

Canadian Adults' Interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR): A 2004 National Survey

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Introduction

Canada is now the most highly schooled country in the world, in terms of the proportion of adults who have attained some form of post-secondary university or college credential. With rapid increases since 1960, over 40 percent of Canadian adults 25 to 64 had college or university qualifications by the year 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2003). There was also a rapid increase in participation in continuing adult education courses during this period. Our recent national surveys (see below) have found that participation in all forms of formal education (including credit programs and non-credit courses) by all those over 18 grew to over 43 percent in 1998 and nearly 45 percent in 2004. If those over 18 registered in school credit programs are excluded, this still amounts to around 35 percent of all other adults participating in some form of course annually. Adult education participation rates remain significantly lower than many other countries, notably in Scandinavia (Statistics Canada, 2000).

In this context, growing concern has been expressed by government, business and educational leaders over the exclusion of others of comparable competencies from formal educational credentials. The Conference Board of Canada (Bloom and Grant, 2002) has estimated that recognizing prior learning gained through work and training as well as the foreign credentials of immigrants could generate economic benefits of billions of dollars. In this increasingly credential-based society, worries about educational inequities for those who don't have appropriate Canadian credentials increase. The recent Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning (2001, p. 2) states:

In order to maintain quality of life and achieve our goals for economic prosperity, we must support and recognize continuous lifelong learning in all its forms. In so doing, we promote full labour market participation, social inclusion, individual empowerment and equity for all people.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a systematic process through which already developed knowledge and skills are identified, organized, described, documented and assessed. Advocacy organizations, most notably the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), have done very significant work over the past decade to develop community capacities to provide PLAR services to those interested in them. The research done to date suggests that PLAR provisions remain seriously underdeveloped in most institutions (Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2001), that the major beneficiaries so far have been already admitted college students who have enthusiastically used PLAR to complete their programs more quickly (Aarts et al, 1999), and that use of PLAR in the workplace has not made much progress in recent years—with the exception of the Canadian military (Aarts et al, 2003).

A little examined question is the extent to which Canadians are actually interested in prior learning recognition for themselves and which groups are most interested. The current research is devoted to these questions. All findings reported in this paper are from two national surveys of lifelong learning and work, the NALL 1998 Survey (see www.wall.ca) and the WALL 2004 Survey (see www.wallnetwork.ca). Both surveys interviewed representative samples of adult Canadians over 18. The sample size for NALL was 1,562 and for WALL it was 9,063.

Survey Findings

1.1. Interest in PLAR

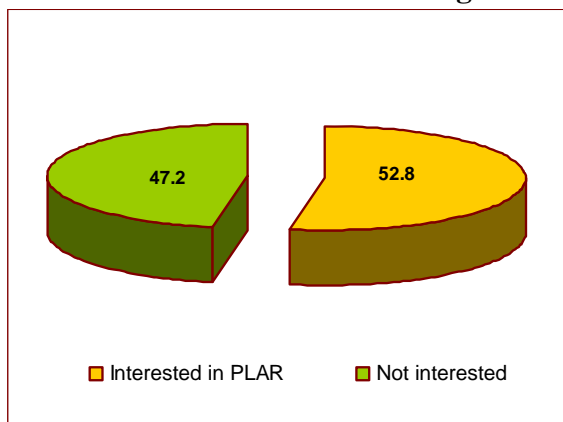
In both the 1998 and 2004 surveys, all respondents were asked the following question:

“Would you be more likely to enroll in an educational program if you could get formal acknowledgement for your past learning experiences so that it would require fewer courses to finish the program?”

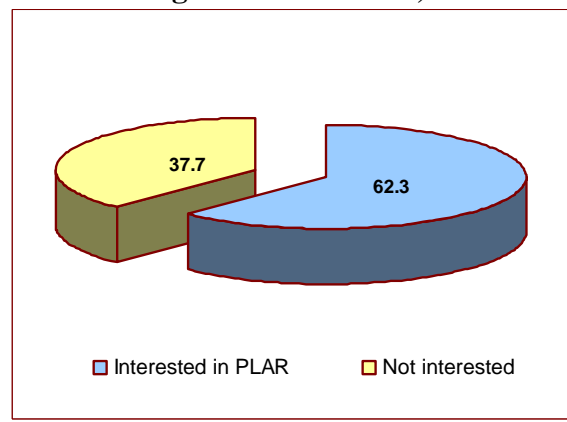
This question does not capture all interest in PLAR. For example, there are probably many people who would like to have their informally achieved competencies institutionally certified but who do not want to devote time, resources or energy to taking any further formal courses. Positive responses to this question do offer estimates of the extent of popular interest in PLAR provisions in relation to future participation in formal education.

As Chart 1 shows, in 2004 more than a half of all Canadian adults and over 60% of employed workers would be more interested in enrolling in further education with recognition of prior learning. In terms of population, this translates into over 12 million people who would like their informal learning achievements to be applied as credits toward a wide range of academic courses and other training programs. The 1998 survey found slightly higher expressions of interest in both respects. This apparent decline may be related to recent increase in employment time which has left less time for adult learning and perhaps to the aging of the adult population (see Livingstone, 2005). In any case, very strong interest remains among particular groups as we shall see.

Chart 1 Interest in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Canada, 2004



Source: WALL, 2004 [All respondents]



Source: WALL, 2004 [Currently Employed]

1.2. Unmet Demand for Formal Education and PLAR

Only a tiny fraction of those who express interest in PLAR have so far been able to use this process to gain advance credit at Canadian educational institutions (Thomas, Collins & Plett, 2001). Table 1 shows the proportions who took a course last year, those who did not but wanted to, and those who did not take one and did not want to do so. It also shows the percentages in each category who were interested in PLAR. Among the 45% who did take any course, interest in using PLAR to expedite attaining formal credentials remains very high, with about two-thirds expressing interest. The 17% who did not take a course but wanted to translates into over 4 million adults with unmet need for formal education courses. Of these, two-thirds also indicate interest in PLAR. These people, about two and a half million Canadian adults, probably constitute the most hidden part of active unmet demand for PLAR. Among the third group, those who did not participate in formal education and did not want to last year, there is still a significant number, about a third, who would probably enroll if PLAR were provided. There is clearly a large unmet demand for formal education courses in Canada and also a strong interest among those with unmet demands to use PLAR. Further analysis shows that interest in PLAR is even stronger among those who faced the most barriers to participating in formal education courses (e.g. too costly, unavailable, family responsibilities, lack of time).

Table 1 Current Participation in Formal Education and PLAR, 2004

Participation Status	% of Total Population	% Interested in PLAR
Enrolled past year	45	64
Not enrolled, wanted course	17	66
Not enrolled, not wanted	37	34
Total	100	53

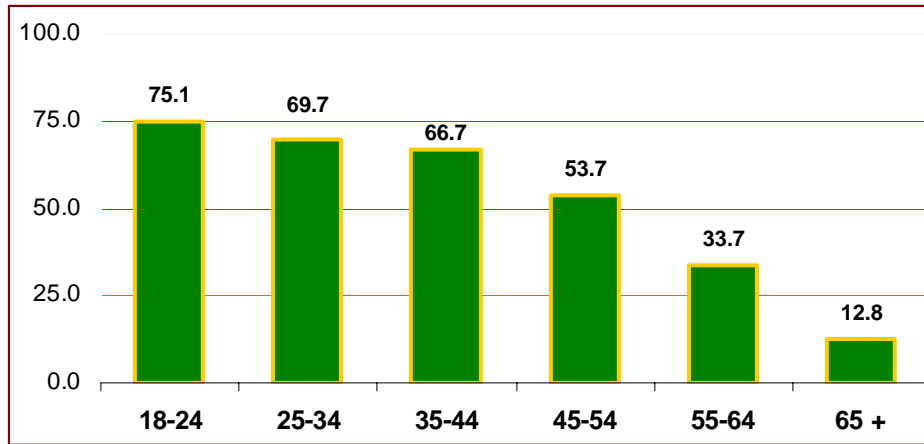
Source: WALL, 2004.

2. Socioeconomic Factors Related to Interest in PLAR

2.1. Age and PLAR

Younger respondents are most interested in PLAR (Chart 2). Three-quarters of those under 25 express interest. They have had less opportunity for prior informal learning than older folks but perhaps more current informal learning for PLAR assessment and more motivation for certification as they enter adulthood. Two thirds of those aged 25 to 44 are interested in PLAR. Contrary to earlier expectations about aging and participation in adult education courses, more than half of 45 to 54 old respondents are also interested in PLAR. Interest drops sharply after 55.

Chart 2 Age and PLAR

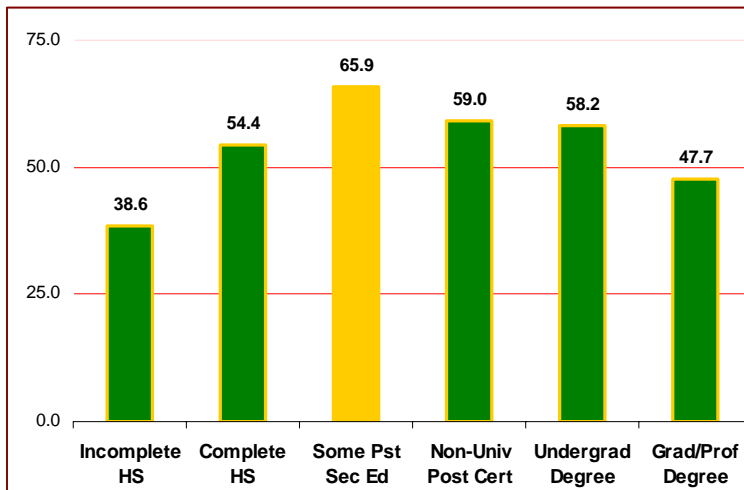


Source: WALL, 2004

2.2. Formal Educational Attainment and PLAR

The relationship between schooling and interest in PLAR appears to strengthen as people get some post-secondary education and then diminish as they obtain higher credentials (Chart 3). The least formally educated – those without a high school diploma – express the least interest in PLAR. The highest interest is among people with an incomplete post secondary education, about two thirds of those with some community college, some university or some professional studies credit. Interest decreases among those with post-secondary credentials and there is only minority support among those with graduate or professional degrees.

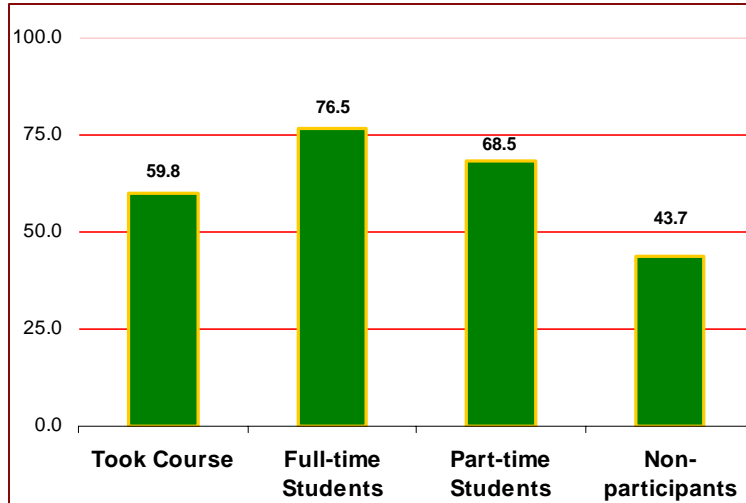
Chart 3 Formal Educational Attainment and PLAR



Source: WALL, 2004

If we look at support for PLAR in terms of current participation status in formal education, we find that interest is highest, about three-quarters, among those who are currently full-time students, and presumably see immediate benefit to expediting their program completion (Chart 4). Two-thirds of part-time students indicate support as well

Chart 4 Current Participation in Formal Education and PLAR



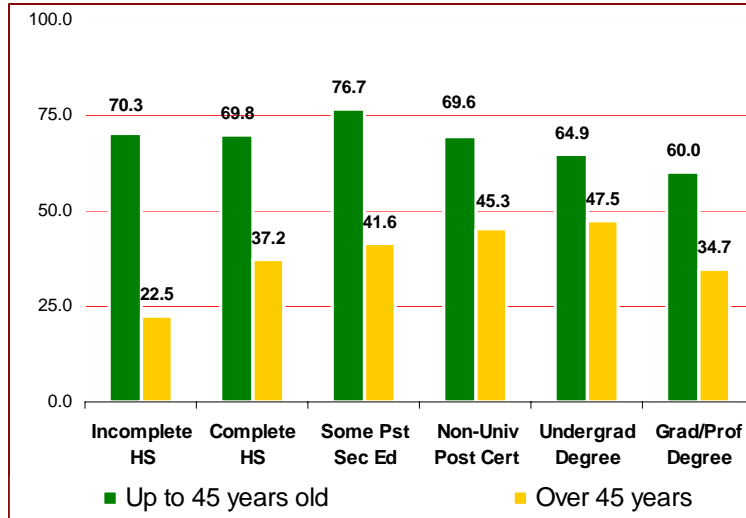
Source: WALL, 2004

as a majority of the diverse current participants in adult education courses who are not registered students in credit programs. But even among those who are not currently students or adult course participants, over 40 percent also express interest.

2.3 Age, Participation in Formal Education and PLAR

More specific analysis shows that younger people, those up to 45 years old, are much more interested in PLAR regardless of their educational attainment. As Chart 5 indicates, among younger respondents educational attainment is not as significant a determinant for attitudes toward PLAR as it is among people older than 45. Chart 5 shows that among younger people with incomplete high school more than 70% are interested in PLAR while among those older than 45 with incomplete high school only about one in five are interested in PLAR. Smaller but significant differences regarding interest in PLAR compared by age exist among all educational groups. These results suggest strong interest in PLAR among the most at-risk younger high school drop-outs (see Statistics Canada, 2003). Further analysis of current participation in any formal education by age finds that about half of participants older than 45 are interested in PLAR compared to only a quarter of non participants over 45. In contrast, among those under 45, over two-thirds of *both* participants and non-participants express interest in PLAR.

Chart 5 Age and Educational Attainment by Interest in PLAR

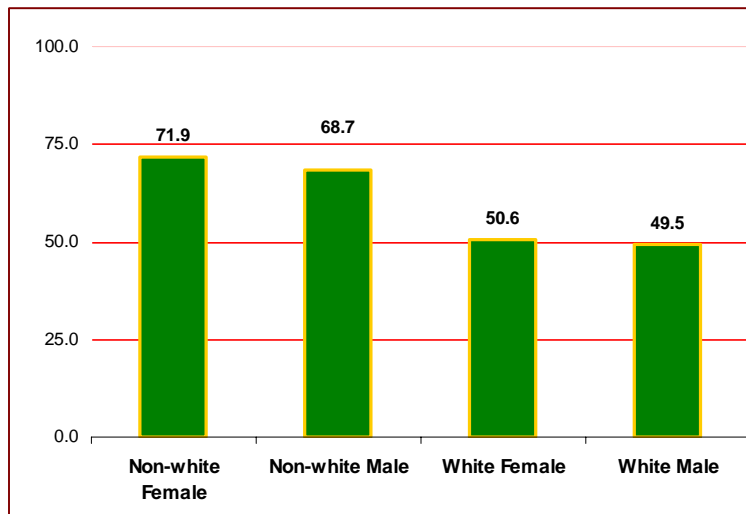


Source: WALL, 2004

2.4. Race, Gender and PLAR

There is a significant difference in interest in PLAR between white and non-white respondents (Chart 6). While about half of white respondents are interested in PLAR, more than two thirds of non-white respondents express support. Gender differences are generally not significant.

Chart 6 Race, Gender and Interest in PLAR



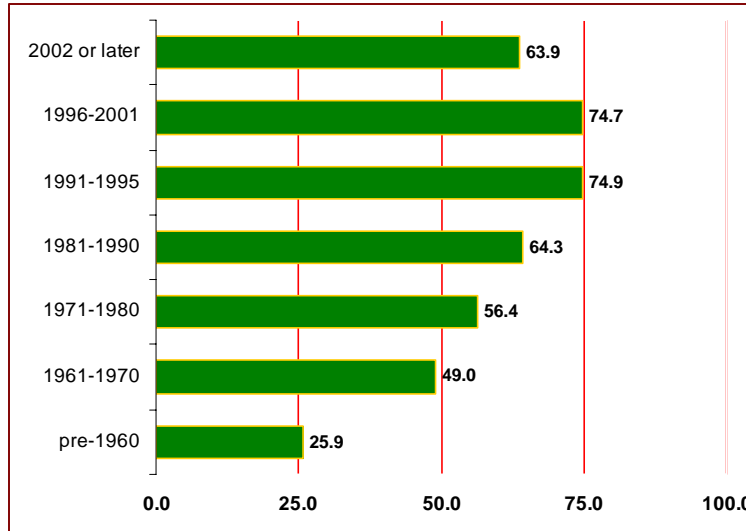
Source: WALL, 2004

2.5. Immigration and PLAR

There is no significant difference between those born in Canada and all those born abroad in interest in PLAR. But there are significant differences between immigrants of different periods. About three-quarter of immigrants who arrived in Canada between 1991 and

2001 are interested in PLAR, more interest than any other group of immigrants or those born in Canada (Chart 7). Further analysis shows that over two-thirds of these recent immigrants who are older than 45 also retain interest in PLAR.

Chart 7 Period of Immigration to Canada and Interest in PLAR



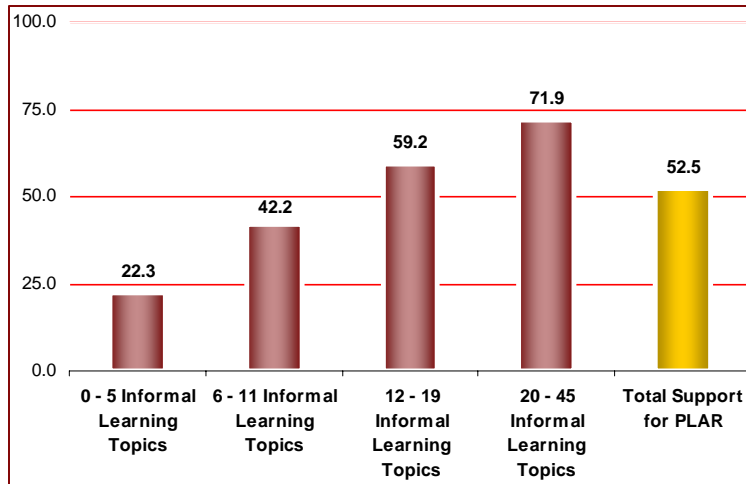
Source: WALL, 2004

3. Informal Learning and PLAR

Adults' informal learning is widely assumed to provide the basis for further development of a lifelong learning culture. But there has been very little empirical research on the actual informal learning of Canadian adults to date. The NALL and WALL surveys and related case studies provide baseline data (see www.wallnetwork.ca). The 2004 WALL survey has found a high general level of involvement in different forms of informal learning activities among Canadian adults, an average of around 12 hours per week for the over 80% who report involvement in informal learning activities. The self-reported incidence of all informal learning activities may have decreased somewhat in recent years, probably in relation to a significant lengthening of employment hours (see Livingstone, 2005). In any case, Canadians' informal learning activities remain very extensive, are only slightly related to formal education and retain their significance for people of virtually all ages (Livingstone, 2005).

Canadians who are more involved in informal learning are more interested in PLAR. As Chart 8 shows, among those who indicate little or no involvement in informal learning topics over the past year (less than 5 topics) only a fifth are interested in PLAR. Among those most highly involved in informal learning (who report learning about 20 to 45 topics) about 70% are interested in PLAR.

Chart 8 General Involvement in Informal Learning and PLAR



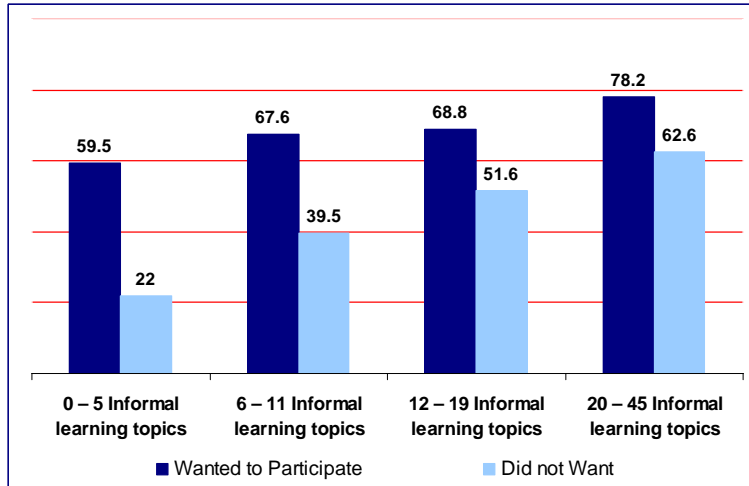
Source: WALL, 2004

Further multi-variate analysis similarly shows a higher interest in PLAR among those more engaged in informal learning across all domains of informal learning (job-related, housework-related, community volunteer work-related, general interest). Analyses controlling for age, gender and employment status show that people highly involved in informal learning are several times more likely to be in favour of PLAR, and that if their knowledge and experience were recognized, they would be more likely to enroll in adult education. An table that contains a summary of relevant multivariate analyses is included in Appendix 1.

3.1 Informal Learning, Unmet Demand for Formal Education and PLAR

Greater involvement in informal learning also appears to be related to unmet demand for access to formal education. Among respondents who participate most extensively in informal learning, more than half reported an unmet demand for formal courses. In contrast, among those with low participation in informal learning only a quarter of respondents reported unmet demand for courses. Our analysis suggests that informal learning plays a compensatory role for people who want to participate in formal education and training but who encounter barriers that prevent them from participating. In any case, as Chart 9 shows, the majority of who faced barriers to desired participation in formal education in the past year but who involved themselves fairly extensively in informal learning express interest in PLAR, with highest support of nearly 80 percent among the most involved informal learners.

Chart 9 Involvement in Informal Learning, Unmet Demand for Education and PLAR

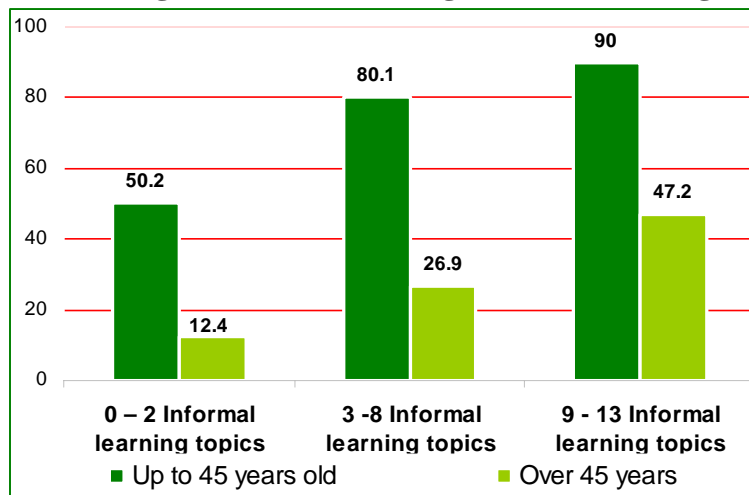


Source: WALL 2004.

3.2 School Dropout, Age, Informal Learning and PLAR

In this highly credentialed society, high school dropouts are at increasing risk of becoming marginalized in various ways. Analysis of interest in PLAR among school dropouts of different ages and different levels of involvement in informal learning suggests some important distinctions. Chart 10 shows that, despite lower general support

Chart 10 Age, Informal Learning and PLAR among School Dropouts



Source: WALL, 2004

for PLAR among people with incomplete high school, younger dropout express high levels of interest in PLAR, ranging from 50% among those minimally engaged in informal learning to an exceptionally high 90% among those highly involved in informal learning. In comparison, respondents over 45 are two to four time less likely than their younger counterparts to support PLAR. The most important point here is that young high school dropouts are not generally dropouts from further learning and most continue to be quite interested in PLAR to gain access to further credentials.

Concluding Remarks

In contrast to global leader status in post-secondary education, Canada trails many countries in adult education provision. Fuller recognition of Canadian adults' prior informal learning could contribute to substantially greater participation in adult education and training. More than half of all Canadians and even greater numbers of the employed would be more likely to enroll in adult education if their previous informal learning were recognized.

More than two thirds of racial minorities, recent immigrants and younger school dropouts all express a high interest in enrolment in adult education and training if their prior informal learning were to be recognized, and all of these groups are found to be devoting very substantial time to informal learning. PLAR may offer part of the solution to the barriers to adult education and training faced by many people.

More comprehensive studies on prior learning assessment and recognition are needed. But the current survey certainly suggests that further development and implementation of PLAR policies and practices would have positive effects on the educational development of Canadian adults and especially on educational and employment opportunities for those who currently face greater barriers. The survey results indicate substantial unmet demand for participation in many kinds of formal education. Using PLAR to address this demand could, for example, address the current shortage of skilled trades workers in Canada. It is probable that a wider application of PLAR would contribute to higher enrolment and completion rates in various academic and vocational training programs, as well as more effective identification of the talents of the active labour force. Both greater educational equity and a more productive labour force would result. The key question is can we develop the quality systems needed to support the current demand for PLAR?

Survey Information

The Canadian National Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) was conducted in 2004 as part of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Collaborative Research Initiative project on "The Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning in the New Economy: National and Case Study Perspectives", centred at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). Further information about this research network may be found at www.wallnetwork.ca. The survey was administered by the Institute for Social Research at York University. The sample of respondents comprises 9,063 randomly selected adults over 18 and provides data on a wide array of paid and unpaid work and formal and informal learning related practices. The current analysis includes questions on attitudes toward PLAR, respondents' demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, participation in and barriers to participation in adult education, as well as questions on involvement in informal learning measured through estimated time and participation in specific learning topics. The NALL National Survey of Informal Learning was conducted in 1998 with similar questions and a smaller sample of 1,562 respondents. Further information is available at www.nall.ca.

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Appendix 1

Summary of Findings on Determinants of Attitudes towards PLAR in Canada

	Interest in PLAR	df	Sig.	Raw Odds	95%CI Lower	95%CI Upper	df	Sig.	Adj. Odds	95%CI Lower	95%CI Upper
AGE											
65 +	12.8%	5	.000	1			5	0.00	1		
18-24	75.1%	1	.000	20.41	16.51	25.23	1	0.00	13.72	10.73	17.53
25-34	69.7%	1	.000	15.55	12.83	18.86	1	0.00	9.16	7.36	11.41
35-44	66.7%	1	.000	13.55	11.26	16.30	1	0.00	9.12	7.40	11.23
45-54	53.7%	1	.000	7.86	6.53	9.46	1	0.00	5.52	4.50	6.78
55-64	33.7%	1	.000	3.43	2.79	4.20	1	0.00	2.55	2.04	3.17
RACE											
White	50.1%			1					1		
Non-white	70.4%	1	.000	2.36	2.05	2.72	1	0.00	1.69	1.39	2.05
IMMIGRANT STATUS											
Non-immigrants	52.1%	3	.000	1			3	n.s.	1		
Immigrated 31+ yr. ago	38.2%	1	.000	.56	.48	.67	1	0.05	1.24	1.00	1.53
Immigrated 11-30 yr. ago	62.2%	1	.000	1.51	1.27	1.80	1	n.s.	1.03	0.82	1.30
Immigrated -10 yr. ago	72.4%	1	.000	2.40	1.93	2.99	1	n.s.	0.83	0.63	1.09
GENDER											
Male	52.3%			1					1		
Female	53.2%	1	n.s.	1.04	.95	1.13	1	n.s.	1.09	0.98	1.21
INFORMAL LEARNING											
0-5 Learning Topics	31.0%	3	.000	1			3	0.00	1		
6-11 Learning Topics	51.4%	1	.000	2.35	2.08	2.66	1	0.00	1.80	1.56	2.08
12-19 Learning Topic	58.7%	1	.000	3.17	2.80	3.59	1	0.00	2.49	2.16	2.88
20-45 Learning Topic	71.2%	1	.000	5.51	4.83	6.28	1	0.00	3.17	2.72	3.69
ADULT EDUCATION											
Non-participant	43.7%			1					1		
Participant	63.8%	1	.000	2.27	2.08	2.47	1	n.s.	1.09	0.97	1.23
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT											
Incomplete HS	38.6%	4	.000	1			4	0.00	1		
Complete HS	54.4%	1	.000	1.89	1.65	2.18	1	n.s.	1.07	0.90	1.26
Some post second.	65.9%	1	.000	3.07	2.63	3.59	1	0.06	1.20	0.99	1.46
Non-university certif..	59.0%	1	.000	2.29	2.04	2.57	1	n.s.	1.11	0.97	1.29
University degree	55.9%	1	.000	2.01	1.76	2.30	1	0.03	0.83	0.70	0.98
STUDENT STATUS											
Non-student	49.9%			1					1		
Student	70.8%	1	.000	2.43	2.13	2.77	1	n.s.	1.14	0.96	1.35
BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION											
No barriers	41.2%	4	.000	1			4	0.00	1		
One barriers	63.7%	1	.000	2.50	2.17	2.87	1	0.00	1.90	1.61	2.23
Two barriers	68.8%	1	.000	3.13	2.67	3.67	1	0.00	1.92	1.60	2.30
Three barriers	74.0%	1	.000	4.05	3.42	4.81	1	0.00	2.33	1.93	2.81
Four or more barriers	77.7%	1	.000	4.97	4.20	5.88	1	0.00	2.60	2.16	3.14

Source: WALL 2004.