



**Helping Increase Assessment Capacity
and Efficiencies Among Regulatory and other
Stakeholder Bodies
OUTCOMES PAPER**

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Beyond Academic Credentials: A 360 Degree Look at the Recognition of Prior Learning: Report of Outcomes

A/ Introduction and Background

Introduction

There is strong evidence to suggest that the knowledge, skills and abilities immigrants bring with them to Canada may not be fully reflected in their credentials.¹ Therefore recognition of foreign credentials is not sufficient to determine whether an internationally trained applicant meets the standards of a particular occupation. People continue to learn throughout their lives. The richness of that learning and experience would be lost if we depended solely on the evaluation of credentials.

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) has been involved with the issue of recognizing immigrants' prior learning for almost twenty years. CAPLA's yearly conferences focus heavily on qualification recognition through exchanging promising practices that examine the informal and non-formal learning of adults. In 2006, CAPLA undertook a research study for HRSDC entitled *Recognizing the Prior Learning of Immigrants to Canada: Moving Towards Consistency*. In 2007, CAPLA investigated the *Feasibility of Developing a National Framework/Model to Assess Immigrant Learning*. CAPLA continues to provide leadership and advice on many activities, research studies and projects aimed at improving the assessment and recognition system for the foreign-trained. They have linked with other organizations looking at similar issues.

The *360 degree* project came about because of such linkages. Through discussions with the CAPLA Board of Directors, along with Jan Robinson (Ontario College of Physiotherapists) and Christine Nielsen (Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science) CAPLA wanted to investigate unique approaches to the recognition of prior learning (RPL) for immigrants. The idea of using PLAR tools designed to assess continuing competency to evaluate entry level competence was one such innovation.

Great strides have been made over the past decade to recognize and value the knowledge, skills, work experience and education of internationally-trained immigrants. An increasing number of regulatory bodies, certification

¹ The same might be said of the credentials earned by an experienced Canadian-born professional who has continued to work and develop long after earning one or more credentials.

organizations and universities that have routinely evaluated formal credentials as part of their normal processes are now recognizing the need to determine whether an internationally-trained applicant meets the standards of a particular occupation or is prepared to work or study in a Canadian context.

According to the Forum of Labour Market Ministers (FLMM), foreign qualification recognition is the “process of verifying that the knowledge, skills, work experience and education obtained in another country is comparable to the standards established for Canadian professionals and trades people.”² Many regulators and employers however find that the evaluation of foreign credentials serves well as a *starting point*, as part of a comprehensive assessment process. This project explores the nature and potential of assessment options beyond the recognition of credentials that can be used to verify the knowledge, skills and abilities of entry-level immigrants into a profession or trade in Canada.

Background

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been around for more than 50 years.³ Its origins in North America can be traced to national standardized examination programs such as the College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) offered by Educational Testing Service, and to an education-based research project implemented during the mid-1970s in the United States. Initially this early version of prior learning assessment (PLA) provided opportunities for adults, especially those exiting the U.S. military, to earn college credit for the learning they acquired prior to entering the college or university classroom. The development of the recognition of prior learning in Canada followed much the same process: it was initially viewed as an important vehicle for adults to apply their knowledge and skills towards the achievement of an academic credential. Over the years, however, RPL - or prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) – has been applied in a number of different contexts including the licensure and certification of experienced adults.⁴ In some jurisdictions, the use of portfolios has become a popular assessment tool associated with RPL.

During this same period of time, a second movement was underway. The United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and certain professions in the United States, offer prime examples. The main impetus of this movement was the desire to ensure the “competence” of individuals, verifying that they could meet the expectations of the workplace rather than a learning program, and could transfer

² Pan-Canadian Framework for the Assessment and Recognition of Foreign Qualifications (2009).

³ Some researchers make a strong argument that the assessment of prior learning was throughout history, starting in China during the second century BC. (*Experiential Learning: Rationale, Characteristics and Assessment*, Edited by Morris Keeton, San Francisco, CA: 1976)

⁴CAPLA’s community of practice website www.recognitionforlearning.ca provides a description of many of these other applications.

and apply their knowledge and skills to new situations and environments. The concept of competence applied to all aspects of work performance, not a single facet. The assessment of competence relied on the use of multiple assessment tools, such as self-assessment, demonstrations, oral interviews, written examinations and others.

About the current project

The current project will clarify and describe a number of techniques used in the practice of competence-based assessment and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). With evidence to confirm that tools used in both PLAR and competency assessment are the same, the project will lead to further clarification and de-mystifying of language, processes and practices. Competency assessment and PLAR use the same tools and are founded on the same basic premise: that approaches to the assessment of learning must be fair, valid and relevant to what individuals know and can do. The assessment process recognizes that learning is not time or place-bound. By ensuring key stakeholders understand this basic concept,, we will be better able to move towards more consistent RPL practices and opportunities for immigrants. Regulating bodies, certification organizations and other stakeholders will be better equipped to determine that immigrants meet Canadian standards of practice and can work safely and effectively in a Canadian context.

Methodology

The phases and activities for this project to date have included:

1. Research:
 - Conducted research into the use of various assessment tools by regulators and other stakeholders in Canada and other jurisdictions
 - Conducted research into the nature of various assessment tools with a focus on identifying the applications, strengths and limitations of each tool
2. Knowledge Exchange – Web Based:
 - Prepared and facilitated webinar, “Beyond Academic Credentials: A 360 Degree look at the Recognition of Prior Learning”
 - Communicated with key regulators and other stakeholders regarding the webinar opportunity
 - Hosted webinar on October 31, 2011
 - Registered 270 people for the webinar and facilitated over 225 participants’ attendance on the live webcast
 - Analyzed webinar participants’ questions and perspectives
 - Posted webinar recording on www.recognitionforlearning.ca

- Created an online discussion area for webinar participants at www.recognitionforlearning.ca
- 3. Knowledge Exchange – Face to Face:
 - Prepared for and facilitated a pre-conference session on November 13, 2011 entitled “Beyond Academic Credentials: A 360 Degree look at the Recognition of Prior Learning—Creating the New Normal: People, Tools, Processes and Quality Assurance” at CAPLA’s Fall Focus Workshop, followed by a one-hour highlights session on November 15 for those who could not attend the day-long workshop.
 - Analyzed and collated participants’ questions and recommendations from both face-to-face activities in preparation for the outcomes paper and manual

Description of Activities:

Research: The research included a literature search (electronic and paper-based) of regulators and other stakeholders across Canada and reviewed the use of various tools and methods used to assess entry-level applicants and the continuing competence of experienced practitioners. Research into the nature of different assessment tools included a literature search of journal articles, action research findings and other publications that highlighted the strengths and limitations of various assessment tools. This work also included a close look at the application of each tool, when it was used, for what purpose and for what group of learners.

Knowledge Exchange - Webinar: The hour-long webinar was advertised on the CAPLA website and an invitation to participate was emailed to a large number of regulators, certifying bodies and other stakeholders. The webinar attracted interest from more than 270 initial registrants. Just over 225 actual participants logged in to the webinar. Those unable to attend were provided with a link to the recording of the webinar which is housed on CAPLA’s online community of practice at www.recognitionforlearning.ca. Five key questions were used to guide the webinar conversation. The questions were:

1. How can we best facilitate a process that allows immigrants to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and abilities beyond credential evaluation?
2. What assessment strategies and tools are most effective with immigrants and why?
3. What factors help to determine the appropriateness of one tool over another for a particular organization or unique purpose?
4. Can a single tool or process ensure that an immigrant is “competent” to work in Canada?

5. Are there examples of good practice that link concepts of PLAR and the assessment of competencies?

The session was moderated by Jane McLaren, project manager and facilitated by Susan Simosko. Contributors to the discussion included Christine Nielsen, Executive Director of the Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science and Jan Robinson, CEO of the College of Physiotherapists of Ontario. Susan also facilitated the session. The format included a discussion of each question by the three contributors and concluded with an opportunity for participants to ask questions or make comments. All questions / comments from the participants were recorded for reference in developing the pre-conference session and the manual.

Knowledge Exchange - Pre-conference session: The pre-conference session was organized around four main themes: the needs of immigrants, the nature of the tools, experiences from the field, and quality assurance. The outcomes and questions from the webinar were integrated into the session. Contributors to this pre-conference session included Christine Nielsen (CSMLS), Jan Robinson (CPO), Nigel Lloyd (Principal of CamProf - UK), Roman Savka (Project Manager, Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council), and Susan Simosko. Susan also served as the workshop facilitator.

Three case studies were developed to focus the day. All were based on real-life situations and experiences. These can be found in Appendix A. A one hour workshop followed the pre-conference session a few days later, in order to give CAPLA conference participants a chance to 'hear what was said' at the earlier sessions and to provide input into the overall project outcomes.

Findings

Research: The initial research included an investigation of both Canadian and international websites of regulator body practices. Particular attention was paid to self-assessment tools, demonstrations, oral interviews, examinations and portfolios. Information was collected from more than 25 organizations. The results of this research and subsequent research, specifically in relation to participant perspectives and recommendations, will be compiled and included in the manual.

Research into the nature of various tools and their strengths and limitations was incorporated into the pre-conference session and will be used to inform the development of the manual.

Knowledge Exchange - Webinar: The webinar generated a high level of interest and included more than 225 participants from Canada as well as several other nations including Lithuania, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the USA. Participants represented regulatory bodies, educational institutions, federal and provincial ministries, sector councils, private training providers, immigrant-serving organizations, the Canadian forces, libraries and literacy centres. Key recommendations and questions from participants are summarized below:

- The clearer the assessment tools are to the applicants, employers, validators and reviewers, the more consistent the gate-keeping.
- All professions and trades have basic standards of performance that cannot be weakened; but they can be applied flexibly by keeping focus on the objectives that the standard are designed to foster and maintain. The concept of “flexible rigor” can help in making choice among various tools.
- As a regulatory body in Ontario, we used either WES or ICAS Canada to assess education and CLB for language assessments. Immigrants are required to meet criteria for entry into Canada and then the assessments listed above are used to assess educational requirements. Assessment of competency follows after the above steps are completed.
- As a new regulatory body we need to know where to start!
- It is important to remember what an actual tool is designed to do. Is an organization trying to screen people in (identify and assist qualified people to move into positions) or out (screen out or prevent those without full qualifications from working in the field)? Often assessment tools come from a “traditional culture” in which regulatory bodies perceive a need to create barriers to entry rather than facilitate the assessment of competence.
- Suggestions for effective, flexible gap training for those who do not meet the standards
- What are the skills or training required of PLAR assessors?
- Do regulatory bodies have a duty to support applicants to the process in their efforts to meet national requirements? And how would a regulator achieve this goal with limited resources and attitudes?

The above questions/comments contributed to the framing the pre-conference session and will also contribute to the manual.

Note: A reference to the complete set of the PowerPoint presentation used during the webinar is attached in Appendix B.

Knowledge Exchange - Pre-conference session: Twenty-three participants attended the pre-conference session. They represented regulating bodies, certification agencies, government ministries and departments, educational organizations, prior learning assessment offices and private consultants.

Note: A copy of the Agenda is attached in Appendix C.

During the first interactive session of the day, participants were divided into three groups. Each group was asked to review one of the three case studies (see Appendix A) and respond to the discussion questions. Participant input from the pre-conference will help inform the content of the manual. What follows is a brief summary of responses to each question:

Group 1—Immigrant perspective:

What questions do immigrants need to have answered prior to coming to Canada?

Responses:

- What are the provincial requirements?
- What are licensing requirements?
- Where do I go for information and/or to speak with someone?
- How long will the process take?
- What are the differences in practice in Canada?
- Are there specialty areas in my occupation?

What do immigrants need to have to determine whether or not their skills and knowledge are adequate to practice in Canada?

Responses:

- Self-assessment opportunities against standards of practice for each profession
- A knowledge of the level of English or French required
- Standards of practice
- Scope of practice
- Decision-making expectations

Group 2—Regulator perspective

What are the key elements of the plan that will help your organization understand why so many internationally-trained immigrants are not successful on your licensing exam?

Responses:

- We need to gather data about why people fail—factors may include language, skills, knowledge and/or test-taking ability?

- We need to understand something about the cultural background of the candidate and how that relates to Canadian expectations.
- We need a systematic way to identify gaps

Will the College deal with all internationally-trained nurses the same or will different applicants from different nations require various support services and assessments?

Responses:

- We will treat everyone the same—everyone needs to meet the same standard
- We will treat people differently—individuals may require different levels of support to be successful

Group 3—Employer perspective

What questions are you and the consultant trying to answer?

Responses:

- How can I do a better job of determining who has the necessary skills and who does not?
- How can I determine an immigrant's language proficiency?
- Where can I get help to address the problem of recruiting and hiring immigrants?

How can you modify your current hiring practices to get the workers you need?

Responses:

- Perhaps I need to write better job descriptions
- I need to get assistance to modify my assessment and hiring practices, perhaps work with a settlement agency

TOOLS:

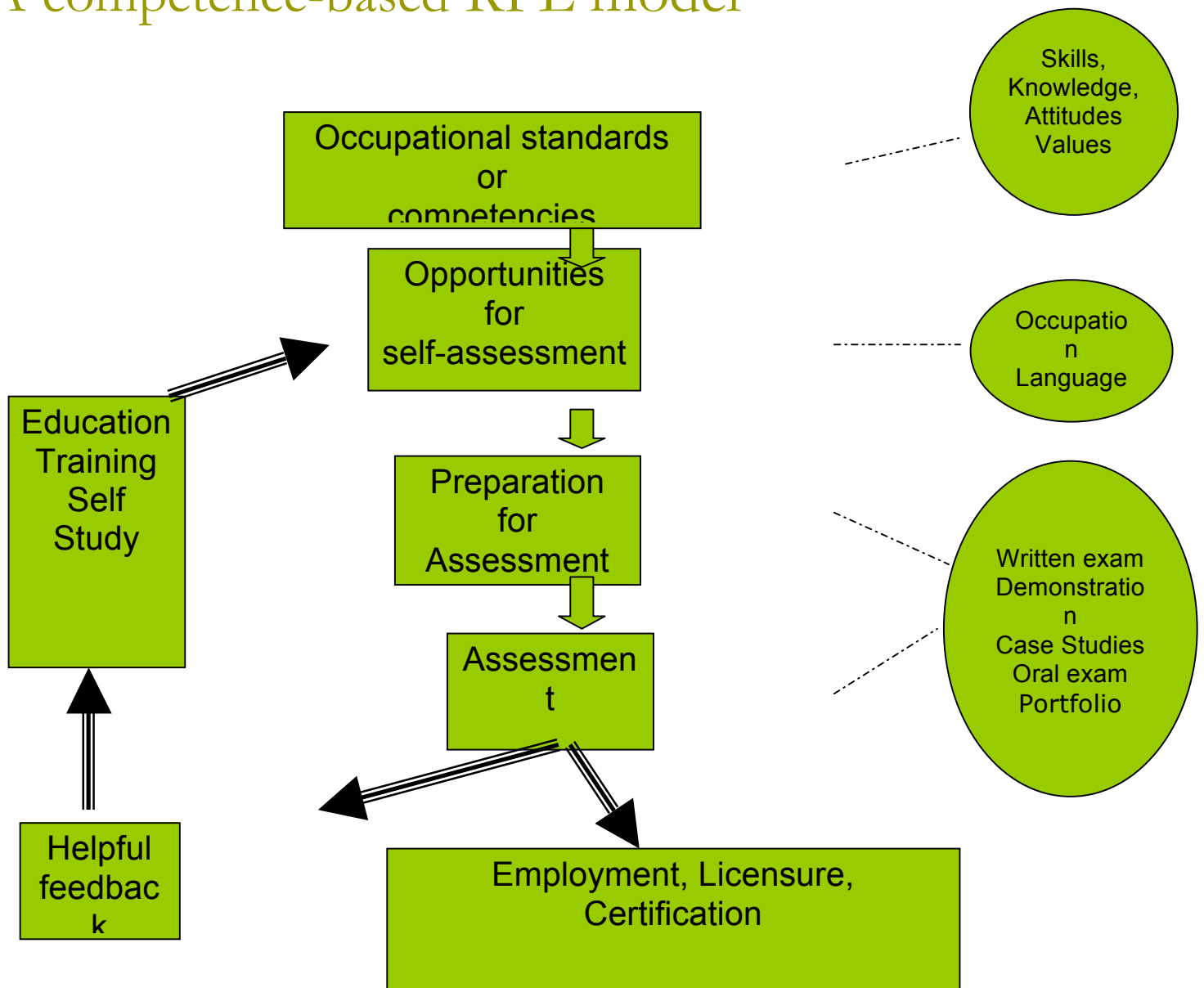
The next segment of the knowledge exchange - pre-conference session looked at the needs of each stakeholder group and four assessment tools—their purposes(s), strengths and limitations. A reference to the PowerPoint presentation can be found in Appendix D and provides a summary of this session. Key points included:

- Applicants need a clear idea of the expectations associated with a profession or trade; they need to understand the “indicators of performance.”
- We want to give applicants a comprehensive idea of an occupation or trade without overwhelming them with too much detail about the things that are “nice to know.”

- Immigrants need to have opportunities to prepare for assessment—they need to know what they will be assessed on and the criteria against which they will be evaluated.
- **Self assessment** tools:
 - can be on-line or paper-based; they can be developed for use by applicants on their own or in conjunction with a mentor or advisor
 - help applicants to understand what will be expected of them
 - should give applicants useful feedback that will help them to make sound decisions.
- **Written exams** include multiple choice, short answer or essays.
 - The quality of a written exam depends on the structure of the exam and in the relevance and quality of the individual test items
 - Effective written examinations require the development of statistical data that relates to the performance of a particular group of test takers
 - Written examinations may have high reliability as assessment measures but low validity in assessing the actual competence of an individual
- **Demonstrations** include a range of simulations such as role plays, Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) and the evaluation of actual work-place performance, e.g., practice audits.
 - Simulations such as OSCEs are expensive to set up and to maintain, although they are frequently used by regulating bodies to assess and applicant's competence
 - The assessment of an applicant using demonstrations requires careful and thorough training of assessors
- **Oral questioning/examinations** enable applicants to discuss processes and outcomes, describe what they know and can do, and describe how they would respond to contingencies in their occupation or trade.
 - Oral questioning requires the applicant to have confidence in English or French
 - Oral questioning requires clear "scoring" or "rating" criteria to ensure that applicants are treated fairly
 - Oral questioning may be a useful tool for formative assessment or guidance purposes—allowing an immigrant to tell his/her story
- **Portfolios** enable applicants to be self-directed in the presentation of their evidence.
 - Portfolios need to be simplified and linked to the occupational standards
 - Rating systems need to be developed to fairly assess portfolios of evidence

- Applicants require clear instructions in the development of portfolios and the nature, quantity and quality of the evidence they can include

A competence-based RPL model



The flowchart illustrates the integration of RPL and competence-based assessment tools.

PROCESSES:

The next segment of the knowledge exchange - pre-conference session looked at processes from two points of view: the Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science and the Manitoba Fairness Commission.

Christine Nielsen (Canadian Society of Medical Laboratory Science) described the review process her organization had undertaken to improve their assessment processes. This included their credential evaluation service and their on-line self-assessment process. Christine noted that one concern CSMLS identified was that immigrants want to know where they fit in. This information may not change their plan to come to Canada but it might change their plan of what to do when

they get there. She also noted that regulators have to be aware of whether or not they are the barrier. “Do you say you MUST have Canadian experience but getting that experience is impossible?” Christine emphasized that since it is the regulatory body’s job to protect the public, they need to be very sure that everyone who is licensed is fully competent to perform in the workplace. CSMLS is the third largest health profession in Canada and has national standards which ensure consistency across Canada. The risk to the public for not verifying a credential is one a regulator cannot bear.

The Manitoba Fairness Commission’s booklet, “Process Model for Qualifications Recognition” was distributed to and reviewed by all workshop participants. In the discussion, workshop participants noted that they liked the format, the “plain English” and the logical flow. Suggested additions included adding a date, explaining how it fits into the overall mandate, and stating who the primary target audience is.

QUALITY ASSURANCE:

This quality assurance portion of the knowledge exchange - pre-conference session included two presentations, one by Nigel Lloyd, the other by Roman Savka. A summary of key points from each is provided below:

- To ensure quality, you need to have clear standards and procedures and be committed to continuous improvement
- Key principles in ensuring the quality of certification include establishing processes that are:
 - Accessible, equitable and fair
 - Coherent
 - Current, relevant, and valid
 - Transparent
 - Sustainable
- Key principles in ensuring the quality of structure interview includes:
 - Developing constructed scripts and protocols
 - Develop two types of questions: primary and probing
- Overall, quality systems need to; reflect a high level of reliability and validity in assessment measures, clear and useful information for candidates, assessor training, the ability to monitor and track candidate performance, a commitment to fairness and ethical decisions making, a commitment to planning and development, and financial sustainability.

Suggestions for CREATING THE NEW NORMAL

The final segment of the day asked participants to identify key factors that they thought would be essential to creating the “new normal” in which entry-level

immigrants would have a fair and equal chance of consistently demonstrating their skills, knowledge and abilities. The comments below offer a summary of participants' four primary recommendations:

Collaboration. We need to build on all the innovative work that has been done by other organizations and collaborate across professions and jurisdictions, sharing resources and ideas. Competencies or standards that are the same across different professions should be described in the same way to facilitate career alternatives and choices for individuals (e.g. management skills). We should also be able to draw on all the PLAR work across the country to develop a strategic approach towards its integration in increasing the numbers of educational and workplace training programs. One way to do this is to identify and support champions of PLAR and identify the components of the most workable programs.

Political alignment. We need better political alignment of policies (e.g. the point system and provincial policies). It would be helpful if we could work towards a seamless service in which all government departments gave consistent messages. More strategic funding across professions would also be helpful.

Gather input from internationally educated immigrants. It would be helpful to take a "bottom up" approach to really understand what people need before coming to Canada and when they first arrive. This might enable us to develop a more person-centered approach to the assessment and integration of entry-level immigrants into the Canadian workforce.

Support employers. Support employers to do a better and more efficient job of recruiting, hiring and retaining entry-level immigrants into the workforce. We need to do a better job of aligning the workplace with regulation.

Next Steps

In preparation for the manual, research will continue to identify effective models that draw on a range of different assessment tools. The tools themselves will be explored and details about the strengths and limitations of each will be presented. The outcomes of the work described in this report will also be integrated into the manual. Suggestions from the two knowledge exchange activities will be incorporated to assist in framing the manual and the issues it addresses.

APPENDIX A – CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1 Immigrant Perspective

You and your family live and work in Lagos, Nigeria. You are a nurse and your husband is a pediatrician. You met when you had a one-year fellowship to study at the Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, England. Your husband was completing a one-year residency. You have two children, ages 8 and 10.

You have been an operating theatre nurse for the past 11 years. It is demanding work but you love it. Similarly, your husband is viewed as a real leader in pediatric medicine.

Your dilemma is this: you and your husband want a better life for your children. You have relatives in Canada and they regularly write letters about the life there which seems so much safer and more stable than living in Nigeria. They have offered to help you, sponsor you—whatever it takes to get you into Canada. They have said you and the children can live with them and that they will help you get settled. You understand that Canada is short of nurses and doctors so think you would have something to offer.

You and your husband agree that you want to seriously consider moving to Canada. But your first concern is to learn what it takes to practice nursing and medicine in Canada.

- 1. As you begin your search, what specific information do you look for?**
- 2. How will you know whether you have the skills and knowledge to practice nursing in Canada?**

Please use Worksheet 1 to summarize your group's responses.

Case Study 2

Regulator Perspective

You are the chairperson of the Quality Assurance Committee of a regulatory body in nursing. For many years, you have seen applicants come and go. But increasingly, the College is experiencing an influx of young graduates and some experienced nurses from overseas. Because of the demographic changes in your province you are seeing more and more applicants from Asia, the Philippines, and for some odd reason the UK.

Your concern is this: although all the graduates have proof of completing education and training programs, they are not successful on any of the examinations—the practical or the written. The College provides information about educational programs and even bridging opportunities but few, if any, of the applicants have the resources to actually start over or take a bridging course.

With such a high rate of failure, you feel something is wrong with the way the College actually assesses foreign-trained nurses and you wonder if there isn't something more you can do or recommend to the College. On the other hand, a piece of you also thinks that Canada has the best nurse training programs in the world, so maybe the foreign-trained nurses really can't practice in a Canadian context.

You express your concerns to the Registrar and the other members of the Quality Committee and together you develop a plan.

- 1. What are the key elements of the plan?**
- 2. Will the College deal with all internationally-trained nurses the same or will different applicants from different nations require various support services and assessments?**

Please use Worksheet 1 to summarize your group's responses.

Case Study 3

Employer Perspective

You own and operate a large-scale high-end construction firm. Until recently you never had difficulty hiring carpenters, roofers, electricians, plumbers or any other trades people. But recently, it seems like there are fewer and fewer qualified workers. You are very frustrated and feel you are not able to bid on particular jobs because of the lack of skilled workers.

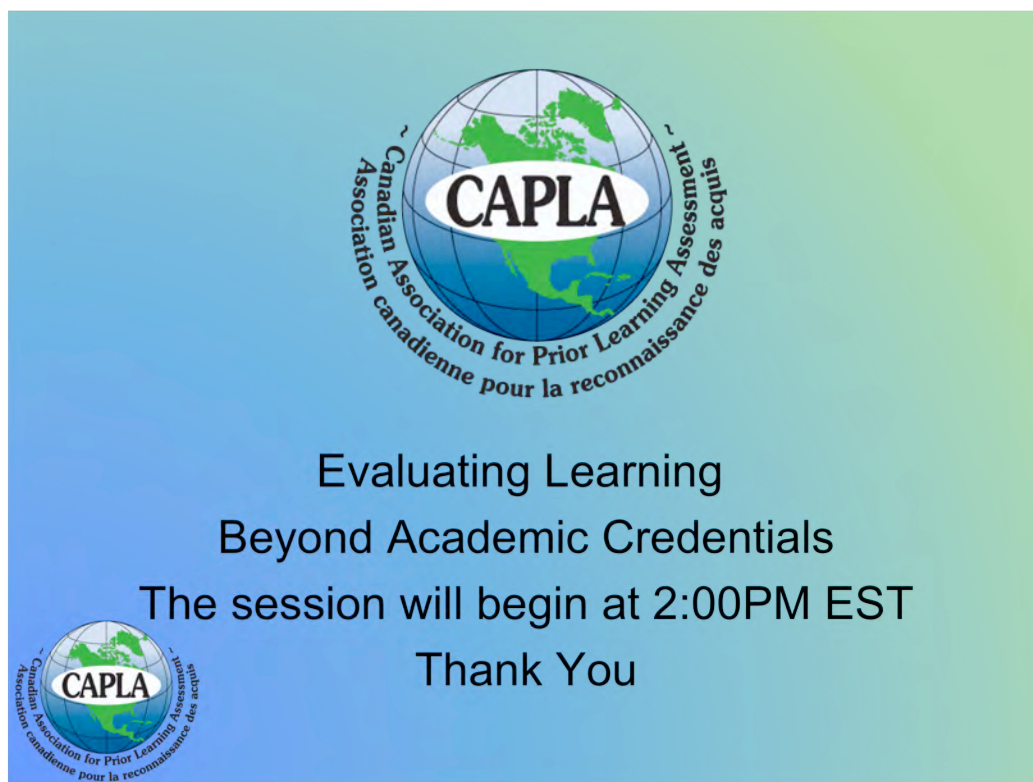
You placed want ads in the local papers and even placed on-line advertisement. Yes, people came in but they were mostly from other countries and you didn't have a clue about how to determine whether they had the skills and knowledge you need or whether they could even learn about Canadian codes. You also worry that someone who looks and sounds different may not fit in well with the long-time experienced workers you have. It is such a dilemma.

You decide as a last resort to hire a human resource consultant to help you figure out how to deal with the internationally-trained workers who apply for work.

- 1. What questions are you and the consultant trying to answer?**
- 2. How can you modify your current hiring practices to get the workers you need?**
- 3. How can you maintain your current workforce and still introduce workers from other nations without having to deal with a lot of "agro"?**

Please use Worksheet 1 to summarize your group's responses.

Appendix B: PowerPoint from webinar



To review the full PowerPoint presentation please go to www.recognitionforlearning.ca / Discussion Forums / CAPLA Webinars / Recognizing Credentials – Oct. 31 / Webinar Slides

(note: you must register as a user with www.recognitionforlearning.ca in order to access the discussion area)

Appendix C: Agenda from Pre-Conference Workshop

AGENDA

Beyond Academic Credentials

A 360-degree Look at the Recognition of Prior Learning Creating the New Normal: People, Tools, Process and Quality Assurance

**November 13, 2011
King Gallery, 3rd Floor
9:00 – 4:00**

9:00 Welcome, introductions, review of agenda and overview of purpose and process

9:15 Background: outcome of webinar

9:30 PEOPLE: Defining the issues

10:00 Feedback from working groups and clustering and clarification of issues

10:30 Break

10:45 TOOLS: What are the tools in our assessment toolbox? A look at the strengths and limitations of various assessment tools including: self-assessment, demonstrations (including work-place and simulations), challenge exams, case studies and structured interviews.

12:00 Lunch

1:00 PROCESS: How are organizations using some of these tools?

2:00: QUALITY ASSURANCE: Creating a system-wide approach to assessment and quality assurance: What does this mean and how can it work?

3:00 Creating the “new normal” how do we create lasting organizational and system-wide change?

3:30 Open Forum

4:00 Wrap up and close

Appendix D: PowerPoint Presentation from Pre-Conference Session

Beyond Academic Credentials: A 360-degree look at the Recognition of Prior Learning

Creating the "New Normal":
People, Tools, Process and
Quality Assurance

CAPLA:
2011 Fall Focus Workshop

To review the full PowerPoint presentation please go to
www.recognitionforlearning.ca / Discussion Forums / CAPLA Webinars /
Recognizing Credentials – Oct. 31 / Fall Focus Pre-Conference

(note: you must register as a user with www.recognitionforlearning.ca in order to
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