub-sectors of education and training (including general and adult education, the college sector and higher education and across the provinces and territories. Furthermore, departments and ministries of immigration encourage PLAR for better integration of the foreign trained.

20. A very strong case can be made that PLAR could have a role as a distinctive mechanism in Canada for helping to meet several different, but linked, needs. This is because possession of formal credentials is a key component for progression on the part of the learner and worker in three key respects:

⁵. Policy learning refers to a process whereby stakeholders, mainly representing different countries or jurisdictions, join together in a voluntary peer learning process. See for example: **Policy learning – Applying the changing learning paradigm for policy advice on VET reforms in transition countries**, Peter Grootings, Soren Nielsen. In: Descy and Tessaring (eds.) *Modernising vocational education and training. Cedefop Fourth report on vocational training research in Europe: background report*. Luxembourg: forthcoming. Available on Internet as working document: www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Projects_Networks/ResearchLab/forthcoming.asp

- Progression through lifelong learning systems usually depends on achieving the specified and formal qualifications for entry, and progression;
- Entry to a large number of professions and skilled trades hinges on a formal licensing and certification that is recognised by the appropriate regulatory (or other) body, operating at the level of the province or territory. Mutual Recognition Agreements must therefore be made between provinces and territories as well as between the self-regulated professions for the mobility of skilled workers and professionals, and this kind of recognition is by no means generally applied.
- Immigrant workers who are welcomed to Canada frequently find that they face high barriers to recognition of their skills and qualifications. Frequently, it is difficult for immigrants to enter the labour market for skills areas in which they are both skilled and well qualified in their country of origin. Recognition of the qualifications and skills that immigrants bring with them is now seen in all the provinces and territories as a major policy challenge, in both economic and social terms.

21. These are commonly expressed bottlenecks that limit individual learners and workers from progression, at the same time limiting the extent to which Canada makes use of its potential human resource. By all accounts, getting closer to resolving these bottlenecks is an important challenge if Canada is to achieve the economic and social development it aspires to.

22. A commonly shared perception exists that PLAR could appropriately help to shift some of the bottlenecks and barriers. Thus, PLAR can help to improve access to learning for those with informally acquired knowledge and skills. Furthermore, PLAR could open avenues to access employment – making qualified labour market entry for cross-provincial/territorial migrants and for qualified immigrants more straight-forward. These objectives could be achieved without lowering standards of access to the different levels of education or training, nor entry to the labour market.

23. Across Canada there is a common discourse on PLAR and this is shared by stakeholders with differing interests, including policy makers and officials, principals and teachers, employers and others. This comprises a core of professional understandings and a range of mechanisms for PLAR that are accepted substantially within provincial/territorial borders through communities of practice (and are shared by those most directly implicated professionally), and are also shared Canada-wide through specialist networks. Yet shared understandings and a common language have not resulted in a clearly defined role for PLAR. In other words, no dominant rhetoric on the value of PLAR is in evidence.

24. Therefore, it is worth asking where the drive for improved recognition of non-formal and informal learning originates. The commonly expressed drivers are both economic and social, and this report has already referred to some of these. This includes the following well-documented factors:

- Challenges caused by immediate and future skills gaps and skills shortages in the labour market.
- The impact of demographic change, with the ageing of populations in most provinces and territories.
- The need to up-skill Canadians as jobs change.
- The need to tackle the basic skills deficit of people who left school early and did not later gain the skills needed to succeed in Canada. Often these are discouraged learners.
- The need to attract larger number of immigrants to work in Canada.

- The need to target identified groups that currently have a high incidence of unemployment, low previous levels of education attainment and qualification, and are over-represented in data on social exclusion. Aboriginal groups are prominent in this respect in many provinces and territories.
- The need to find ways to recognise more efficiently the knowledge and skills – as well as the formal credentials - that cross-border migrants and immigrants bring with them for entry to the labour market, without compromising the existing standards of quality assurance.

25. A prominent approach to PLAR places the emphasis on a renewed approach to learning, as well as to assessment. In this view, PLAR is seen as a key to promoting lifelong learning, and as a mechanism that works well for learners. In a short, unpublished paper that followed the OECD team visit to the Atlantic Provinces, Douglas Meyer, director of the PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, wrote:

“We have come to believe that our social and economic needs are not well served by the dominance of the prevailing learning = schooling mindset and discourse. Instead we believe that widening our view of adult learning to a position reflected by the phrase, Every place a Learning Place; Every Person a learner, would provide not only a more accurate perspective of the realities of adult learning in our society, but a much better base to foster and strengthen a lifelong and life-wide learning culture.”

26. In terms of promoting PLAR, several of the provinces have developed their policies on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning over a number of years. As later sections of the report will show, this includes Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan. In the different provinces and territories, PLAR champions have taken a local lead in different initiatives. The evidence suggests that there is a keen knowledge among those close to the possibilities and issues that PLAR raises across Canada. The local examples of initiatives cited later in the report have mostly developed through champions' activity, and the provincial authorities frequently attested to the importance of PLAR professional networks in generating this.

27. PLAR also strikes a chord with Canadian attitudes, which were depicted several times during the OECD visit as valuing getting things done through harnessing people's skills in settings that emphasise local communities and levels of action.

***Policy Recommendation:** Policy makers and stakeholders should consider more widely the evidence for adopting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, often referred to as PLAR, as a tool that can help significantly to tackle specific, identified challenges that many learners, employees, employers and migrants face in their local, provincial, territorial and Canadian environments. To this end, a more concerted approach on the part of CMEC to collect data would be a constructive step.*

5 Canada's shift to a culture of competences and learning outcomes

28. Across the fields of, respectively, human resource development in Canadian workplaces and provincial programmes for education reform, a shift to the use of competences in the workplace and learning outcomes in education and training programmes is evident. In education, this is marked in the college programmes, and also in mainstream primary and secondary education. With some notable exceptions, however, universities are lagging and often resistant in this respect. This shift to competences and learning outcomes is compatible with and a sound basis for a more extensive adoption of PLAR developments. In other words, a competence-led basis for human resources in firms and the adoption of a learning outcomes approach to schooling systems is highly conducive to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

29. College and university courses use credit to build up the units of assessment. Although credit is not always transferable, it does provide a mechanism that is, like competences and learning outcomes, compatible with extending approaches to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The case is that in Alberta and British Columbia and more and more in other provinces credit is readily transferrable. Alberta, notably, has over 60 000 course and program transfer agreements in place between its institutions.

30. Barriers exist. As indicated, most universities are still unwilling to recognise or give status to PLAR. Among the regulated occupations, mechanisms such as the multiple-choice Red Seal tests, which govern the final access to skilled status in many technical and other skilled occupations, often create precisely the barriers that PLAR is intended to overcome. Inter-provincial/territorial and into-Canada migration is often hindered by formal requirements of regulatory bodies, where the requirements that have to be met to achieve provincial or territorial licence to practice appear at times to be unnecessarily restrictive.

31. While most provinces and territories have increased the learning outcomes focus of their school and college curricula, many employers, regulatory bodies and sector councils have increasingly turned to what is commonly referred to as competence-based approaches to human resource development. For the workplace, this activity is reflected at the national level. HRSDC has developed a portfolio of nine essential skills⁶. The skills are generic and are intended to be applicable across a wide range of skills and applications. On numerous occasions, the HRSDC essential skills were referred to often as a useful tool and a way to avoid reinventing the wheel in each province or territory. Similarly, a cross-Canada system for classifying language skills is available.

***Policy recommendation:** The provinces/territories – individually and through the CMEC – should work with regulatory bodies and sector councils to extend the use of recognition of non-formal and informal learning.*

***Policy recommendation:** As far as is logical and consistent with specific needs, provinces and territories, through CMEC, could keep abreast of the essential skills definitions.*

6 Arrangements that commonly characterise PLAR in the Canadian provinces and territories

32. As the report now turns attention to the specifics of developments in the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in specific jurisdictions and situations, it may be helpful (to the non-Canadian reader) to have a brief portrait of some common features of PLAR in Canada. It must be remembered that each province/territory differs and that this is an effect of the jurisdiction analysed above.

33. For the most part, provinces/territories have or are developing enabling policies that encourage – to a more or less energetic extent - the use of PLAR. The term enabling refers to arrangements that are set up whereby schools and colleges can or are expected to make arrangements for PLAR, without being specifically mandated. At provincial/territorial level there are relatively few situations in which regulations are in place to set up to require a system of PLAR entitlement and provision (Quebec is the clearest exception to this generalisation). Funding follows the same policy direction: there certainly are circumstances, described later, where PLAR funding covers the costs of having PLAR professional advisors/administrators in schools and/or the cost to the learner or the establishment of undergoing the PLAR process. Again, this is certainly not the norm across Canada's jurisdictions. Cost of PLAR is a significant factor for the applicant and more so for the institution involved, and this probably inhibits wide take-up. Specific quality assurance measures exist in some environments where PLAR is used, but quality

⁶. For more information, see www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/hip/hrp/essential_skills/essential_skills_

of assessment, the basis for sound judgements and quality assurance were also often cited by participants as a factor that inhibits the wider use of PLAR.

34. PLAR (*RAC* in Quebec, *PLA* in a few provinces/territories or institutions) places emphasis on the assessment of prior learning, rather than the recognition of experience per se. That is to say, PLAR is about the assessment of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and attitudes learnt), through the medium of the learner's experience. The most common mechanisms in use are the following.

- The challenge: the student can challenge the college or university concerning the requirement to achieve specific units of credit through a taught course and examination, if s/he can demonstrate the prior acquisition of the necessary knowledge, skills or other learning outcomes, using an accepted assessment tool and process.
- Equivalence: the student can demonstrate that previously acquired qualifications should count for exemption (or even, in the case of Quebec and a few other local establishments, a full qualification) from parts of a qualification course. In the regulated labour market, this may count towards exemptions from required courses or work experience, but never (or almost never) exempts the candidate from the final examination. Thus, for example, a midwife or mechanic may be able to demonstrate that they have all the knowledge, skills and attitudes for qualified entry, but they still have to take a written exam for entry. Indeed, much PLAR activity is in preparation for a final matriculation or labour market entry examination, which is a key feature for many occupations.
- The portfolio is the most commonly accepted tool for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Competence assessment is often undertaken through developing a portfolio. In PLAR, preparing a portfolio is used as a systematic process through which individuals could identify, reflect upon, demonstrate and present the skills and knowledge they have learned through their lives.

35. The target groups vary according to local need, such as the relative attractiveness of the provincial/territorial labour market and the predominant flows of labour and learners into and across Canada. For example, there is a migratory shift away from the Atlantic Provinces towards Ontario and Alberta and from northern and rural areas to the major cities; this includes immigrants as well as Canadian migrants. Aboriginal populations, often referred to as First Nations, Métis and Inuits, are targeted for economic and social reasons, as are people who left education or training young with few formal qualifications.

36. The report will next take up several of these specific issues, to report and analyse developments in a more context-specific way.

Policy recommendation: *Several provinces/territories are energetic and innovative in developing policies on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Using PLAR, policy makers, regulatory bodies and sector councils should develop more of a common understanding, in order to develop ways of reducing barriers to labour market entry.*

7 Policy trajectories of the provinces and territories

37. The ten provinces and the three territories take rather different approaches to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in terms of their policies. Nevertheless, some common trends can be identified.

38. Some provinces/territories have a policy framework in place for PLAR or *RAC*. This is the case in Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and Quebec. In some cases policies are not well integrated between the different ministries and departments responsible for education, employment and immigration. The framework that is ready to be implemented in Manitoba does, however, present quite an integrated model between departments and stakeholders; the employers have exerted strong pressure on the Manitoba policy for recognition. Quebec also has liaison arrangements between the ministries.

39. It should be noted that no province/territory is seeking to establish a mandatory framework that overrides the autonomy of universities or the considerable degree of operational freedom of the colleges under the localised system of management that is adopted across Canada.

40. Some of the provinces/territories are currently forming their policy. These provinces/territories are either committed to develop or are close to framing the policy. Alberta and Nova Scotia fit this model.

41. Some provinces/territories intend to formulate a policy, and some are at the earliest stages of achieving this objective.

42. Perhaps it should be added that some of the provinces and territories are so small in terms of population or area that localised activity may, in practice, constitute a policy. Prince Edward Island fits this category, and its PLAR initiatives imply a policy lead.

43. One province has been on a different trajectory since the early part of the decade. Previously, British Columbia had adopted clear policies on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, known locally as PLA. After start-up funding in the 1980s, the British Columbia post-secondary education budget backed up the province's policies with a PLA enhancement grant, establishing PLA coordinators in every post-secondary institution in the province. In 2001, with a change in the province's leadership and a review of all government spending, the approach changed, and funding for PLA coordinators became part of block funding to the institutions and allocated at each institution's discretion. The Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, the organization that coordinated and led provincial level PLA policies, was closed in March, 2004.

44. Box 1 summarises the policy position in the provinces and in the Northwest Territories⁷.

⁷ No information for the OECD visit was received from the other territories, nor did they take part in the meetings we held.

Box 1. PLAR policy, by province and territory

Alberta

The Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology has announced its intention to develop a strategy for PLAR as it applies to the advanced education system. Alberta's 2005 policy on supporting immigrants had already recognised the importance of the dual goals of retaining high skills standards while recognising and utilising immigrants' skills and credentials. The Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) has published principles and standards for recognising prior learning and hosts an annual PLAR conference to build capacity among PLAR practitioners in Alberta.

British Columbia

As summarised above, British Columbia was among the provinces/territories leading the development of PLAR in the 1990s. The policy identified the role of PLAR in learner-centred provision, mobility and credit transfer, and improving access to education and training. By the end of the 1990s, each post-secondary institution was funded for a professional PLAR advisor to facilitate growth in usage and awareness. In 2002, in the light of a change of provincial government, a budget review and a change away from targeted funding, the individual institutions became responsible for PLAR. The provincial government now takes no policy lead on PLAR.

Manitoba

Manitoba has developed a coherent approach to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Since 2001 recognition of prior learning has been seen in policy terms as a potential solution to some of the labour market skills shortages (in a context of already high employment levels). It is seen as important for raising literacy levels and adult upgrading, and improving access to education and training for excluded groups. To this end, a policy framework was developed in 2001 and revised goals that implicate the different departments were agreed in 2004, emphasising promoting and embedding PLAR, and adopting key competences (as well as technical competences) and quality assurance measures. A P3T Committee has been established to coordinate between departments and across educational sub-sectors and to link demand and supply issues in the labour market.

New Brunswick

(Colleagues from New Brunswick were unable to attend the meeting in Halifax, as planned. So these details are drawn from secondary sources)

New Brunswick developed and published its statement of a lifelong learning strategy in 2005. Increased use of PLAR to increase learning and employment opportunities is one of six objectives identified. Therefore a policy is in place; without more contact with the province it is difficult to assess the extent or coherence of the policy or implementation.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador does not have a coordinated approach to developing PLAR. The importance of informal learning was highlighted in the 2005 White Paper on Public Post-Secondary Education and PLAR was specifically addressed in the 2007 Skills Task Force Report. The Department of Education is currently recruiting a PLAR Program Consultant to help individuals use the PLAR process to pursue apprenticeship.

Northwest Territories

Currently the Northwest Territories do not have a policy on PLAR, although in 2005 the territorial government announced a plan that would include mechanisms for using PLAR

Nova Scotia

The provincial PLAR Initiative was launched in 2005 as part of the skills plan. As yet there is no policy, but the Department of Education is taking the lead in setting up a provincial advisory committee, with the intention of developing a clear policy for developing PLAR, for which initiatives are already under way. As of 1 April 2008 Adult Education has been transferred to the Department of Labour and Workforce Development which will be responsible for the PLAR initiative.

Box 1. PLAR policy, by province and territory (Cont.)

Ontario

In effect, a policy for PLAR has been in operation since 1996, at which point the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities required all the colleges to provide PLAR opportunities wherever possible, and provided funding to facilitate this, including some funding for a PLAR advisory role and, in particular, funding to offset PLAR costs. Since 2003 the Ministry of Education established PLAR policies for mainstream schooling and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities continues to administer the PLAR policy for colleges. As Ontario's universities are considered autonomous institutions no provincially mandated policies for PLAR are in place for universities.. New legislation from the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration is designed to make access to regulated professions fairer and more open. For this purpose a fairness Commissioner is being established; this may begin to tackle the issues relating to immigrant skills recognition already raised in this report.

Prince Edward Island

The Department of Education issued a statement in 2002 declaring that that recognition of prior learning is fundamental to a coherent lifelong learning strategy. Although there is no provincial monitoring in place, the provincial government is committed since 2004 to use PLAR to help to tackle skills shortages, and (in Canada's smallest province) several initiatives are under way.

Quebec

RAC - la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences – is a clear policy priority in Quebec. The ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) du Québec has taken a lead in its field of responsibility. An inter-ministerial group provides links with other ministries, although the competences defined by the education and labour ministries do not entirely coincide. The legal basis for recognising experiential learning goes back to the mid 1960s, but ageing, migration and labour shortages required a new approach. In practice, RAC is applied in adult's secondary vocational and general education and to a considerable extent in colleges, and higher education remains more suspicious. An accessible website⁸ sets out and supports the process or application for RAC or challenge, and schools/colleges are funded per RAC candidate or successful challenge.

Saskatchewan

A provincial policy framework for recognising prior learning (RPL) was established in 2004. A particular characteristic is the involvement since the start of a wide range of stakeholders. A social partnership organisation, the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board was the forum for advocacy and leadership, generated in particular by client advocates and labour representatives: It was through this mechanism that the government became involved. A framework was approved in 2004, implicating the government and the stakeholders. This led to the RPL co-ordinating group, co-chaired by government and labour market stakeholders. Taking the policy further into its implementation stage, the Saskatchewan Labour Market Commission is now established, subject to the direction of a new provincial government.

45. Until recently, many of the initiatives on PLAR concerned the creation of opportunities for challenging for credit for progression through (or access to) formal qualifications. While this remains a key aspect, opening up access and progression in skilled and professional occupations in the labour market is now reported, as indicated earlier, as a key issue everywhere in Canada. The major cities (Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver) and provinces such as Alberta and Ontario attract large numbers of migrants, both from other provinces and from outside Canada's borders. Migration within Canada includes immigrants who arrive in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador or Prince Edward Island, then migrate on to provinces such as Ontario and Alberta. However, the recognition of skills and qualifications for those who cross borders, even within Canada can be a major impediment to an efficient mobile labour market. This is

⁸ For information see www2.inforoutefpt.org/rda

in particular the case for the 51 regulated occupations, where entry hinges on the requirements of self-governing, province/territorial-based regulatory bodies. Entry to regulated professions – for example for the technician from Europe or the craftsman from another province/territory – is a matter for the independent provincial/territorial regulators). Non-regulated occupations and professions may have restricted entry or clear entry requirements, and some coordinate their efforts through sector councils. It appears that the need to ensure high standards of knowledge, skill and attitudes for skilled labour market entry and the need to make optimal use of the skills of people ready for work in Canada are often not in equilibrium, so far as migration is concerned.

46. In conclusion, provinces' and territories' progress along a broad policy trajectory for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning can be traced and described. Most have in place, are developing or intend to develop a policy, although these vary in the extent to which stakeholders such as the labour ministry and the social partners are involved. The range is from 'on the starting blocks' to 'a well-formed and shared enabling policy in place'. The exception is British Columbia, which had a PLAR policy; and provided financial support to the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology (C2T2), the organisation that coordinated and led PLA policy until 2004, when C2T2 was closed and responsibility for PLA initiatives devolved to the individual institutions.

***Policy recommendation:** A key challenge is to harmonise the need for quality for entry to regulated and controlled labour markets with the need to make best use of available and skilled people seeking entry to the labour market.*

8 Volume of use, funding and quality assurance of PLAR

Volume of PLAR in use

47. Except in Quebec, little collation of the numbers of learners, employees and other participants engaged in PLAR is collected and available beyond the single institution level. In this respect, the evidence seems to suggest that PLAR take-up does not typically exceed one per cent of learners linked to a particular institution. The evidence points to the conclusion that PLAR touches only a very small minority of learners and workers in Canada.

Funding

48. As with other aspects of PLAR, financing depends on the policy of each province and territory. Thus, the federal government does not provide colleges or universities with any ongoing funding. There is no single approach to funding and in practice arrangements vary. In one case (Quebec) a funding formula is in place for student and institutional costs, while in some other cases (British Columbia, for instance) the ministries do not provide any earmarked funding for PLAR activity. As the report has shown, federal funding for specific projects can be allocated, relating to labour force development and immigration.

Identifying costs

49. Research conducted by Van Kleef et al (see **A Slice of the Iceberg**) was the first attempt to establish the real cost of PLAR. In this study, seven institutions across Canada were chosen to identify the direct and indirect costs of prior learning assessment and recognition. Direct cost seemed straightforward to identify, and include:

- The time used for developing assessment tools and methods.
- Assessment costs involving assessors and faculty members.

- Providing advice and guidance (counsellors and faculty members).
- Marketing.

50. The research found that indirect costs proved more difficult to identify, both in terms of facilities that are used and in terms of the income loss where colleges award learners' credit that leads to exemptions.

Costs to the individual

51. The fee that individuals pay to undertake PLAR varies from province to province. It is free in Quebec at the adult's secondary vocational and general education sector, but not at the postsecondary level, while in some other provinces a formula operates to limit the costs to the individual. This may be through funding the individual, but is more likely to be by funding the institution, as in the case in Ontario. There is no up-to-date information available across Canada to provide consistent comparisons. Benchmarking would be useful, and would lead to more transparency, particularly for mobile groups in the population. Nevertheless, it is a widely accepted principle that the cost of PLAR to the individual cannot exceed the cost of taking the course.

Funding the institution

52. Again, arrangements vary. Nevertheless, as a general rule the funding arrangements tend to incentivise institutions in practice to enter students for regular courses rather than encourage PLAR applicants.

Cases where provinces make PLAR funding arrangements

53. Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec seem to have the clearest arrangements. Elsewhere, some schools and colleges may make more local arrangements.

54. PLAR funding for Ontario colleges is provided through the provincial General Purpose Operating Grant which supports each college in accordance with a funding formula that is based on activity levels that are translated into funding units. Funding units have a specific value determined annually. A college has to conduct 100 PLAR assessments to qualify for each funding unit worth of revenue. This funding which back in 2003, resulted in 1/7 the amount of funding going to the colleges if they opted for providing PLAR over delivering the course. At colleges, a range of learner fees for PLAR are set by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. They are currently allowed to charge up to a set maximum per individual course challenge depending on the length of the course. The formula is USD 54.34 for 18 hour courses up to USD 137.00. Most assessment fees are USD 108.68 for 45 hour courses. The combination of funding and fees does not cover the costs of developing and delivering PLAR⁹.

55. No provincial funding is provided to Ontario universities. In order to cover costs, universities doing PLAR must take funds out of their operating budgets and/or charge learner assessment fees. The Ministry of Education allows PLAR to be delivered to secondary school students in grades 10, 11, and 12, mostly through challenge, at no cost to learners. However, there is little uptake. A separate policy governs PLAR for mature students that offers older learners the opportunity to have their knowledge and skills recognized for credits towards an Ontario Secondary School Diploma through an equivalency or challenge assessments process.

⁹ See Van Kleef et al, *Slicing the Iceberg*, chapter on funding

56. For Manitoba's universities and colleges, resources for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning are not generally accounted for separately from the overall program and institutional budgets. Approximately USD 65 000 per postsecondary institution was targeted to facilitate initial incorporation of PLAR into each institution. This is now incorporated into on-going funding to the universities and colleges (subject to base increases). In public postsecondary institutions, students are expected to bear the primary direct costs related to PLAR assessments. Examples include:

- Brandon University – A PLAR application fee of USD 300.00 is levied irrespective of the number of courses to which an applicant is seeking to apply PLAR.
- University of Winnipeg – Students are charged a fee equal to one half of the tuition fee normally associated with the course(s)
- Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology has established a wide variety of contingencies relating to the fee structure for PLAR.

***Policy recommendation:** More careful analysis is needed to establish the direct and indirect costs of PLAR to providers and to individual learners. Furthermore, there is a need to collect data based on commonly accepted indicators for PLAR*

Quality assurance

57. Provinces/territories recognise that quality assurance is still an issue, but there is growing awareness of the important role quality assurance plays, contributing to recognising and increasing stakeholder confidence in PLAR, in particular to reduce resistance to its legitimacy and use in higher education.

58. Although several provincial and territorial ministries and departments have played an important role in providing direction and financial support for the development of PLAR policies and procedures, no provincial/territorial government has established regulations to set PLAR quality standards. It may be possible (see Policy Recommendation 3) to establish a shared pan-Canadian set of principles that can help to anchor PLAR in the provinces/territories. No matter how various and diverse provincial/territorial solutions for PLAR, such an approach would provide more transparency of services and procedures. This could provide a baseline for more transparency in provincial/territorial activity. Thus, this could contribute to raise trust and acceptance on PLAR. Quality assurance is largely the responsibility of individual organisations, such as colleges, universities and regulatory bodies. A few provinces/territories have developed or are developing general PLAR policy frameworks that either include or embed elements of quality assurance, which stakeholders groups are encouraged to follow. This includes Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario and Quebec.

59. Institutions actively engaged in PLAR often incorporate elements of quality assurance into their PLAR practices. However, they do not adequately integrate these into the whole institution's quality assurance mechanisms. Some colleges and universities provide clear, transparent procedures and reliable decisions that rely on the expertise of individual managers and advisors. Currently, collaboration in such matters as training for assessors is not widespread. Formal collaborative structures among colleges and universities are the exception rather than the rule, although examples of such initiatives exist, for example in Quebec.

60. The recent report on Quality Assurance in PLAR (November 2007)¹⁰ provides a good starting point, setting out a range of measures that can be used selectively to identify the most appropriate PLAR quality assurance strategies. The purpose of the report is to promote targeted quality assurance, thus helping policy-makers and institutions develop robust quality assurance mechanisms for PLAR in Canada.

61. Because PLAR is still a recent concept in public education provision, raising trust and acceptance on the part of stakeholders and the wider public stakeholders adds importance to the question of quality assurance. Ways are needed to deliver prior learning assessment with quality assurance, without creating an undue burden for learners and institutions.

Policy recommendation: *Following on from Policy Recommendation 1, CMEC could discuss and debate the issue of quality assurance in PLAR, recommending its findings to the provinces and territories. This could be supported by building on the findings of the Slice of the Iceberg (1999) and Feedback from Learners (2003) and commissioning a longitudinal study on PLAR candidates' academic success, economic and wider benefits.*

9 Recognition in practice

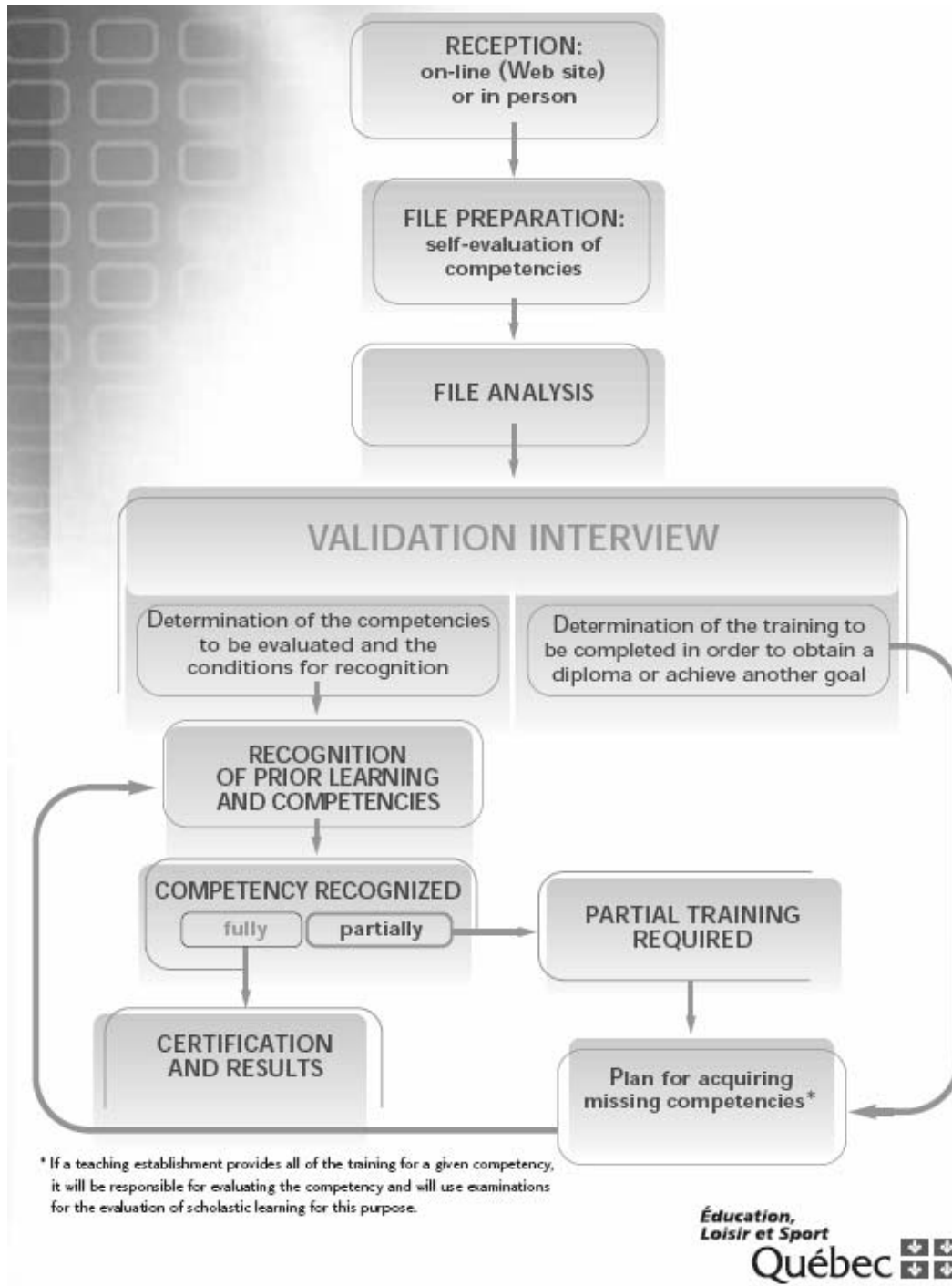
62. Among the provinces and territories, Quebec probably has the most explicit procedure for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This is described here, along with other examples. The main emphasis tends to be either the establishment of equivalences between qualifications and credits, or the recognition of knowledge, skills and attitudes that the individual has learnt, other than through recognised qualifications from the formal education and training system. 'Challenge' is a method frequently used by learners, particularly perhaps in the college sector, and evidence is most often gathered through the use of portfolios.

Published procedures

63. Quebec has a ministry-sponsored procedure for recognising prior learning. Legislation gives the individual the right of access to *RAC* provision. Education and training providers are empowered to operate the designated *RAC* procedures. The procedures can be adapted to each sub-sector. *RAC* is well suited to vocational education and training, because *référentiels* establish essential competences for each qualification in agreement with the sector stakeholders, thus there is a ready point of reference in terms of learning outcomes. There is less ambiguity about learning outcomes than, for example, is the case in higher education. As already indicated, a website is published and kept up-to-date, informing the public about how learners and organisations can use *RAC*. The website and published documents describe the pathway, tools and steps in the process. Furthermore, perhaps uniquely in Canada, *RAC* can be used in Quebec to achieve a full qualification, in which case the certificate indicates the qualification awarded, without distinguishing the pathway used to achieve it. The website is designed such that the learner or the worker is able to proceed through most of the application on-line, alternatively advice and guidance is provided on how to gather evidence and how to liaise with the appropriate provider. The *Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport* (MELS) provides a clear summary of the steps involved.

¹⁰ *Quality Assurance in PLAR*, November 2007. A research initiative on Quality Assurance in prior learning assessment and recognition in post-secondary education funded in part by Canadian Council of Learning (CCL) and conducted within a partnership formed by the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology in Saskatchewan, Ryerson University in Ontario, the University of New Brunswick and the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL).

Figure 1: Quebec's On-line RAC Procedure¹¹



Source: www.inforoutefpt.org/rac

64. In Quebec, policy and implementation are supported with funding measures. Providers are funded for each RAC procedure undertaken, and the province is now investing specific funding in each of

¹¹ This is how the system is presented on the official website

the regions for regional *RAC* development. This includes the development of wider *RAC* networks among providers and stakeholders, and more local instruments.

65. Although no other province or territory has a similarly public and legislated procedure that applies across the education system, some have PLAR procedures intended to apply to particular sub-sectors. This is the case with the Ontario policy for the college sector. Since 2003 the ministry has been committed to implementing prior learning assessment across the whole of the college sector. Through the work of a coordinating committee, research was conducted and provincial guidelines and training programmes developed. All the 24 colleges are now required to make recognition available to a broad range of adult learners, without overriding their local decision-making powers. A similar provision is underway for K-12 in general education, but for universities PLAR is at the discretion of each institution. Ontario funds providers for each PLAR assessment, as already discussed. At Humber College, for example, challenge is the preferred method for learners to gain credit or exemption (see below), and how labour market partnerships with Daimler/Chrysler and policing authorities have enabled employees to use PLAR procedures to gain sufficient credits to gain them access to a degree programme of studies, which would enable the employee concerned to cross a threshold for promotion to management.

66. Manitoba and Saskatchewan are, as Section 7 suggested, at the point of bringing coherent enabling policies for PLAR to fruition. The evidence presented to the OECD team strongly suggests that several other provinces and territories intend to follow their own broadly similar trajectory to establish PLAR more firmly. British Columbia, as reported, had a policy and implementation programme that was clear and wide-ranging in the late 1990s, but devolved responsibility for PLAR policy to postsecondary institutions in 2002.

67. In many other cases, colleges, adult education services and sometimes universities have developed their own published procedures for PLAR. The annex to this report provides several examples. Here, two examples from the college sector are illustrative. Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology in Manitoba has adopted PLAR as a mechanism and has a PLAR contact person in every department. Now into its second five-year strategy, the college's approach is based on respecting and valuing all kinds of learning. For PLAR, the 2005/10 business and action plan emphasises the central importance of the following: communication, quality assurance, staff development, partnerships, coordination and training. Insufficient funding is allocated, and this remains a problem. Douglas College in Vancouver, British Columbia, gives strong support to PLAR procedures. However, since the reversal of the provincial policy, which generated targeted or earmarked funding for professionals to manage and support PLAR across the province's postsecondary institutions, arrangements have withered and are now concentrated in the community education department of the college. SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) is a college that has made a priority of PLAR. A hundred of the college's programmes are posted as having adopted PLAR as part of the framework, and are developing a growing number of courses annually. Even though PLAR success rates are high and students tend subsequently to achieve well, the concept of PLAR was reported to the OECD team as still not widely understood by the general public. It was noted that PLAR is being recognised by those industry sectors where PLAR is addressing labour market pressures; (i.e. health sciences, early childhood education, correctional services). To build awareness and expertise provincially, SIAST is now delivering training in PLAR practices.

Equivalence and credit transfer arrangements

68. One prominent type of recognition, in terms of access to and progression through formal systems in education, training and the labour market, relates to establishing the equivalence between different qualifications. This is linked to arrangements for the transfer of credit from one situation to another.

69. Agreements allowing credit transfer between colleges within a province are normal across Canada, including in some instances between colleges and universities, and widespread between provinces/territories. Organisations like the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers (ACAT) and the British Columbia Council on Admissions & Transfer (BCCAT) have helped to bring this situation about. Credit transfer arrangements exist less between universities.

70. The Atlantic Provinces Community College Consortium (APCCC) has been instrumental in supporting signed agreements for credit transfer between colleges in Atlantic Canada. In Prince Edward Island, Holland College and the University of Prince Edward Island have numerous articulation agreements leading to degrees in specific programs.

71. However, it is in regulated professions that mobility recognition agreements probably create most friction, and this is a major barrier to fluid and full professional mobility. This tension was cited as a major problem by numerous participants across Canada. In spite of federal, regulatory bodies' and provinces/territories' attempts to improve matters, a lack of articulation of qualifications exists in many (but not all) circumstances. Also, this often creates hardship for the migrant involved in inter-province/territory migration and mobility arrangements. It causes difficulties for many newcomers to Canada, where there is a lack of recognition of qualifications and skills acquired in other countries. Organisations in each province (except two territories and the Atlantic Provinces, which are currently planning an Atlantic International Credential and Competency Assessment and Recognition (ICCAR) service) take on the task of recognising international credentials. In present circumstances the task is uphill, as already reported. For the authorities responsible for assessing or recognising foreign credentials, namely the provincial and territorial authorities, regulatory bodies and sector councils, this is currently a difficult task.

72. Because labour market articulation of skills and qualifications for mobility is identified as such a vital, modern issue, several of the case studies presented were attempting to ameliorate or resolve the issues. In British Columbia, the College of Midwives is providing bridging programmes so that midwives trained elsewhere are better prepared to take the province's examinations for qualification. In Nova Scotia, the Halifax Immigrants' Learning Centre provides language and orientation programs, pre-employment and work placement support. The Saskatchewan Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (SATCC) will help employers to identify equivalent qualifications for foreign-trained tradespersons and financially support skills training to Red Seal certification levels. SATCC no longer bases entrance into a programme on academic qualifications but encourages applicants to self-evaluate their ability to engage the program.

73. Barriers to occupational entry present, in short, a key challenge for recognition and licensing, and mobility.

Recognition of prior learning

74. Recognition of prior learning overlaps with the recognition of equivalences reported on above. But it has led to processes that are useful to think about separately. The learner's entitlement to 'challenge' for credit or exemption is common wherever non-formal and informal learning is recognised in Canada and this is often associated with one form or another of competence assessment.

75. As the name implies, challenge is a formal process that the learner can opt for, where PLAR is practised, with the aim of establishing that s/he should be awarded credit or exemption, on account of knowledge and skills acquired through former learning and/or experience. Typically, where a procedure is in place, the learner (normally already enrolled on a course, therefore this step is not available to those who are not enrolled) challenges the school, college or university authorities through a set procedure to accept

(validate) that s/he has already acquired the kinds of learning outcomes that the unit or credit or course is intended to teach. This results, when successful, in the award of credit towards a qualification.

76. Assessment of the learner's knowledge, skills and attitudes is an enabling process that many PLAR initiatives have established in order to recognise or help to develop the attributes that the learner has not gained through formal credentials and qualifications. Usually, this relates to particular target groups. Box 2 highlights some of the examples found across Canada.

Box 2. Some initiatives on competence assessment (and development)

- Prince Edward Island has a Path to Success project to identify and build up the essential skills (including writing skills) of apprentices who have previously failed the Red Seal written test. The anticipated outcomes include: increased number of clients successfully completing apprenticeship programs and achieving Red Seal Certification; increased capacity for individual clients to be successful in their lifelong learning plans by essential skills interventions; increased enrolment in apprenticeship training and trades training programs; increased capacity of training and employers to respond to individual needs of clients by creating new, barrier free pathways to learning. Essential skills assessment tools, trade skills passports and Essential Skills Trades Curricula developed during the project will be shared across Canada.
- The G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education at Ryerson University (Toronto, Ontario) has made competence assessment and development a priority through the development of special initiatives for immigrant professionals. Analysis of learners' competences (using industry standards) gained through their experience, and bridging programmes that may include industrial placements are among the tools in use across the adult learning school.
- Humber College (Toronto, Ontario) assesses the competences gained through working experience of serving police officers and of shop floor technicians in the automotive industry with Daimler/Chrysler, to enable them to enter degree programmes defined as needed if they are to progress to management.
- Adult learning centres in Manitoba use PLAR to build up the skills profile (including literacy skills), of adults seeking a high school diploma. Credits for literacy awarded by the centres count towards the high school diploma.
- The Manitoba Trades Qualification Unit assesses the qualifications and competencies of non-ticketed journeypersons acquired through on-the-job work experience, whether living in Canada or out-of-country. These skills/competencies are often gained as a result of non-formal and informal learning. The end goal for the Trades Qualifier is to attain a Manitoba Certificate of Qualification in a regulated, designated trade.
- Several provinces have new requirements for a qualification to work as a care assistant in social services and in early years education. PLAR is a commonly used technique for demonstrating competence, used for example by the *Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface*, Manitoba.

77. Initiatives for competence assessment show that PLAR thrives best in situations where a holistic approach is taken to learning. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is, therefore, often better suited to modern forms of teaching and learning that are based more on learning outcomes and the development of capability or competence, than on traditional approaches to teaching and testing a content-laden curriculum.

The portfolio as the preferred tool

78. Just as the challenge is the most common mechanism for gaining credit or other recognition in the education and training systems, so the portfolio is undoubtedly the most used device for collecting and presenting evidence of PLAR. As has been found to be the case in other countries, the learner's activity

(often guided) in gathering a portfolio together allows a wide range of evidences to be included and taken into account. As well as written papers and diaries, and evidence of previous work, community and personal experiences (some kind of CV) and testimonials, the portfolio gives room for artefacts, photographs, audio and filmed evidence, and lends itself to evidence collected using ICT.

79. Of course, this can be time consuming. On the other hand, the portfolio is sometimes also seen as being a tool for active learning, as well as a tool for assessment. This is because the portfolio supports the process of self-assessment to identify both strengths and gaps in the learner's profile, and helps providers to identify and negotiate ways that the learner's profile can be improved, for instance for entry to a college or to a regulated profession. One of the clearest instances of the use of the portfolio is at the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia. All the learners who are seeking personal or professional development through the PLA Centre build up a portfolio of learning as an assessment, self-assessment and learning development tool. The PLA Centre uses an experiential learning approach to train PLA assessors and education and training providers to develop outcomes-based curricula. The centre supports the applicant, who is to submit evidence to assemble the portfolio, and also advises on filling gaps through further training. This helps the learners to come to grips with written examinations for professional entry. The Nova Scotia Community College is associated with this initiative, in that all students must complete a portfolio for graduation. In addition some of the college's successful graduates achieve this through portfolio completion. For this reason the college is widely called the Portfolio College.

80. Though not on such a college - or centre-wide basis, many PLAR initiatives use the portfolio as the preferred tool. The Centre for Adult Accreditation in Athabasca University in Alberta, for example, which was founded in 1970, has over 70% of undergraduates who are first generation higher education learners, and 80% who work as they learn. PLAR is quite widely used, and the portfolio for credit challenge is the method used.

81. A noteworthy advance on the portfolio approach has been developed at Douglas College in Vancouver, British Columbia. As a long-established PLAR centre experiencing difficulty after the withdrawal of British Columbia's provincial coordinated approach to PLAR policies and targeted funding, the college has remained determined to operate PLAR as widely as it can in restricted circumstances, and to continue to innovate. The college has developed what it calls the Flextrack process for the learner to undertake PLAR. This involves a process of gateway assessment, credit transfer where applicable and challenge using on-line tools. It was reported that this process does not sacrifice quality or risk standards, is faster and much less expensive to complete. If this initiative matures, it may be of wide interest to all users of PLAR (learners, institutions and employers), in offsetting some of the negative aspects of completing comprehensive and detailed portfolios in the traditional ways.

82. Behind this lies a tension that has been a clear theme of this report. Recognition is used as an alternative method of assessment for qualification, when compared to traditional qualification procedures in the academic world or in the labour market. Yet, at the same time, PLAR is often used as a facilitator that allows the learner to sit traditional exams for qualification or recognition. In fields such as medicine written exams may be a necessary way to test some kinds of knowledge. In other fields the requirement of a written exam may, unnecessarily, block entrance to qualified status. This might be the case for a skilled mechanic or construction worker.

Recognition in the sub-sectors of education and training

83. It must be stated once again that any general conclusions summarising practices in the provinces/territories is liable to inaccuracy, because of the variations between provinces/territories. However, as the evidence and analysis contained in this report suggest different subsectors of education and training provision take up PLAR to rather different degrees.

84. The colleges, even though use is by no means general, are a sector that seems to use PLAR quite frequently and to a growing extent. Where provincial policies are in place, these seem to apply most fluently in the college setting. Possibly this is because the college setting is deeply concerned with vocational education and training, therefore with both identified sets of technical and generic skills, and with the development of people whose prior learning experience is readily relevant to qualifications offered.

85. Also, however, adult and continuing education provides evidence of some innovative and also quite widespread usage. Again, there is the linkage with skills and experience, and also that adult education has as part of its *modus operandi* the task of facilitating the learning of disadvantaged groups, and engaging unsuccessful and reluctant learners with a learning environment. K-12 education makes little use of PLAR with younger learners, but often offers opportunities for older learners who need certification for entry to some other qualification or career development. This report has brought a few such cases to light. An example is the Northwest Territories, where the Adult Learning and Basic Services have set up arrangements through which aboriginals who did not complete high school can gain a high school diploma through credit and PLAR recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

86. Higher education seems to be the most reluctant partner for PLAR. Frequently, universities are reported to be concerned at issues of quality assurance in relation to PLAR, and as unwilling to compromise their autonomy to fit in with provincial policies. Nevertheless, there are some encouraging signs, for example with regard to Ryerson University in Toronto and Athabasca University in Alberta. Ryerson University has adopted a commitment to experiential learning. As reported earlier, CMEC has recommended that universities consider how to optimise their use of PLAR. Population changes in some parts of Canada mean that there will be far fewer young people to occupy college and university places, and this is a factor that is likely to persuade more universities that there is a business case to review their entry policies, and to give greater consideration to non-traditional forms of entry and progression, including PLAR.

87. Finally, it seems clear that in the labour market, many firms, particularly large companies, have shifted their human resource orientation, and now concentrate on the skills, knowledge and competence development of their workforce. Again, many firms are aware of an acute shortage of labour and/or skills and appear to be well motivated to optimise their use of skills already available in Canada, and through further immigration.

Target groups

88. This report has indicated that particular groups are targeted for PLAR. This includes: aboriginal groups, immigrants, migrants crossing provincial/territorial borders, up-skilling employees for promotion, up-skilling low-skilled and older workers, and providing potential entry to education and/or employment for unemployed people as well as those who left school without qualifications and at risk of exclusion.

89. While PLAR helps people seeking advancement, it frequently seeks to reach excluded groups from the economic and social well-being that most Canadians enjoy. PLAR is a specific tool being used in some cases as a way of reaching aboriginal populations, including self-help. Athabasca University, for example, has targeted for access to higher education many members of aboriginal groups, whose family had no university background. Saskatchewan has identified aboriginal employment development as a priority, facilitating this through the recognition and use of non-formal and informal learning opportunities, and the use of challenge. Two lines of thought lie behind this policy: the province has a rapidly growing shortage of skilled people in a rapidly expanding economy; and, all the population groups are static or falling, except for the aboriginal groups, which are expanding. At the same time, it is precisely the aboriginal groups that tend to be excluded from the social and cultural capital of extensive access to

learning, and from jobs in all sectors of the labour market. The policy is to develop public/private partnerships involving the stakeholders, including aboriginal communities. The mechanism used is locally based partnerships to overcome barriers to entry to learning and to open up to individual opportunities in education and employment. Nursing and the new requirement for community care workers to have a qualification are examples of openings in the labour market where considerable success has already been achieved numerically. The establishment of the First Nations University of Canada, with three campus locations in Saskatchewan, provides an avenue and, importantly, perspectives that recognise and respect aboriginal community values and aspirations. Support and funding for this kind of initiative has opened up new avenues, and ensure that they are appropriate to the needs and cultures of the communities. The Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research (GDI), established in Saskatchewan, is Canada's only recognized Métis College. One arm of GDI which serves the technical and adult upgrading needs of Métis learners (Dumont Technical Institute) has set up a grade-twelve PLAR credit founded on language recognition and skills in the community, based on Métis values of knowledge of the land and people.

90. In Manitoba, this idea is given a specific policy context and framework for application. The province has supported a project called “Igniting the Power Within”. The purpose is to develop Essential Skills and PLAR for aboriginal communities. In quite a small project, the communities themselves consult on and shape how the project should develop. In particular, representatives wanted to reflect the mindset, idiom and the values of the communities. So far the project has attracted limited funding, but has set the objective of issuing competence-based certificates as the end result. Thus, the project is an entry-to-learning project, rather than leading to full qualification. Other colleges and initiatives in Manitoba are driving in the same direction, as for example in the reported case of the Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology.

91. In summary, a variety of interesting case studies and good practice exists in Canada for PLAR. In part, this variety exists because of the provincial/territorial and decentralised approach that is taken. PLAR has a considerable potential in helping to meet several of the challenges that Canadians face.

Policy recommendation: *This is an appropriate moment for CMEC and stakeholders to consider how to generalise to a greater extent the lessons learnt in successful PLAR initiatives and innovations in different fields at the local and provincial/territorial levels.*

92. This development can bring significant benefits to individuals, employers and other stakeholders.

10 Supporting policy development and implementation, and sustainability

93. This report has already reached conclusions and policy recommendations relating to improved policy learning to expand the use of PLAR in Canada. PLAR is well adapted to many of the dominant needs and values in Canada's systems of education, training and to labour market needs (if not to some labour market entry practices). Recognition of non-formal and informal learning can clearly support the implementation of Canada's economic and social goals, as expressed at local, provincial and territorial, and at federal levels.

Policy recommendation: *In addition to the previous policy recommendations, the following should be given consideration, under the leadership of CMEC and its partners:*

- *To undertake further research on approaches to PLAR that show signs of helping to overcome barriers to professional recognition.*
- *To improve the available data on take-up.*

- *To raise the level of public and professional debate on PLAR, as concerns: funding approaches and methodologies; establishing posts for PLAR professionals; incentivising providers and learners; reaching the target groups through coherent policy intervention; growing PLAR through local champions and wider communities of practice.*
- *To achieve a shift to peer learning and forms of collaboration to overcome any potential diseconomies of scale, without sacrificing jurisdictional responsibilities.*

11 Synthesis of policy recommendations

94. This final section brings together the policy recommendations contained in the report.

Policy recommendation 1

A better situation of peer learning between the provinces/territories on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning could be achieved through a ministerial agreement that PLAR be added to the educational themes that CMEC confers on, through its system of working committees.

Policy recommendation 2

Policy makers and stakeholders should consider more widely the evidence for adopting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, often referred to as PLAR, as a tool that can help significantly to tackle specific, identified challenges that many learners, employees, employers and migrants face in their local, provincial/territorial and Canadian environments. To this end, a more concerted approach on the part of CMEC to collect data would be a constructive step.

Policy recommendation 3

The provinces/territories – individually and through the CMEC – should work with regulatory bodies and sector councils to extend the use of recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Policy recommendation 4

As far as is logical and consistent with specific needs, provinces and territories, through CMEC, could keep abreast of the essential skills definitions.

Policy recommendation 5

Several provinces/territories are energetic and innovative in developing policies on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Using PLAR, policy makers, the regulatory bodies and sector councils should consider ways of reducing any unnecessary barriers to labour market entry.

Policy recommendation 6

A key challenge is to harmonise the need for quality for entry to regulated and controlled labour markets with the need to make best use of available and skilled people seeking entry to the labour market.

Policy recommendation 7

More careful analysis is needed to establish the direct and indirect costs of PLAR to providers and to individual learners.

Policy recommendation 8

Following on from Policy Recommendation 1, CMEC could discuss and debate the issue of quality assurance in PLAR, recommending its findings to the provinces and territories. This could be supported by building on the findings of the Slice of the Iceberg (1999) and Feedback from Learners (2003) and commissioning a longitudinal study on PLAR candidates' academic success, economic and wider benefits.

Policy recommendation 9

This is an appropriate moment for CMEC, its stakeholders and partners to consider how to generalise to a greater extent the lessons learnt in successful PLAR initiatives and innovations in different fields at the local and provincial/territorial levels. This development can bring significant benefits to individuals, employers and other stakeholders.

Policy recommendation 10

In addition to the previous policy recommendations, the following should be given consideration, under the leadership of CMEC and its partners:

- To undertake further research on approaches to PLAR that show signs of helping to overcome barriers to professional recognition.
- To improve the available data on take-up.
- To raise the level of public and professional debate on PLAR, as concerns: funding approaches and methodologies; establishing posts for PLAR professionals; incentivising providers and learners; reaching the target groups through coherent policy intervention; growing PLAR through local champions and wider communities of practice.
- To achieve a shift to peer learning and forms of collaboration to overcome any potential diseconomies of scale, without sacrificing jurisdictional responsibilities.

ANNEX 1 SOME ILLUSTRATIVE CASE STUDIES

Alberta: Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers

ACAT has played a leading role in credit transfer; the council encourages collaboration and advocates greater use of PLAR. The council has made an inventory of best practices.

Alberta: Athabasca University's Centre for Adult Accreditation

Has established qualification recognition, PLAR portfolios for challenged and credit transfer. Seven out of ten graduates are first generation in higher education; eight out of ten students are working,

British Columbia: C2T2 – PLAR strategies for the province in 1990s, changed in 2002

British Columbia's province-level initiatives in the mid and late 1990s set up PLAR coordinators across the province. BC was a PLAR leader in Canada, until it moved in 2002 to a block funding approach and funds were not specifically targeted to PLAR initiatives. Each individual institution has discretion on how to allocate the funds.

British Columbia: Douglas College, Vancouver, British Columbia: Flex-Track approach to PLAR to replace the portfolio system

College management supports PLAR, although it is now more tenuous than when there was a central coordinating organisation. PLAR work centres on the department of child, family and community studies. The Flex-Track pathway is an on-line innovation, and is intended to take PLAR 'beyond portfolio assessment'.

Manitoba: Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology

Now into its second 5-year strategy, the college's approach is based on respect and valuing learning. The 2005/10 business/action plan comprises communication, QA, staff development, systems coordination, resources (an issue), partnerships, coordination (a PLAR designate in every department) and training.

Manitoba: Apprenticeship Branch - The Trades Qualification Unit

The Trades Qualification Unit (TQU) is developing ways to apply PLAR principles to improve the success rates of Trades Qualifiers. Utilizing the National Occupational Analysis TQ applicants can review, in detail, the knowledge they declared during the application process (Work Experience Form). This approach will both direct their upgrading strategy and allow for the integration of new trade specific knowledge. Applicants are provided with learning supports, such as individual learning modules, text books, CDs, etc., as well as Essential Skills, English as an Additional Language and Trades Qualification upgrading courses provided by local community colleges..

Manitoba: Igniting the Power Within

The focus is on essential skills and PLAR for aboriginal communities. The approach being taken is to consult carefully with communities and elders so that they can identify the most appropriate ways of developing skills and PLAR, linking contexts without sacrificing either traditional cultural values and thought, or access to the labour market and modern communications

Newfoundland and Labrador: Skills Task Force

Newfoundland and Labrador does not yet have a provincially coordinated approach to PLAR, though there is a consensus among educational institutions, government, business and labour concerning the need. The recently released Skilled Task Force Report specifically addresses PLAR through increased support to trades qualifiers, credit transfer and institutional policy.

Northwest Territories: Adult Learning and Basic Services

A high school diploma gained through credit and PLAR recognition of non-formal and informal learning for aboriginals

Northwest Territories: Aurora College

Developing and using PLAR since 1995

Nova Scotia: The PLA Centre

The centre is independent of the provincial government, but receives mainly public money and is an influential hub of PLA development. The activity centres on recognising prior learning through portfolio or other evidence. The work of the centre accentuates the link between PLAR and the importance of experiential aspects in learning.

Nova Scotia: The Portfolio College

The NS Community College is known as the Portfolio College. All students have to complete a portfolio for graduation, accentuating the links between experience, learning and assessment, rather than a formal dependence on credential and written examination

Ontario: PLAR established across the colleges

Ontario has had a policy requiring the delivery of PLAR in the colleges for some years. This means that coordinators are encouraged, and all colleges have some involvement in PLAR, though this still affects the progression of only a small minority of students. Colleges are funded per credit achieved by PLAR, although the amount of funding has remained unchanged for some years

Ontario: PLAR at Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education provides model for whole university strategy

The Chang School has championed PLAR as a part of student-centred learning strategies for immigrant professionals and as part of labour market orientation. Bridging programmes facilitate professional recognition, based on using competence systems to generate and recognise the outcomes of previous and experiential learning. Still, students have to sit for the regulated professions' exams – Canada's approach to failsafe in regulated occupational entry and Red Seal qualifications

Ontario: Humber College in partnership with policing sector and Daimler/Chrysler

Daimler/Chrysler has developed a policy that for promotion beyond supervisor the candidate must have a degree. Humber has developed a portfolio system with Daimler/Chrysler for recognising learning from experience – approx 15 have completed degrees this way – some courses, some credit – and many more have completed diplomas. After 4 cohorts the union got involved in this approach to learning, and the scheme is firmly embedded in the company. Similarly, in a different initiative, the college is providing credit for the learning outcomes of experience for police officers seeking to enter a degree course, which is now a requirement for promotion.

Prince Edward Island: Literacy Initiatives Secretariat links to labour market initiatives

A long and gradual development over a decade positions PEI for a more thorough and integrated approach to PLAR.

Prince Edward Island: Cavendish Farms initiative

A public and private sector co-development linking a well-being for employees' initiatives with PLAR

Quebec provincial government: Appel de projets du MELS (juillet 2005):

In Quebec, the *Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS)* has established two sets of initiatives designed to support the further development of recognition (*RAC*). One aspect entails regional approaches to collaboration within the province. The second incubates research and innovative practice on recognition. Both aspects are by competitive invitation to tender; every region is involved in the former aspect.

Quebec provincial government: website dedicated to recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RAC)

MELS has developed and maintains a website to open up information on *RAC* to a wider public, and to facilitate and extend take-up. The site can be found on www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/rac. Access to the site can initiate a clearly described process of steps that will, if the learner is successful, lead to recognition or the issuing of a credential or qualification.

Saskatchewan: Labour Force Development Board dissolved and the Saskatchewan Labour Market Commission established

Over almost a decade the SLFDB steered PLAR. The push was substantially from the labour market. The SLFDB was keenly interested in ensuring that Saskatchewan established fair and equitable processes to support the recognition of all learning and was mandated to co-chair the Recognizing Prior Learning Coordinating Group (RCG) and advance the priorities of the recognizing prior learning provincial policy framework. The SLFDB was dissolved in January, 2007 and the Saskatchewan Labour Market Commission (SLMC) was established. The SLMC has not yet established any strategic policy for PLAR. Therefore, the leadership for the RCG has been coordinated by the Government of Saskatchewan.

Saskatchewan: Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (SATCC)

SATCC works to prepare people – including many immigrants for Red Seal and other occupational qualifications through the recognition of non-formal and informally acquired knowledge and skills. On the job training guides for each trade have been developed; checklists are being tested in several trades to

simplify the process for employers and supervisors. Providing upgrading courses for tradespersons who have not been through an apprenticeship is another key way to fill gaps in knowledge and abilities.

Saskatchewan: SIAST – PLAR across a college

SIAST is a college that has made a priority of PLAR. 100 programmes are posted and each year capacity builds with a growing number of courses in development. In practice, less than 4% of PLAR applicants are not successful in their challenge, yet the concept is still not widely understood by the general population. The college envisions the need for a public awareness campaign.

Saskatchewan: Dumont Technical Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research

The province and Canada's only Métis college, has set up a grade twelve PLAR based on language recognition, skills in the community, knowledge of the land and people (Métis culture)

Saskatchewan: Regina Open Door – Enhanced Language Training Program for Immigrants

Provides professional newcomers to Canada needs assessments, labour market language instruction, and work-placement and mentorship opportunities. Immigrant learners reflect upon competencies, explore their place in the current labour market, and produce relevant tools for successful job searches. ELT staff provides guidance and support for newcomers to refine both their language skills and ability to integrate into the current workplace culture. The Employment Services Department supports newcomers with low level English skills. Resources such as computer access and newspapers as well as a World Class Workforce Job Board are used to assist learners to reflect upon competencies, explore their place in the current labour market, and produce relevant tools for successful job searches. ES staff provides courses, guidance and support for newcomers to refine both their language skills and ability to secure employment in the current workplace. Capacity in English language is cited as a very important factor in successful labour market attachment.

Saskatchewan: Regional Colleges and their satellites

Although the regional colleges cannot grant credits, they work in rural and isolated communities and are a key mechanism for entry and re-entry to learning. – ESL, literacy, bridging courses for example.

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