

# **Government Relations**

# CLFDB Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition Consultation: Canada's Colleges Respond

#### March 1996

ACCC forwarded the CLFDB's consultation paper to all of its member institutions through their President's offices. The consultation document engendered substantial discussion within the system. A number of institutions provided the ACCC secretariat wit h written responses and the following is based on a synthesis of the points raised by our membership.

#### **General Observations**

Canada's colleges, institutes and cégeps have undertaken a significant amount of work in the development of Prior Learning and Assessment (PLA) at both the provincial and institutional levels. Colleges in the province of Quebec have been using P LA for the last 10 years. Individual colleges have used various PLA approaches since their inception. The experience of these institutions with PLA and its applications for both learners and employers has convinced colleges of the value and potential of a national PLA system. A system tied to specific national occupational standards could enhance the credibility of the learning portfolio\passport\record as well as facilitate the transferability and portability of credentials. However; this support for a national PLA system is tempered by the realization that the development of a national initiative in this area will be difficult from both a political and financial perspective. It is also important to stress that there are a number of different assessment tools and approaches which work in different contexts depending on the area(s) of credit being sought. This is a very complex area, one that is intrinsically tied to the issues currently faced with respect to transferability, mobility and portability of educational credits. Thus, a vision of a national system for PLA is a goal to aspire to, while remaining cognizant of the significant complexities along the route.

It was very unclear to our members, whether the CLFDB's intent with respect to PLA involved the development of a national framework of guiding principles for PLA or the development of a rigid set of rules governing PLA. If the CLFDB's intent is to develop a framework of guiding principles, similar in concept to the CLFDB training standards paper, ACCC would be most supportive. However, for many of our members their reading of the PLAR consultation document suggested that the CLFDB's approach is founded in rigidity and centralism, something which ACCC could not support. At the same time, the workshop presented at the PLA Conference and subsequent discussions between ACCC Secretariat Staff and CLFDB staff indicate that the CLFDB is concentrating on a guiding principles approach.

The addition of the term Recognition to Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) elicited a number of criticisms. Most practitioners of PLA in the field indicated that PLA is the accepted term outside of Canada and that the majority of provincial initiatives in this area have also used PLA. Our francophone membership also indicated that the CLFDB's french term for PLA Evaluation et reconnaissance des acquis is not used by francophone practitioners. It was suggested that he CLFDB adopt the more widely used Reconnaissance des acquis (RDA). We are cognizant of the desire of individuals to have their prior learning assessed as well as recognized, but would argue that recognition is an inherent component of the existing term (PLA).

## Q1. Comments on the National Strategy

## 1.1 The Key to Success

Irrespective of the strategy adopted, ACCC must indicate that the success of national approach to PLA will be highly dependent on the acceptance of PLA by the various labour market partners, outside of the formal education system. In Canada, PLA has be en used by colleges in order to assist incoming learners, but has not

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been readily accepted by professional or occupational societies or employer groups. ACCC recommends that the CLFDB should focus attention on the front end of the process, i.e. assessing the readiness of the labour market partners to use PLA, assess the awareness of PLA and even marketing the process. The CLFDB could undertake a cost\benefit analysis of PLA and use the results of this research to build support for the a national system of PLA with the professional and occupational societies and employer groups.

It is also important that the CLFDB acknowledge the considerable amount of work on PLA at the provincial level and that the CLFDB's effort in this endeavour must build upon the existing PLA framework as opposed to supplanting the existing framework. The CLFDB's effort must not be perceived as an imposition of a national framework from on high, but rather the logical next step in the development and utilization of PLA. We would recommend that the CLFDB approach CAPLA and encourage it to play a significant role in the development of the national PLA initiative.

While the listing of "What must be done\Why\By Whom" in the consultation document is to be commended for its analysis and delineation of the needed steps, the majority of responses received by ACCC suggested that there was little in the way of a strategy aimed at the development of pan-Canadian commitment to the principles of PLA standards. While PLA is certainly a priority within many colleges and institutes it is still at an emergent stage in others. PLA is even less in evidence amongst other training providers. Coupling this with the lack of recognition of PLA credits by various accrediting bodies, indicates a major focus on the promotion of the PLA concept is necessary.

## **Q2. Comments on the Proposed National Standards**

The national standards advanced in the consultation document would be more appropriately entitled as a "National Framework of Guiding Principles for PLA". If they were then included in a document similar to the CLFDB Training Standards document, which also included an action plan for building understanding and support of the concept and the principles by the various labour market partners, the value of the document would be much greater.

2. The PLAR process must be equitable, i.e., barrier-free and bias free.

Comment: There are costs associated with PLA assessment that will most likely fall to the assessee and could therefore act as a barrier to assessment. However, costs are not an equity barrier in the traditional sense. Clarity is needed around the term "barrier-free".

7. The assessment tools and their PLAR application should be developed by, recognized and accepted by all the labour market partners.

Comment: Numerous assessment tools have already been developed, used, modified, and validated by PLA practitioners in cégeps, colleges and institutes. We believe strongly that the tools must be developed by those with the expertise in this field. This is vital, in that the use of the wrong assessment tools for the skills, knowledge and experience being assessed could result in significant disadvantages for the individual being assessed. As various accrediting bodies are also pressed to use PLA approaches for individuals not coming through an institutional program base, their need for skilled PLA tool developers/assessors will become increasingly significant. Certainly, feedback from the other labour market partners is valuable, however the primary responsibility must rest with those with the expertise.

8. The assessing institution must provide assessment options, and the opportunity and assistance for individuals to make choices regarding both how the assessment is done and who conducts the assessment.

Comment: Educational institutions, which will be issuing the credential, must maintain control over the assessment process, including the assessor and the method of assessment. In most instances, the learner does not possess the knowledge of PLA required to make the choices listed in this standard. Colleges have found that different assessment techniques are more appropriate in different skill areas. Moreover, the choice of an inappropriate assessment tool could actually limit the award of credits. We would recommend dropping this standard.

11. The recognition that results from PLAR should be transferable and portable from within and between

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institutions and jurisdictions so that an individual does not have to needlessly replicate the PLAR process, and is able to move from place to place without losing credits or credentials.

Comment: While this objective is desirable, it must be understood that its realization will be linked to the progress, and most likely lag behind, a system of credit and course transferability. A national standard for PLA must respect the diversity of the assessing institutions as much as it promotes commonality amongst these institutions. There are provincial differences in the manner in which prior learning is assessed, which need to be respected if a national standard is to be accepted.

12. The recognition that is awarded through PLAR should not be differentiated from that awarded in the traditional manner.

13. Credentials should reflect learning rather than when where or how the training\education took place.

Comment: As educational institutions respond to the new funding realities, they are becoming much more market driven in their practices. Institutions now realize that image, identity and distinctiveness are highly valuable to learners and employers. An institution's willingness to conduct PLA and grant credit for experiential learning will depend on the ability to preserve the uniqueness of their credential. Some have suggested that recognition of experiential learning ought to be differentiated in order to preserve the value of the credential. Moreover, many institutions and/or provincial governments may require a residency period or a period of attendance at the institution prior to the award of a credential. From the perspective of learning institutions, standards 13 and 14 ignore the importance for colleges, institutes and cégeps of credentials bearing their institution's name.

## Q3. National PLAR Standards: Next Steps

1. CLFDB needs to reach out to the non-education labour market partners and assess support for PLA, create awareness about PLA and market the concept. This is a big effort. The labour market partners are vital if the life and work experiences of individuals, and the credits they receive for such through PLA are to be widely accepted beyond the educational institutions. Indeed groups such as the sector councils could lead the way in enhancing the credibility of PLA, particularly within the context of the emergence of national occupational standards.

2. The CLFDB should publish a document, similar to the Training Standards document, outlining a National Framework of PLA Guiding Principles. We stress again the importance of having a more principles-based focus than the more rigid and centralist approach implied by the words "national standards". Principles are typically more readily subscribed to and simply changing the terminology would forward the national case for PLA.

3. Need to link PLA at colleges to training requirements of occupational and professional associations\groups at the national level. Minimum national occupational standards are needed in order to realize the whole potential of PLA and would make the development of PLA approaches a much more integrated process. National occupational standards have the potential of will leading to the development of widely applied assessment tools, which are appropriate for a particular field. At the present time the recognition of national occupational standards rests with the Forum of Labour Market Ministers. It will be important to gain the support of the Forum for the Guiding Principles, again to further build the credibility and momentum of acceptance of PLA in the wider community.

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