

**Nova Scotia Department of Labour and  
Workforce Development**

# **Recognition of Prior Learning Policy Framework**



Prepared by  
**The PLA Centre**



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## Glossary of abbreviations used in this report

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <b>RPL</b>   | RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (UMBRELLA TERM FOR RECOGNIZING FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING)      |
| <b>PLAR</b>  | Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (primary focus on experiential and informal learning) |
| <b>DLWD</b>  | Department of Labour and Workforce Development  |
| <b>AOP</b>   | Achieving Our Potential: An action Plan for PLAR in Canada by PLA Centre                        |
| <b>QCF</b>   | Qualifications and Credit Framework   |
| <b>WEI</b>   | Workplace Education Initiative Program  |
| <b>NSSAL</b> | Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning   |
| <b>EAS</b>   | Employment Assistance Services  |
| <b>DCS</b>   | Department of Community Services  |
| <b>NSCC</b>  | Nova Scotia Community College   |

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Making the Case for Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) in Nova Scotia

### **Current Situation: Recession, Recovery and Transformation of the Economy**

As a result of the recent recession, thousands of Nova Scotians are going through the personal trauma of job loss and the life, family and community upheaval that results. Yet as difficult as the effects of recession have been on individuals and communities, it is increasingly clear that we will not be able to return to things as they were. The challenges which confront us are rooted in a deeper and more complex dynamic—one that recognizes significantly increased interdependence between and among the systems of society, the environment, the economy and the labour force—and calls for nothing short of transformational change, if we are to respond effectively.

At the local level, many will not return to the same workplaces to do the same work. In fact, much of the work of the past will disappear—as jobs shift to workers in new locations and the focus in developed economies moves from ‘knowledge’ to an increased emphasis on ‘innovation and creativity’. Those returning to work will have to adjust to new work settings, draw upon the transferable skills acquired in previous jobs, and in many cases learn new and higher level skills to support productivity gains in a more competitive global marketplace. Many will change occupations; all will need to adjust to new economic and social environments.

At the same time, demographic trends indicate imminent labour market shortages due to the fact that older workers are beginning to leave the labour force at higher rates than the younger cohorts entering it. In Nova Scotia, for example, that shift will occur within the next year or two and will accelerate over the next decade.<sup>1</sup>

Although predictions of ‘labour shortage’ may be temporarily masked by a ‘jobless’ economic recovery which fails to generate employment at the same rate and scale as previously—a deeper current of evolutionary change is emerging that will affect the long term health of our workforce and communities. This is evident in the voices that are now urging us to recognize the systemic nature of the crisis and shift our economic and social priorities from *growth* to *sustainability*, from *consumption* to *conservation*, and from *competition* to *collaboration*.

Beyond the immediate problems remains the inevitable long term predicament of labour supply challenges. These challenges cross industrial and geographic boundaries and are broader and deeper than a simple approach to training can satisfy. Neither can they be ‘solved’ by the traditional measures of improved technology and increased immigration. Responses by the formal education and training systems have also proved to be inadequate to the scope and nature of the problem especially as it relates to the need for change within those very systems themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> J.D. McNiven, with Michael Foster. The Developing Workforce Problem; Confronting Canadian Labour Shortages in the Coming Decade (AIMS) October 2009

What is clear in the face of such turbulence and inevitable upheaval is that new multi-faceted public policy approaches are urgently required to put in place innovative and effective human resources support services and programs. In short, we will need both to find new workers and increase the skills of all workers. This includes extending the new workforce to include the ‘reserve labour force’ and those traditionally marginalized as well as addressing:

- the immediate and short-term recessionary impacts of unemployment, industrial displacement and community disintegration;
- the mid-term ‘labour market shortage / labour market surplus’ situation that may arise;
- the long-term need to maintain and enhance the skills, capacities and knowledge of Nova Scotians and Canadians generally; and build a system which can respond in an inclusive way to the evolving and changing needs of individual citizens / workers.

### **The Role and Potential of RPL**

In this context, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a first order response to the recessionary, labour adjustment and ‘transformational’ challenges we face. The two basic principles of RPL are:

- What individuals know and can do is more important than where or how they learned those things, and
- No one should have to spend time, energy and resources learning over again what they already know and can do.

Applied to the formal training and education system, these principles result in greater efficiency of training systems by focusing training investments on identified knowledge and skill gaps ; the enhancement and acceleration of credentialing processes; fairer and more accessible international and domestic licensing arrangements; and greater labour mobility.

For the over 100,000 adult Nova Scotians with few or no formal qualifications, RPL methodologies analyse and articulate the skills and knowledge they have acquired through their life, community and work experience. RPL also identifies both the transferable skills they can use and the learning gaps they need to fill. Most importantly, it builds the confidence and motivation necessary to participate more fully in the economic and civic life of their communities.

In the longer term, RPL strategies have the capacity to mobilize large groups of discouraged and disadvantaged learners, including those who are unemployed or marginally attached to the workforce. In Nova Scotia, these groups include:

- Aboriginal and African-Nova Scotians
- Newcomers to Canada without formal qualifications, and others facing systemic and/or cultural barrier
- Adults facing low literacy challenges
- Social assistance recipients and long-term unemployed
- Persons with disabilities.

At the same time, RPL has proven to be equally effective with other groups facing significant transition challenges. These include:

- Employees with inadequate skill levels facing new job requirements and with limited ‘trainability’ potential due to essential skills deficits and/or attitudinal issues (lack of confidence, motivation, etc.);
- Single parents wishing to return to work;
- Highly skilled and experienced workers being displaced due to international competition, restructuring or technological change;
- Internationally educated professionals seeking certification and employment in their field of expertise;
- Well-qualified and credentialed groups (i.e. recent university graduates; women returning to the workforce, mid-career changers, etc.) who find themselves in low-skill/low-wage jobs;
- Retirees who want/need to continue to work in positions more appropriate to their age and circumstances;
- Para-professional groups (e.g.: Continuing Care Assistants, etc.) with experiential skills and knowledge, but facing new service standards and certification requirements.

### **The RPL Leadership Challenge in Nova Scotia**

Internationally, many countries are developing and implementing RPL policies and practices. In Canada it is generally acknowledged that Manitoba and Quebec have the most well-established and fully developed RPL systems. In Nova Scotia, with a decade and a half of fragmented but successful innovation and development in this field, the province is well placed to take its place as a national and international exemplar of this creative approach to human resources development and social and economic inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

The following Policy Framework provides a comprehensive strategy and the detailed steps necessary to achieve that result. The DLWD is well-placed to provide the collaborative and government-wide leadership required. The PLA Centre looks forward to participating in and contributing to this timely, bold and creative initiative.

## **1.2 Objectives**

The scope of this project grew from an original focus on the development of an internal departmental ‘Policy Framework on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)’ to a deeper understanding of the potential of the field of learning recognition strategies to contribute to and enhance the work of the Nova Scotia Government in human resource development. Consultations with internal (government) and external (community and industry) partners served to further clarify the purpose and context of the project—enabling the Department of Labour and Workforce Development (DLWD) PLAR Committee to envision the conditions and

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<sup>2</sup> Over a 15-year period, the PLA Centre has worked in partnership with the Nova Scotia Departments of Community Services, Education and Health. It has also partnered with a number of federal agencies in the province including, DND, CORCAN, and HRSDC, as well as with a variety of community agencies and PSE institutions.

opportunities for facilitating government-wide participation and action<sup>3</sup>. The proposed framework that has resulted is both a guide to DLWD program action and a conceptual blueprint for further dialogue and discussion among government partners. In addition it provides a first approach or foundational base from which to build wide and inclusive stakeholder involvement in a provincial initiative on “Seamless Learning”.

It is intended that the Framework will guide the DLWD in the development of its own activities, but also in its efforts to encourage and support expanded engagements in RPL by key partners within and outside of government including:

- Departments and agencies of the provincial government
- Employer and employee organizations
- Military and their related organizations
- Community and voluntary sector organizations
- Post-secondary educational (PSE) institutions.

The Framework will propose new initiatives by the Government on three levels:

- The expansion and improvement of RPL program activities currently underway;
- The development of new RPL program models and resources to fill gaps and unmet needs; and
- The promotion of activities and material support for the expanded use of RPL approaches and tools by key partners (internally and externally).

The Framework document is comprised of the following elements:

1. The context for the Framework, including:
  - Clarification of terminology
  - Review of important developments in other jurisdictions
  - Identification of current RPL programs in Nova Scotia
  - Assessment of socio-economic “drivers” for RPL.
2. Consultations with Key Stakeholders
3. A proposed RPL Policy Framework including:
  - Vision, mission, and values statements
  - Policy principles, goals and objectives
  - Plan for development of RPL programs and practices
  - Performance measures and assessment strategies
  - A Schedule of Activities for Action.

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<sup>3</sup> See Section 2.1 Working Definition for a full explanation of the learning recognition strategies and the terms RPL (Recognizing Prior Learning) and PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition).

### 1.3 RPL and Labour Force Development

Across Canada and internationally governments are taking major initiatives to harmonize, broaden and deepen the recognition of and support for adult, lifelong and life-wide learning as a key component of a dynamic and viable society and economy. What makes these new initiatives and investments especially urgent and compelling, however, is the current reality that, like most developed nations, we are beginning to run out of people.

The demographic evidence is startling. According to a new study published by the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies (AIMS), this year or next in Nova Scotia the age cohort reaching retirement and leaving the workforce will for the first time exceed the number of young people entering it.<sup>4</sup> From that point on the labour force will shrink rapidly, so that by 2015—if significant counter-measures are not taken—demand for workers will start to outstrip the supply of people available to fill those jobs. “Moreover”, the authors state, “the situation does not turn around after 2015 but becomes a permanent and increasingly more difficult feature of the provincial economy”.<sup>5</sup> Nor, they add, will the situation be altered by the current recession where, temporarily at least, there are more people than available jobs.

This analysis confirms in detail for Nova Scotia what parallel studies have found to be true for Canada as a whole, the U.S. and much of Europe. The AIMS study concludes that a “paradigm shift” in human resources development policies is required. It identifies several options to address the labour supply crisis, a key component being programs targeting segments of the population “whose participation rates have historically been lower than the rest of the working-age population”.<sup>6</sup> These include Aboriginals, African-Canadians and Persons with Disabilities.

The PLA Centre’s Achieving Our Potential Report adds considerably to that list with others groups that are marginalized in terms of economic and social participation. These include:

- Adults facing literacy challenges
- New Canadians, both skilled and semi-skilled
- Women facing barriers re-entering the workforce
- Youth at risk
- Older workers
- Dislocated and displaced workers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> J. D. McNiven, with Michael Foster. *The Developing Workforce Problem: Confronting Canadian Labour Shortages in the Coming Decades*, January 2009, page v.

<sup>5</sup> McNiven, J. page 9.

<sup>6</sup> McNiven, J. page 15. The authors consider a number of options including increasing birth rate and attracting many more immigrants; the former they think unlikely and the latter insufficient, though they think more vigorous efforts should be made to recruit newcomers and to provide better transition supports.

<sup>7</sup> Morrissey, M. et al, **AOP Report**, 2008, page 68.

The following table describes the size and educational achievements of important populations that might be targeted by new RPL programs linked to employment development services in Nova Scotia.

| Target Population                               | Size and Characteristics   |
|---|--|
| <b>1. Aboriginal adult learners</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 2,530 (24% of) Aboriginal identity Nova Scotians aged 25 to 54 have not completed high school or other education/training (Census 2006).</li> <li>▪ 2,435 (23% of) Aboriginal identity Nova Scotians aged 25 to 54 are not in the labour force (Census 2006)</li> </ul>   |
| <b>2. Immigrants – skilled and semi-skilled</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There are 28,480 persons between age of 25 and 64 in Nova Scotia who were born outside of Canada—6% of total population (2006 Census)</li> <li>▪ Of 4,170 recent immigrants (i.e., arrived between 2001 and 2006) between the ages of 25 and 64, 485 (11.6%) had high school as highest level of education, and 175 (4.2%) had less than high school.</li> <li>▪ Immigrants account for about 5.2% of Nova Scotia’s labour force</li> <li>▪ The employment rate for 25 to 64 year old recent immigrants is 64% (compared to 82% for Canadian born peers). 1,285 recent immigrants aged 25 to 54 were unemployed in 2006 (Census)</li> </ul> |
| <b>3. African Nova Scotians</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 45% (8645) of the African Nova Scotian population are below age 25 (NS Community Counts)</li> <li>▪ 20% of African Nova Scotians aged 25 to 54 are not in the labour force and 23% of this total age group have not completed high school or other education and training (Census 2006)</li> <li>▪ 33% or 1,460 African Nova Scotians aged 45 to 64 have no certificate, diploma or degree</li> </ul>   |
| <b>4. Youth at risk</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 22,195 people aged 15 to 24, in the labour force, without high school complete or any other formal education or training completed</li> </ul>   |
| <b>5. Older Workers</b>                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 182,590 people in the labour force between ages of 45 to 64</li> <li>▪ 31,935 of them (17.5%) have not completed high school and have no other education/training</li> <li>▪ 62,070 people in the labour force between ages of 55 to 64</li> </ul>  |
| <b>6. Learners facing literacy challenges</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 38% of the adult population in Nova Scotia have below level 3 literacy skills (ALL Survey – 2003)</li> <li>▪ 94,275 adults aged 25 to 64 have not completed high school and have no further education/training (2006 Census)</li> </ul>   |
| <b>7. Persons with Disabilities</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ There are 6,130 persons with disabilities, aged 15 to 64 who are unemployed and 49,170 who are not in the labour force (2006 PALS Survey)</li> </ul>  |

| Target Population  | Size and Characteristics   |
|--|--|
| <b>8. Women Facing Barriers</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 40,600 women between the ages of 25 and 54 are not in the labour force (2006 census)</li> <li>▪ 20,700 women aged 25 to 54 who are not in the labour force have no post secondary qualifications</li> <li>▪ 41,000 women aged 25 to 54 who are in the labour force have no post secondary qualifications</li> </ul> |
| <b>9. Apprentices and Workers involved in professional certification</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 4,097 active apprentices in N.S. (2005–2006)</li> <li>▪ Approximately 50% of people who begin apprenticeship programs do not complete them within standard time frames</li> </ul>   |

Taken together these and other groups represent what Michael Bloom, Vice-President of the Conference Board of Canada, calls a significant “reserve labour force” for which RPL in all its forms is an essential “first order” response.<sup>8</sup> While the AIMS study offers little practical advice on how wider labour force participation might be accomplished, Bloom identifies a number of ways that employers could recognize and build upon the informal and experiential skills and knowledge of the workforce, improve the quality and retention of new and current employees and significantly reduce the costs of training and retraining, through well established and tested RPL principles and practices.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly important are the principles and practices within the overall field of RPL commonly referred to as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).<sup>10</sup> This is because PLAR services, programs and processes take into account the skills and knowledge that people acquire informally and experientially through their life and work.<sup>11</sup> This is especially significant for marginalized groups that have traditionally been excluded from full economic and social participation. Many have limited formal education or training, have experienced more “failure” than success in their schooling, and have little confidence to undertake such programs.

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, Michael, “Broadening the Skilled Workforce: Recognizing Learning, Competencies and Credentials”, Presentation to the Fall Focus Workshop of the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), Toronto, November 2007. Other researchers such as Joy Van Kleef and David Livingstone have used the term ‘*the hidden iceberg of adult learning in Canada*’ to indicate the potential of informal and experiential skills and knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> At a key consultation held in Ottawa in February 2008, Michael Bloom and Paul Cappon, President and CEO of the Canadian Council of Learning, further explored the implications of these demographic and labour market pressures and the crucial importance of RPL in responding to them. This event which brought together a number of experts from across the country on the theme “Shifting the Discourse; Mobilizing Adult Learning in Canada,” formed an important component of the development of the PLA Centre’s AOP study and report.

<sup>10</sup> See Section 2.1 Working Definitions outlining the distinctions usually made within RPL between the areas of credit and credential recognition/transfer, on the one hand, and the recognition of prior informal and experiential learning (together with whatever formal education and training an individual may have) which is generally referred to as PLAR.

<sup>11</sup> As noted in the terminology section, there are areas of overlap across these various forms of RPL.

Apprenticeship is a prime example.

Discovering that what they have learned on-the-job and through other experiences is real, substantial and valuable, often results in an internal “paradigm shift” that enhances confidence, motivation and ambition.

Moreover, during severe economic downturns many people who have been very successful in formal education and employment suddenly find themselves dislocated and disoriented. PLAR programs also help them make necessary transitions by understanding and utilizing the full range of their transferable skills—whether acquired formally or experientially—and thus has similar transformative impacts as with members of more marginalized groups.

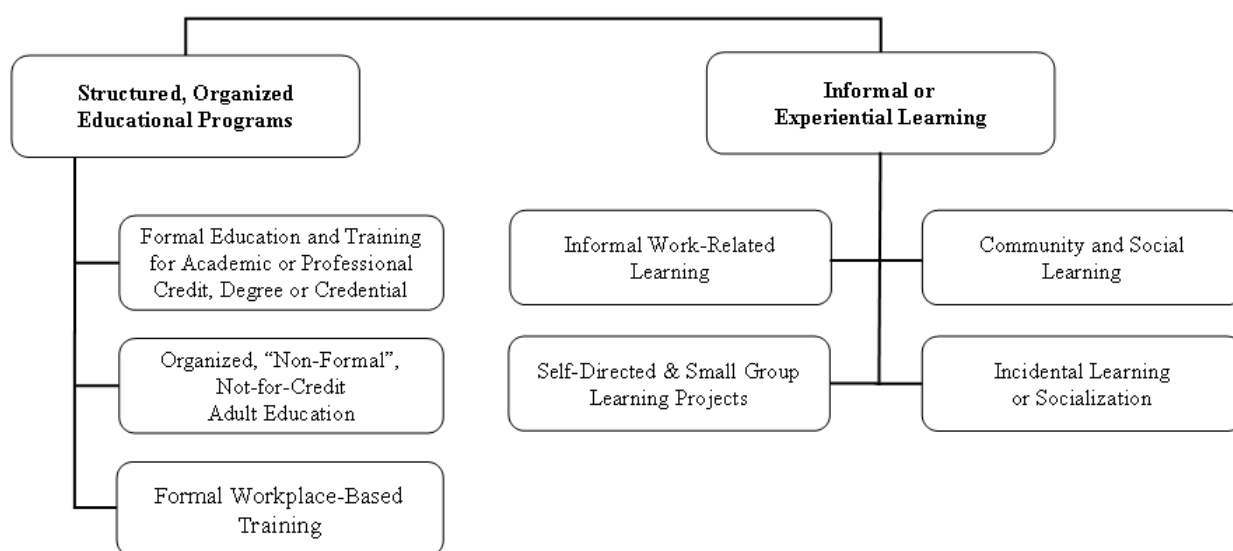
Finally, it should also be noted that beyond the economic necessities and benefits of increased labour market access, the confidence and motivation that come from participation in PLAR programs have significant personal, family, community and social benefits as well.

## 2. Context for the RPL Policy Framework

### 2.1 Working Definitions

While there are no universally agreed upon definitions for the various forms of assessment and recognition of prior learning there are some widely recognized concepts that are helpful in identifying the range of activities and purposes. In Canada, particularly, there is growing acceptance of “recognition of prior learning” (RPL) as the generic term that best describes the overall field of assessing and recognizing learning.

RPL programs address two broad fields of adult learning—learning in structured or “formal” educational programs, and “informal” or experiential learning. As illustrated in the following graphic, each field has important sub-fields:<sup>12</sup>

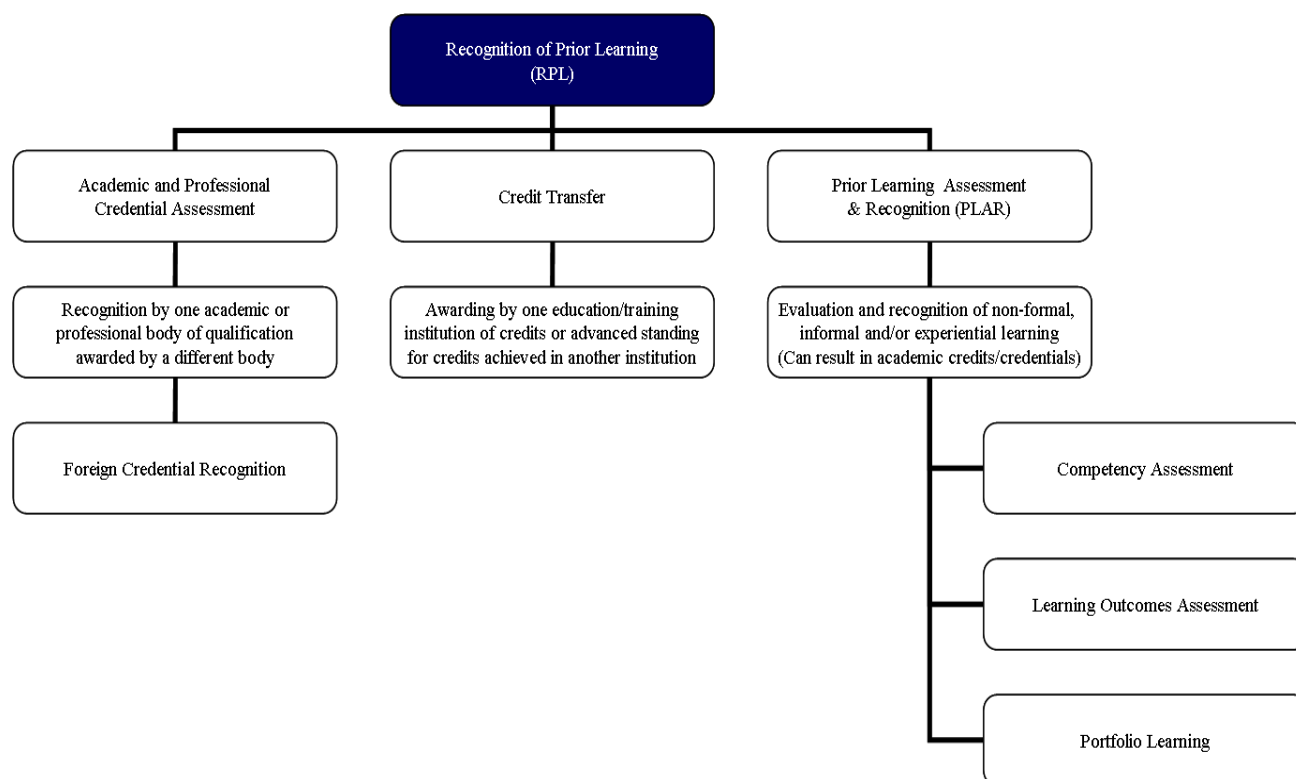


Learning in formal educational settings is typically validated and documented by means of credits for individual courses, and licenses, certificates, degrees or diplomas for completion of entire programs. In these fields RPL activities most often focus on recognizing equivalencies and transferring credits or credentials from one formal system to another. The assessment and recognition of knowledge, skills and broad competencies<sup>13</sup> acquired outside of formal educational programs—on the job, in the community, or through everyday life experiences— involves methods of assessment and recognition that are quite distinct. The following graphic describes three basic fields of RPL activity—credential assessment, credit transfer, and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR):<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Morrissey, M. et al. *AOP Report, Executive Summary* (October, 2008, page 2).

<sup>13</sup> A “competency” is taken to mean the combination of knowledge, practical skills and experience required to successfully carry out any particular task ranging from the simplest to the most complex.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, page 3.



Building on this conceptual approach, in this DLWD Framework document the term “recognition of prior learning” or RPL will be used to encompass three discrete fields of assessment and recognition of prior learning:

- Academic and Professional Credential Assessment (Credential Recognition)
- Credit transfer
- Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)

However these are not hard-and-fast definitional categories because in practice the different types of RPL activity often overlap or are used in combination. In apprenticeship programs, for example, both formal training and experiential on-the-job learning are valued and taken into account. Similarly, when individuals are engaged in PLAR processes they are usually encouraged to document their accomplishments in formal education and training along with evidence of the knowledge and skills they have acquired through their life and work experience.

These working definitions and distinctions are nonetheless helpful in understanding and clarifying the various activities and objectives that are characteristic of the field of RPL and its constituent components.

## 2.2 RPL in other Provinces

Two recent reports, *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for PLAR in Canada*, and *An Evaluation of the PLA Centre’s Programs and Services: Relevance and Potential to Contribute to Workforce Development in Nova Scotia*, provide up-to-date reviews of relevant policies and programs in other provinces. Some of the most salient developments are described below.

## 2.3 Manitoba

In 2002 the Manitoba Government developed a provincial Policy Framework for PLAR based on three cornerstone service areas—post-secondary programs, advisory services and industry participation. The model that has since been developed enables a decentralized system of supports for recognizing adults' prior learning at universities, colleges, adult learning centres and workplaces across the province. PLAR advisory and assessment services are available from 17 employment centres and 44 registered Adult Learning Centres and through partnerships with a range of stakeholders in industry and the community. Workplace based assessment projects are delivered directly in industry locations. There is ongoing development in the areas of capacity building and practitioner training.

A budget of \$1.2 million per year provides sustainable funding and enables ongoing development of programs and practitioner expertise. The government has developed separate partnership agreements with the adult learning community, business / industry organizations, and the postsecondary education institutions. Implementation occurs through existing legislation governing PSE institutions, the Council on Post-secondary Education, the Apprenticeship system, and the Adult Learning Centres.

As part of its efforts to recruit and integrate immigrants the government has adopted a Labour Market Strategy for Immigrants through which new assessment tools are being developed to identify newcomers' skills and competencies relative to Manitoba Labour Market requirements. A Strategy on Qualifications Recognition is currently being initiated as well.

## 2.4 Quebec

Quebec has developed legislation to support its adult learning initiatives. This legislation includes an emphasis on learning recognition strategies.

As early as 1982 the Commission on Inquiry on Vocational and Socio-Cultural Training for Adults recommended that the government facilitate adult learner access to their educational system by implementing PLAR services throughout the province. By 1985 the government made PLAR implementation a public policy priority and legislated the right to have informal learning recognized for credit. By 2003 Quebec's colleges were receiving the same level of government funding for PLAR as they were for course delivery.

Important recent initiatives include a commitment of \$1 billion to a new labour force development program. PLAR is central to the strategy that also includes the development of the Montreal RAC Centre. The Centre serves as a main entry point and as a broker between the many markets and target groups and the PSE institutions, helping people make the connections and helping the institutions to reach out to target groups.

## 2.5 Alberta and Saskatchewan

Of particular relevance to the Nova Scotia situation are the two most recent RPL/PLAR initiatives in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Both these provinces were very active in this field in the mid-1990s, but were less so in recent years. Both seem to be taking fresh and somewhat contrasting approaches to RPL/PLAR.

Perhaps because Alberta already had a well-established body (the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer [ACAT]) to deal with the credit and credentials side of RPL, its new

initiatives centre largely on PLAR programs. ACAT took the lead in the exploration and advocacy work that led to the report *Advancing PLAR in Alberta: An Action Plan* (August 2008).

The proposed plan—now being implemented—specifically supports the validation and recognition of informal and experiential learning. It provides a succinct and detailed checklist of the initiatives and priorities required to put such a system in place. These include an overall goal, guiding principles, anticipated outcomes and specific action areas.

A major Saskatchewan report (November 2008) titled *Recognizing Prior Learning in Saskatchewan; Provincial Needs Assessment & Blueprint for Action* deals with RPL as a whole and covers all aspects of the field, including PLAR services and programs. In addition the Saskatchewan Provincial Policy Framework has recently been updated (January 2009) and includes goals and objectives related to: demonstrating leadership in planning and awareness building; promoting and supporting the delivery of high quality, accessible and relevant RPL services; and demonstrating accountability through evaluation of RPL services and outcomes.

## 2.6 Collaborative Arrangements

Although inter-provincial and inter-governmental collaboration in RPL is uncommon, three federal-provincial labour market partnerships (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Ontario) currently identify PLAR as a key element of future labour market development strategies. These agreements represent a promising public policy basis for sustainable PLAR funding, particularly in services related to employment.

## 2.7 Relevant International Policies and Programs

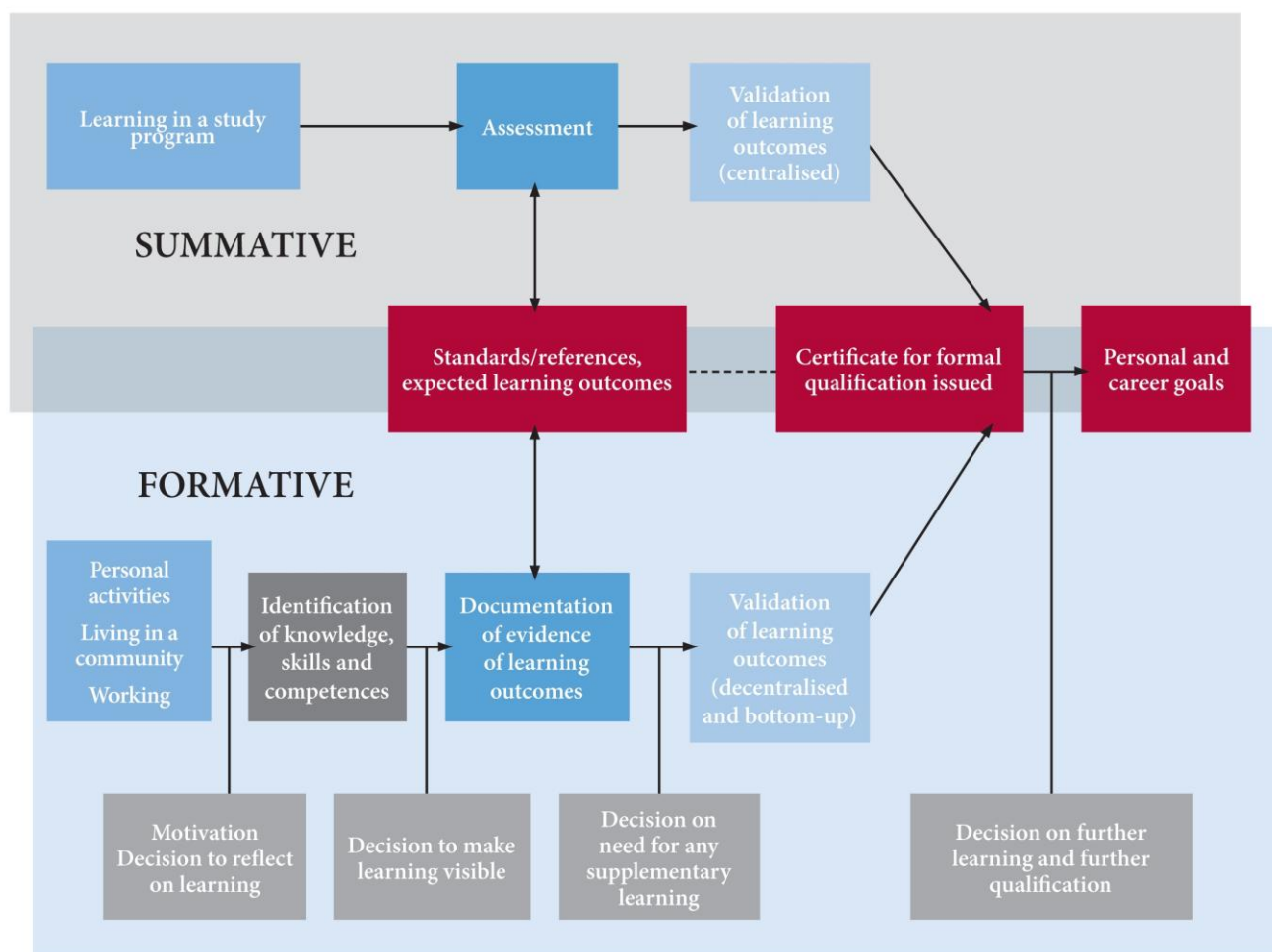
An important development in Europe has been recent efforts to reform and replace well-established competency assessment frameworks. Increasingly those systems have been found to be overly rigid, bureaucratic and costly. In England, for example, a new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) will replace the existing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) framework. The goal is to establish more learner friendly and flexible assessment and support services.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to note that several other countries are using national qualifications frameworks as means to alleviate skill shortages and increase the number of individuals with qualifications. Australia, Ireland, Norway, New Zealand and Scotland have developed national qualifications frameworks to assess employment related skills and knowledge. New Zealand uses its qualifications framework to award occupational credentials that are independent of academic credentials while others translate occupational competencies into academic equivalencies. Because its standards are agreed upon through a multi-stakeholder process, learners' achievements in New Zealand can be recognized in a number of contexts. Similarly, the Scottish credit and qualification framework can be used for personal and career development as well as in support of the learner's transition between informal and formal learning.

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<sup>15</sup> See Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *Claiming Credit: Guidance on the recognition of prior learning within the Qualifications and Credit Framework* (London, 2008).

## Parallel Pathways: Validation of Formal and Informal Learning<sup>165</sup>



In the emerging EU policy approach, as illustrated in the above graphic, we see the development of parallel pathways that support both “formative” and “summative” validation and recognition processes for adult learning.<sup>16</sup> The former emphasize the value of RPL/PLAR activities as motivators and mobilizers for adult learning:

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

<sup>16</sup> See Morrissey, *AOP Report*, page 162.

“Summative” RPL/PLAR activities provide the means to translate experiential non-formal and informal learning into formal academic or professional qualifications and career related credentials.

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

Portugal provides an example of a comprehensive national commitment to adult education and RPL as primary means to achieve social and economic development. To meet the challenge of having 78% of the adult population with less than Level III literacy skills, the government created the National Agency for Adult Education and Training in 1999. Building on this initiative the National Qualifications Authority was established in 2006 to integrate education and training policies and to manage a new system for Recognizing, Validating, and Certifying Competences (RVCC). RVCC is now the starting point for adult training. The goal is to qualify 1,000,000 active workers by 2010 through the national RVCC system as well as through the Adult Education and Training courses. A network of 457 New Opportunities Centres run by churches, non-profit organizations, businesses, schools, etc that offer the full range of RVCC services, adult education and training courses as well as other adjustment programs for individuals. The evaluation reports suggest that the overall program is highly successful in enabling working adults—particularly those from disadvantaged groups—to construct individual learning pathways.

## **2.8 Current State of RPL/PLAR in Nova Scotia**

Studies by the PLA Centre, the Collective Wisdom Solutions<sup>17</sup> group and others make clear that Nova Scotia has key elements of an RPL system in various stages of development. We are not, in other words, starting from scratch. What is needed at this point is an effective planning and policy development process to “connect the dots”, identify the gaps, and put in place sustainable long-term support measures. If this can be done, Nova Scotia will find itself among the leaders in the RPL/PLAR field in Canada.

## **2.9 DLWD Apprenticeship Program**

Staff in the Apprenticeship program frequently process credit transfer and qualifications recognition requests from applicants who come to the province from other provinces and other countries.

Currently the most accessible form of PLAR is the trade qualifier process whereby an individual, if they have a defined number of years experience in the field and references from employers, can challenge to write the final exams to qualify as a journey person without having done the in-class technical training component of the regular apprenticeship program. These individuals can also receive some essential skills and technical upgrading to help them pass the exam. As well some special initiatives within Apprenticeship, such as Women Unlimited and Youth Apprenticeship, currently make use of portfolio methods.

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<sup>17</sup> Collective Wisdom Solutions. An Evaluation of the PLA (Prior Learning Assessment) Centre’s Programs and Services: Relevance and Potential to Contribute to Workforce Development in Nova Scotia, November 14, 2008.

The Nova Scotia Boat Builders Association, in partnership with the provincial government through the Apprenticeship Training and Skill Development Division, has recently developed an innovative apprenticeship model. All the training takes place in workplaces and is based on a competency framework adopted from New Zealand. Current practice also includes providing ALP (Adult Learner Program) credits to apprentices who complete technical training.

At the national level the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship (CCDA) has been trying for some time to develop alternative ways to assess and measure competencies beyond the traditional reliance on multiple-choice examinations. If Nova Scotia Apprenticeship is to move in this direction it will be necessary to develop different methods of assessment beyond the conventional examinations. These might include:

- In-depth interviews and oral examinations
- Practical demonstration of competencies
- Portfolios
- References from employers.

There may in future be situations where new regulatory requirements (e.g., mandatory licensing) make it necessary to qualify large numbers of skilled and experienced workers in fields such as carpentry, automobile services, truck transportation and health care. New PLAR methods and program capacities would be needed to meet such challenges.

The DLWD generally, and Apprenticeship in particular, are working more effectively with Aboriginal communities and this is becoming a priority focus.

The Apprenticeship program is currently promoting more effective teaching/learning methodologies for the technical training component. It favours a learner-centred approach with greater flexibility for instructors to focus on the actual learning needs of apprentices and move away from following a rigid curriculum within prescribed courses.

There has been 32% growth in the Apprenticeship program since 2006. The program is under-resourced in terms of budget and staff.

The priorities for new developments in Apprenticeship where RPL programs may be helpful are:

- Expand effort to encourage experienced workers in the voluntary trades complete their apprenticeships or challenge for certification offered by the Apprenticeship Training and Skill Development Division;
- Develop alternative assessment methods using PLAR methodologies;
- Expand targeted programming for priority communities:
  - Aboriginal people
  - African-Canadians
  - Persons with disabilities
  - Women
  - Youth
  - New Canadians
- Expand staffing and program resources;

- Specialize education and training in RPL/PLAR principles and methods for:
  - Apprenticeship staff
  - PLAR practitioners
  - Employers
  - Union leaders
- Develop strategies to address long-term labour and skills shortages challenges.

## 2.10 DLWD Skills Development Program

The Workplace Education Initiative (WEI) is the Province’s primary program aimed at providing education and training for the employed labour force. It contains sub-programs targeting particular outcomes and learner populations:

- Small Business Essential Skills Initiative
- English in the Workplace
- Apprenticeship Essential Skills Initiative (refresher and upgrading courses for apprentices)
- Employer of Choice Initiative
- Business Competencies Endorsement
- Practitioner/Instructor Certification Program.

The WEI program operates through adult education principles and practices that are highly congruent with PLAR approaches. Most programs are designed in large part by the learners (in collaboration with their employers) and directly address issues of self-confidence, learning goals, and life skills and essential skills enhancement. Program staff describe the WEI as currently being “budget constrained”.

The WEI has developed a province-wide network of practitioners who are trained and certified to participate in the program. Their skills overlap significantly with those of PLAR practitioners.

Another category of Skills Development programming, Worker Transition, offers programs that target unemployed populations:

- One Journey Work and Learn (delivered in partnership with Community Services)
- Targeted Initiatives for Older Workers
- Bridging to Apprenticeship
- Workforce Adjustment measures.

Despite the emphasis on adult education principles and practices throughout these Skills Development programs, there currently are no substantial engagements in RPL/PLAR programming and practices. Strategic objectives in this regard might be:

- To better familiarize Skills development staff and clients with RPL/PLAR principles, approaches methods and tools;
- To link up and possibly integrate the WEI practitioner network with the PLAR-portfolio practitioner network across the province;

- To develop ways to offer PLAR-portfolio learning and other RPL services to participants in WEI, Worker Transition and Employment Nova Scotia programming.

## 2.11 DLWD Adult Education Division

This division centres on literacy and essential skills education and on achievement of the high school graduation diploma for adults and the GED certificate, through the Nova Scotia School for Adult Learning (NSSAL) and other programming.

There is a province-wide network of tutors and instructors, many who have participated in certification and training. Partnerships include community learning organizations, adult high schools and the Nova Scotia Community College.

Completion of the high school graduation diploma for adults requires the successful completion of 12 credits. These credits can be earned through adult high schools (grades 11 and 12) or the Nova Scotia Community College, Adult Learning Program (ALP Level IV), Apprenticeship technical training and transfer of approved credits.

NSSAL provides funding, program resources and practitioner training to 30 community learning networks throughout the province to deliver one-to-one volunteer tutoring and Levels I, II and sometimes III of the Adult Learning Program (ALP). Some networks serve specific populations:

- African-Canadian
- Mi'kmaq
- Acadian Persons with disabilities.

For reasons that are not clear NSSAL enrollments have been trending downward in recent years. This decline is most likely associated with pre-recession employment levels when more people were working and not able to participate in full-time programming.

Priorities for developing RPL/PLAR services were identified in discussions with program managers:

- Provide training for institutional admissions staff on how to assess and apply RPL including PLAR-portfolios;
- Explore the introduction of portfolio learning options within NSSAL programs;
- Increase the use of RPL/PLAR to award advanced standing to adult high school diploma participants.

## 2.12 RPL/PLAR Programs Outside DLWD

Besides the DLWD programs described above, a number of provincial departments and agencies have been involved in RPL/PLAR to a greater or lesser degree. From the PLA Centre's inception in 1996 the Department of Community Services (DCS) has been a strong proponent and partner with the Centre. It collaborated with the Centre to provide Portfolio Learning programs for people receiving provincial income support assistance and adults with low literacy challenges. DCS has supported training and certification for department staff as PLAR Practitioners, and sponsors ongoing professional development and public awareness activities. DCS also took early

steps to provide RPL/PLAR services to members of the Aboriginal and African Nova Scotian communities.<sup>18</sup>

The Nova Scotia Public Service Commission has sponsored a number of mid-career public service professionals to do the PLA Centre's Portfolio Learning for Academic Purposes programs to gain admission to the Dalhousie Masters in Public Administration program.<sup>19</sup>

More recently the Nova Scotia Department of Health has sponsored a major initiative to develop and deliver customized RPL/PLAR services to long-term care workers who are facing new upgrading and credentialing requirements for Continuing Care Assistants in the province.<sup>20</sup> RPL/PLAR services and programs have also been provided for new Canadians by the Metro Immigrant Settlement Association (MISA) and the Halifax Immigrant's Learning Centre (HILC).<sup>21</sup>

It should also be noted that RPL/PLAR principles and practices have significant implications for human resources development at the municipal as well as the provincial level. A case in point is the recent PLAR initiative sponsored by the Halifax Regional Municipality involving Portfolio Learning programs for both front-line workers and middle-level supervisory staff.

Finally, the PLA Centre is partnering with the regional Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) campus in Digby County to explore the use of PLAR principles and practice in a community development context.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.13 Government of Canada support for RPL/PLAR

RPL/PLAR development in Canada over the past three decades has received significant support from federal government agencies. More recently that role has decreased in intensity and scale, but as the challenges of economic recovery, industrial realignment and community revitalization become more pressing it is almost certain that collaborative federal/provincial action on human resources development issues will re-emerge as an urgent priority.

Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (in its various incarnations) was for many years an active champion and supporter of RPL/PLAR. Indeed, the establishment and development of the PLA Centre in 1995–96 was due to initial HRSDC funding and special

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<sup>18</sup> The New Brunswick Department of Family and Community Services has also been an active participant in this work.

<sup>19</sup> The Dalhousie MPA(M) program was developed in response to a request to the University from the Nova Scotia government to do so. One of the conditions for funding support by the province was that the University find ways of considering for admission, successful public service professionals who did not possess the traditional prerequisite of an undergraduate degree. The School of Public Administration approached the PLA Centre and the result was the highly successful Portfolio Learning for Academic Purposes. This example could serve as a template for other such PSE initiatives in RPL/PLAR.

<sup>20</sup> This program which provides as combination of intensive one-day workshops together with individual advising and assessment services has significant potential for application across a number of occupations facing new upgrading requirements where returning to or completing full formal education and training programs is neither feasible or necessary.

<sup>21</sup> Similar work to develop and apply RPL/PLAR services and programs has been done by the PLA Centre, in partnership with newcomer transition agencies, in New Brunswick (NB Multi-Cultural Associations), Ontario (Ontario Institute of Agrolologists) and Alberta (Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers).

<sup>22</sup> It is hoped that this initiative can be linked with similar programs in Lac La Biche, Alberta and St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador as part of larger action research *Portfolio Learning Community* project.

demonstration project support. During the period 2003–2006 HRSDC funded a major initiative to train and certify PLAR Practitioners to provide PLAR-portfolio programs to clients of Employment Assistance Services (EAS) agencies across Nova Scotia, and to undertake a follow-up evaluation study. A number of these agencies continue to offer PLAR portfolio free of charge to unemployed Nova Scotians in their local communities across the province.

As at the provincial level, other federal departments and agencies—most notably the Canada Revenue Agency and Service Canada—have sponsored Portfolio Learning participants seeking admission to the Dalhousie MPA program. The Department of National Defense supported training and certification for a number of PLAR practitioners and the delivery of programs and services to personnel at three Canadian Forces Bases in the Atlantic region. Similarly, Corrections Canada (CORCAN) has supported PLAR leadership training, capacity building and program provision to inmates at the five CORCAN institutions in the Maritimes.

## **2.14 Engagement by Post-Secondary Institutions**

As is the case across Canada and internationally, the university sector has, for a number of reasons, made only limited commitments to the principles and practices of RPL/PLAR. There are exceptions, but usually on a school or program rather an institutional basis; the Dalhousie MPA program is an outstanding but rare example.

Mount Saint Vincent University has been engaged in PLAR Practitioner development and the provision of RPL/PLAR programs and services on a wider institutional basis, as has the Cape Breton University. Many universities claim to use RPL/PLAR principles widely but on an ad hoc and informal basis, which makes such claims difficult to assess.

The limited university engagement with RPL/PLAR is consistent with the difficulty these institutions have recognizing credits and credentials even from sister institutions. Progress in introducing and expanding RPL activities in the sector in Nova Scotia may be dependent upon wider changes in the operational relationships among the institutions and across the PSE system generally.

There are much more substantial commitments to RPL/PLAR in the community college sector. None has gone as far as the NSCC in branding itself the “Portfolio College”, but the use of RPL/PLAR is widespread and systemic in the community college sector across Canada. From a public policy and investment point of view—as the AOP Report concluded—the community college sector seems more likely to be open to significant RPL/PLAR innovation in Nova Scotia at present.

## **2.15 Industry and Community Engagement in RPL/PLAR**

On the industry side, Nova Scotia is somewhat unique among Canadian provinces in having a network of human resources sector councils that bring together employer and employee representatives to provide leadership in strategic planning and program planning and delivery. Eight Councils currently operate, and work together through the Association of Industry Sector Councils (AISC).

Several of these councils have been involved in the design and development of RPL/PLAR activities in the past, either independently or jointly with national sector council partners, and it is likely that most would be willing to participate in future initiatives in this field. Such collaboration will perhaps be more easily coordinated once the labour market agreements are fully implemented and the transfer of programs from Service Canada to DLWD is completed.

By the same token, as mentioned above there are approximately 90 employment agencies in communities across the province that have been funded by Service Canada through Employment Assistance Services (EAS) agreements to provide employment preparation programs for both EI eligible and non-EI eligible unemployed people. These agreements are also being transferred and will be managed by DLWD. Some 60 of these agencies participated in the PLA Centre's national demonstration project for portfolio learning by having staff members trained as portfolio practitioners and by delivering portfolio learning courses to client groups. These agencies are for the most part community-based organizations many of which target high needs groups such as persons with disabilities, African-Nova Scotians, youth at risk and women.

The evaluation study for the PLAR-portfolio demonstration project confirmed that the portfolio learning programs were highly effective in mobilizing EAS clients to pursue employment and/or further education or training. We can anticipate that these agencies will be enthusiastic partners in the expanded delivery of RPL/PLAR services in the province.

Agencies involved in providing services for new Canadians comprise another important community sector that has engaged in RPL programming in Nova Scotia and across the country. We can again anticipate expanding interest in the provision of RPL/PLAR programs in this sector as immigration becomes an increasingly important component of overall labour force development policy.

## **2.16 Strategic Considerations**

While many jurisdictions across Canada are developing and upgrading RPL/PLAR programs and services, there is, as yet, no established and detailed template for a comprehensive system to meet the economic and social challenges facing Nova Scotia.

Similarly, there is a lively debate amongst practitioners and decision makers about whether a top-down, policy driven strategy or a more incremental bottom-up development process will be most effective. As the PLA Centre's AOP Report concludes, however, a combined and balanced "two-hands clapping" approach must eventually emerge if the overall initiative is to be sustainable and effective.

It is apparent, moreover, that Nova Scotia is well positioned to move forward quickly and effectively on both these fronts. The recent initiative to envision a seamless learning culture may lead to an overall vision for the province in which RPL in all its forms will figure prominently. At the same time it is evident that the DLWD, through the Skills and Learning Branch, has a number of component programs and services that either already have, or would be enhanced by having, RPL/PLAR elements.

In addition, the PLA Centre's work with departments such as Community Services and Health and other government agencies in Nova Scotia and elsewhere has established and tested innovative and effective PLAR approaches. The Centre has also trained and certified a network of PLAR Practitioners employed by DCS, the EAS agencies and other non-governmental organizations, and the Community College. This network effectively parallels the networks of workplace educators, apprenticeship field staff, adult education coordinators, and adult learning centres that operate throughout the province. There is huge potential to integrate and mobilize all of those networks to support the development and delivery of RPL/PLAR services so that they are accessible and affordable for all Nova Scotians.

Such leadership and capacity building will provide a basis for continuing and sustainable development that will dramatically demonstrate the positive impacts and outcomes of RPL/PLAR and may contribute significantly to the more comprehensive Seamless Learning initiative.

## **2.17 Conclusions**

This brief overview of the field of RPL, based in large part on review of the literature undertaken for other PLA Centre reports, leads to the identification of a few basic themes and lessons learned with regard to the engagement of provincial governments in the field of RPL.

1. Success in developing and implementing RPL policies and programming seems to stem to a significant extent from the establishment of a lead partner with adequate resources and a clear mandate.
2. The use of the term “Recognition of Prior Learning” (RPL) to integrate the three distinct fields of recognizing prior learning—credential recognition, credit transfer and assessment/recognition of informal/experiential learning (i.e., “PLAR”)—appears to be useful for the purpose of provincial government policy leadership and program development.
3. It needs to be recognized, however, that the PLAR component of RPL is often the less developed and appreciated element.
4. The distinction made by EU policy makers between the “formative” and “summative” aspects of RPL is critically important; it leads us to appreciate that while many RPL programs primarily involve administrative procedures related to access to formal education and credentialing, there is also a transformative learning dimension that assists adult learners to overcome the significant psycho-social barriers many experience when confronted with the need to make changes in their lives through education and training.
5. It appears to be widely accepted in other jurisdictions that government cannot by itself meet the need for RPL services, and that success depends on active and effective collaboration and partnerships with post-secondary institutions, labour and employer groups and voluntary sector organizations.
6. The development of an effective and manageable qualifications framework appears to be a foundational element for the development of RPL programs and for the successful integration of education, training and employment development processes supported by RPL services.
7. There is a growing recognition among economists and social policy experts that RPL programs are key elements within wider strategies to meet emerging labour supply, competitiveness and productivity challenges.
8. Another success driver in RPL programming would appear to be the development of effective linkages to essential skills training.

## 3. Stakeholder Consultation

### 3.1 Purpose

As part of the research design the Project Team designed, organized and conducted consultations with selected groups of key stakeholders. Consultations were undertaken with two groups on June 1, 2009. The purpose of the consultations was to:

- Review the RPL Draft Policy Framework
- Gather feedback on the proposed directions
- Identify the level of activity and interest in RPL among potential partners.

#### Session 1: Government Partners

The first group included members of the DLWD PLAR Committee and colleagues from the divisions of Apprenticeship Training and Skill Development, Labour Market Partnerships, and the Transition Office—as well as members from the other government departments and agencies: Departments of Education, Health, Community Services, Immigration and the offices of Aboriginal Affairs and African Nova Scotian Affairs.

#### Session 2: External Partners

The second group included individuals from employer and employee groups / sector councils and unions, post secondary institutions, and voluntary and community organizations involved in literacy, immigration and employment services.

### 3.2 Key Themes

A number of key themes emerged. Chief among these was the need to establish:

#### 3.2.1 A Lead Role with Adequate Resources

Significant agreement was voiced in both groups for DLWD playing a lead role in developing an RPL framework within a provincial labour and workforce strategy. Discussion also followed regarding the need to collaborate with other departments in the integration and development of RPL strategies. It was widely recognized that an RPL initiative would need sustained leadership and substantial ‘new’ resources if it is to succeed. In addition the role of PLA Centre as a Centre of Excellence and a creative catalyst in its relationship to government was emphasized as key to the success of the overall venture.

#### 3.2.2 A Government-Wide Approach and Corporate Strategy

Strong agreement was expressed, especially among government partners, that this initiative should be seen as *government-wide* as well as *government-led*. This included recognition of the fact that the interests of a number of government departments overlap in the planning and implementation of an RPL framework and therefore collaborative efforts on RPL would need to be supported across and among relevant departments. Equally important, it was pointed out that government would have to ‘lead by example’ for the initiative to be perceived as credible. It was suggested that Government could demonstrate leadership as an employer by integrating RPL processes into its employment policies and practices as for example through the Public Service Commission and the NSGEU.

### 3.2.3 Awareness and Capacity Building

There was general agreement among government partners about the need to make the case for this initiative to Senior Government Leaders—by emphasizing the longer term impact of RPL on the social and economic future of the Province. Participants also observed that there is both a need to raise the profile of RPL within government as well as to build the capacity of staff to understand RPL principles and practices and to provide such programs. This would include training managers and staff in various departments as has been done in the Department of Community Services and the Department of Health.

Similarly, external partners identified an urgent need to educate employers and the business community. They further suggested that high priority be placed on making RPL practitioner training available to community agencies, unions, staff in WEI, EAS and others.

### 3.2.4 Priority Focus and Effective Engagement

Participants (external partners) suggested that the ‘transitioning of workers’ be recognized as the top priority for RPL applications. Both groups identified increased availability of labour market information as key to prioritizing occupational sectors for the implementation of learning strategies. In addition participants identified the need for:

- more flexible options in recognizing competencies (especially among new Canadians and permanent residents);
- a new culture of learning to support current employees as well as employers.

A number of specific programs were identified as potentially benefiting from the inclusion of RPL processes and practices. These included the integration of RPL processes in:

- Current and expanded apprenticeship practices;
- The development of competency frameworks / and the professionalization and certification of new occupational categories (for example in health care and by Industry Sector Councils);
- Peer Learning and other education programs delivered by Unions and community agencies (Literacy organizations; MISA);
- Foundational components in WEI, EAS, NSSAL programs.

A number of participants (in both sessions) noted that success in this initiative would require enhanced engagement of stakeholders. Specifically it was suggested that DLWD move beyond occasional consultations to create mechanisms (eg. permanent advisory bodies with strong stakeholder involvement) to support sustained leadership and collaboration across sectors.

### 3.2.5 Accountability and Quality Assurance

Participants voiced a strong sense of concern regarding ‘grass roots’ accountability and assurance in qualification standards. A number of participants raised the need for developing a culture of learning and training “that drills down into communities and workplaces to include the interests of individuals with lower income and education levels”. Participants also noted the importance of quality assurance in learning recognition and certification processes—as key to the ability of workers to have their skills widely recognized by employers (i.e. Red Seal certification vs. individual workplace standards).

### 3.3 Conclusions

The consultations included 18–20 participants per session, and although it was clear that the process now needs to be expanded to include involvement from Senior Levels of Government and other stakeholders, the consultations provided an important first reading on the direction of the framework by a diverse group of individuals from relevant government departments, agencies and community organizations.

It was significant that both groups recognized and endorsed the initiative of DLWD in facilitating the development of an integrated approach to RPL in the context of a labour and workforce strategy for NS. In addition participants showed interest in working collaboratively with the Skills and Learning Branch staff and confirmed their support for the objectives and overall direction of the Department’s internal Policy Framework.

Government partners also provided useful advice on strategies for moving forward. This included suggestions for gaining the necessary budgetary and policy support from Senior Leaders —as well as the suggestion to secure corporate ‘buy-in’. In particular, participants cautioned that the external credibility of the project might well rest on the perception of government commitment to RPL in its own HR policies and practices.

Given this feedback it would seem that there are at least 3 distinct phases involved in moving forward, the latter two of which are beyond the capacity of this report.

The first is the development of the Government RPL Policy Framework. The second is the development of a corporate strategy to include RPL practices in the Government’s own employment and human resource practices; and the third is a *Province –wide initiative* focused on engaging the full range of stakeholders from sectors and institutions across Nova Scotia in building a seamless learning culture. It is nonetheless clear, that the work undertaken in this first initiative provides an outline and the necessary foundation for building and expanding an RPL framework to increasingly wider groups of stakeholders throughout the Province.

The next section presents the Proposed RPL Policy Framework. Comments from the consultations have been incorporated into the work and are reflected in the statements on Vision, Mission, and Principles / Values as well as in the Goals, Objectives and Proposed Actions.

## 4. Proposed RPL Policy Framework

### 4.1 Government-wide Framework

It should be understood that the following general principles and practices are meant to apply to a Government-wide RPL Policy Framework. It is proposed that this framework be facilitated by the Department of Labour and Workforce Development as the ‘lead partner’ in collaboration with the Department of Community Services (as an established funder and partner with the PLA Centre), and other selected departments and agencies such as Education, Health, Immigration, and the offices of Aboriginal and African Nova Scotian Affairs.

### 4.2 Vision

Nova Scotia will achieve significant social and economic benefits from the expanded provision of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programs and services. All Nova Scotians will have access to RPL services to help them

- Pursue education and training
- Advance in their careers
- Enrich their personal and family lives
- Enhance their contributions as active citizens and community members

### 4.3 Mission

The mission of the DLWD in the RPL field is:

- To integrate RPL principles and practices within the Government’s policies and program activities and
- To promote the use of RPL by government agencies, education and training providers, employers and employee organizations, and community-based service providers.

### 4.4 Principles and Values

RPL programs and services in Nova Scotia must be:

1. **Accessible** to all Nova Scotians, with special consideration given to populations that face more significant learning barriers.
2. **Responsive** to the unique needs of identified adult learner populations and to the economic and social challenges facing the province of Nova Scotia.
3. **Collaborative** in developing and implementing policies and programs with other government departments and agencies, the education and training system, labour market partners and community sector interests.
4. **Sustainable** through government commitment to programs and services.
5. **Learner-centred** through the design and implementation of program models that address participant needs, and offer learning paths that are accessible and conducive to success.
6. **Accountable** to all stakeholders through transparent communications and rigorous monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

7. **Quality Assured** by recognizing current education and training standards and establishing appropriate equivalencies.

#### **4.5 Goal I: Leadership in RPL**

##### **Objectives:**

- Build the understanding and practical commitments required from senior government managers to implement the RPL framework in the province;
- Designate DLWD as the ‘lead partner’ in government to facilitate and coordinate the implementation of the RPL framework.

##### **Proposed Actions:**

1. Facilitate the establishment of an inter-departmental government leadership team—in the form of ‘horizontal management’ among partners;
  - Define, delegate and support specific roles and functions to be undertaken by DLWD staff in coordinating the initiative.
2. Establish a strategic partnership with the PLA Centre as the Centre of Excellence in RPL/PLAR in Nova Scotia;
  - Define and support the role of the PLA Center as the strategic partner to government in the development and implementation of the RPL Policy Framework.
3. Allocate long term resources sufficient to support activities in the areas of:
  - Research, policy and program development and evaluation, quality assurance and advocacy
  - Development and delivery of new or enhanced RPL services through current government programs, through PSE sector and through private sector and NGOs including:
    - Delivery of practitioner training and certification;
    - Communication and marketing of RPL policies, principles and program models;
    - Design and development of competency frameworks, grids and processes.

#### **4.6 Goal II: Build RPL Services within the provincial government**

##### **Objectives:**

- Expand and improve RPL activities currently ongoing in the Government;
- Identify and where appropriate, add RPL program elements or practices to current programs and services that would benefit from such enhancement;
- Develop new RPL programs to meet identifiable client needs or to address defined service gaps.

## **Proposed Actions:**

### 1. Professional Development:

Make RPL programs available as a training option to all Government staff and provide resources and support for ongoing professional development. Through partnership with the PLA Centre:

- Provide options for program staff to qualify as PLAR practitioners;
- Train/certify WEI, EAS and NSSAL instructors as PLAR-portfolio practitioners;
- Revitalize the existing network of PLAR practitioners in NS and provide ongoing professional development support (i.e. website linkage, workshops and conferences)
- Design and develop expanded measures for recognizing and validating acquired competency (competency assessment) toward apprenticeship and workplace certification; more efficient training and development; post secondary admission, advanced standing and accreditation; and personal development.

### 2. Working with the PLA Centre as the ‘Centre of Excellence’ in Nova Scotia:

- Develop PLAR-portfolio programming suitable to WEI, EAS, and NSSAL delivery, and make it available as a program option;
- Collaborate with AWENS, NSSAL, and EAS networks to make one-stop services available to unemployed / under-employed persons in all Nova Scotian communities:
  - Link to Worker Transition and Employment–NS programs—as a prime target in economic downturn;
  - Integrate services—portfolio, competency assessment, job access skills, career planning and access to skills training;
  - Target priority populations (Aboriginal, African-Nova Scotians, persons with disabilities, displaced workers, adults with low literacy challenges, etc.).

### 3. Across a wide range of government programs and departments identify high priority groups for professional/occupational qualification and apprenticeship:

- Develop competency assessment grids;
- Conduct outreach activities targeting skilled/experienced workers in high priority occupations to be certified by means of alternative assessment methods;
- Using competency assessment grids, develop and test alternative assessment methods;
- Conduct outreach activities targeting priority populations (Aboriginal, African Nova Scotian, persons with disabilities, displaced workers, adult learners with literacy challenges, etc.).

## 4.7 Goal III: Build RPL Capacity outside the provincial government

### Objectives:

- Build understanding of the value of RPL and increase its use by partner organizations outside Government;
- Develop ongoing consultations with external partners to guide policy and program development;
- Put in place capacities to support new or expanded engagements in RPL by partner organizations.

### Proposed Activities:

1. Set up RPL Advisory Council with representation of major external partners:
  - Advise on policy and program development;
  - Facilitate partnerships and collaborative activities.
2. Undertake consultation and Action Research to identify current and potential uses of RPL among partner organizations:
  - Non-provincial government departments and agencies: expand and improve RPL activities currently ongoing; where appropriate, enhance current programs by adding RPL program elements or practices; develop new RPL programs to meet identifiable client needs or to address defined service gaps;
  - Employer and employee organizations and sector councils;
  - Voluntary and non-profit organizations, including immigrant support agencies, literacy groups etc.;
  - Post-secondary institutions.
3. Develop strategic planning measures for building provincial awareness and capacity including:
  - Actions to support increased RPL activities and services by sector councils, employers and community-based NGOs;
  - Actions to support increased RPL activities and services within and among post-secondary institutions;
  - Actions to support inter-departmental leadership to advance use of RPL by municipal and federal governments.

## 4.8 Goal IV: Quality Assurance and Evaluation

### Objectives:

- Establish credible and effective benchmarks, and reporting and evaluation mechanisms;
- Support the field of practice to achieve an established level of quality and consistency;
- Build broad support for RPL by recognizing current education and training standards and establishing appropriate equivalencies.

### **Proposed Actions:**

1. Document standards and quality assurance mechanisms in other jurisdictions;
2. Define program goals, objectives, activities, desired outputs and outcomes;
3. Establish benchmark and monitoring and evaluation protocols to support ongoing evaluation and program development.

## **4.9 Goal V: Build Awareness of RPL**

### **Objectives:**

- Promote and develop understanding of the value of RPL to the achievement of social and economic development goals for the province;
- Develop marketing and awareness tools and resources to support information campaigns targeting specific audiences.

### **Proposed Actions:**

1. Develop and carry out a government information campaign to inform and engage employers (including military), as well as the Public Service Commission; reach out to such conferences as the Human Resources Managers Forums;
2. Develop a champion's roundtable composed of ambassadors from the different sectors;
3. Undertake an information campaign aimed at the post-secondary education and training sector, including universities, continuing education units, and private career colleges;
4. Host annual conferences and consultations with existing and potential stakeholders;
5. Implement a 3–5 year evaluation and review.

## **4.10 Proposed Schedule of Activities**

It is anticipated that the first year will focus on clarifying roles and responsibilities, and setting into place the appropriate structures, strategies, and partnerships for facilitating collaborative action toward the development of a Government RPL Policy Framework.

The activities listed below are meant to provide the first stage of an action blueprint toward this end. Consultations undertaken during the research phase of this project pointed to the need for a government corporate strategy on RPL to ensure the credibility and scope of the initiative.

It is suggested that this proposed RPL Policy Framework combined with a corporate strategy to support RPL policies and practices within Government, can serve to provide the leadership and foundational base from which to launch the province-wide goal of 'Seamless Learning'.

### **Activities:**

Although some activities are sequential, many occur simultaneously and are continuous and ongoing throughout the project. Environmental scans, quality assurance and ongoing monitoring/evaluation measures need to be embedded in the overall RPL Framework if it is to be transparent and accountable, and offer continuous improvement to programs. Similarly professional upgrading and development activities are essential to the development of the overall initiative. It is also assumed that the activities and processes proposed below will be reviewed and adapted as the project proceeds.

## **Year One**

1. Confirm the DLWD mandate to lead a government-wide RPL Initiative;
2. Establish inter-departmental Leadership Team;
3. Form PLAR/RPL Advisory Council—with leadership from internal and external partners;
4. Approach the Public Service Commission and Union to open dialogue on possibility of incorporating RPL policies and practices in corporate strategy and in next rounds of collective bargaining;
5. Consult on Proposed Framework—(with Leadership Team and Advisory Council as well as with selected external stakeholders);
6. Engage in Professional Development with internal partners;
7. Define and delegate roles and responsibilities; determine resources for DLWD staff;
8. Confirm and coordinate partnership with PLA Centre—clarifying roles, responsibilities and support for activities;
9. Undertake Environmental Scan—of RPL Activities within the Province; identify scope and extent of Practitioner and voluntary / community-based services network and Sector Councils; identify priorities and potential pilot projects;
10. Develop Communications Plan—get message out to a wide range of Stakeholders on capacity and value of RPL; organize Province-Wide Symposium for development of Action Plan; develop ‘Champions Roundtable’;
11. Develop consultations and strategic ‘business campaign’ to target employers directly for participation.

## **Year Two**

1. Set benchmarks and develop Quality Assurance definitions and frameworks;
2. Continue to build capacity in identified internal/external partners; assess field and implement ongoing professional development programs for practitioners;
3. Research examples and create competency assessment grids and appropriate infrastructure mechanisms for new and existing programs (for example Multiple Assessment Pathways Project BC in apprenticeship);
4. Establish Grants Program to build capacities of partners and enable initiatives;
5. Implement pilot projects across client groups and regions;
6. Maintain ongoing Environmental Scan and Marketing and Education Campaign;
7. Publish annual reports on initiatives and develop plans for next year.

### **Years Three–Five**

1. Having developed benchmarks in Year Two—Review objectives and develop performance measures for monitoring and reporting. This may include measuring such indicators as: levels of activity (number of RPL recognition processes completed); extent and number of target groups reached; distribution of funding; quantity and quality of leadership training and professional development; and evaluation of pilot projects.
2. Monitor and report annually on activities;
3. Review overall goals for Initiative—with attention to contributing to ‘Seamless Learning’ model for the Province. Design and implement evaluation process (formative and summative) to measure the impact of the initiative over the 5-year period.