DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION
- PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

Written by Malcolm Day
Edited by R. E. Tucker
Typeset by L. Wilson
Printed by Peace Tree Printing

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
PO Box 20135, Belleville, ON K8N 5V1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The project manager/researcher would like to thank the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC), the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education (CAUCE). The Association of University and Community Colleges (AUCC). The Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB). The Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology in British Columbia.

He would also like to thank Rick Dedi, Dr. Robin Millar and Lois Morin from the Manitoba PLA Centre, Dr. Douglas Myers and staff from the Halifax PLA Centre in Nova Scotia, Carol Ebner from Douglas College, Lurline Langbell from the Open Learning Agency in British Columbia, Louise Jewkowicz from Red Deer College in Alberta, Ginette Lamarre from College Ahuntsic in Quebec and Luis Guillermo Barnola from the University of Toronto. Their help and assistance was invaluable.

Also, many thanks to Deb Blower, Red River College and to Louise Gordon, Council on Post-Secondary Education, Manitoba for their contributions on PLAR in Manitoba. To Penny Scott from the Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism, British Columbia for her contribution on the development of a national learning system for tourism in Canada.

The author would also like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of the project steering committee of which he was a member, including:

- Deb Blower, Red River College, Manitoba
- Monica Collins, University of Windsor, Ontario
- Terry Durkin, Adult Learner Representative, HRDC, Ontario
- Sandra Evans, Department of Education, Government of Newfoundland & Labrador
- Louise Gordon, Provincial Government, Manitoba
- Bonnie Kennedy, CLFDB, Ontario
- Dr. Douglas Myers, Halifax PLA Centre, Nova Scotia
- Sharon Rose, Nortel Networks, Ontario
- Penny Scott, Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism, British Columbia
- Paul Zakos, President CAPLA/First Nations Technical Institute, Ontario

The project manager/researcher is also grateful for the advice and assistance given by Professor Geoff Chivers, from the Division of Adult Continuing Education, University of Sheffield, England.

FOREWORD

Why is Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) receiving so much attention these days? After all, the fact that people acquire important knowledge, skills and competencies in a variety of settings outside – as well as inside – the formal education and training system is not a new discovery. True, for the past hundred years or so, industrialized societies have given far more recognition to formal learning achievements and credentialing than to other forms of learning. At the same time, at least a limited degree of acknowledgment for on-the-job and community-based learning has always been present.

Nor is it entirely novel to think that learning acquired outside the formal systems can be identified and documented. For the past quarter century at least, especially in the United States, the techniques of Prior Learning Assessment have been used effectively to enable adults who have missed earlier opportunities for further education, to enter college and university programs.

What is unprecedented, however, is the economic and social turbulence of the past decade brought about by innovations in technology, communications, and trade. Individuals, organizations, communities and governments are all struggling to cope with dramatic and apparently continuous change. Not only seasonal and 'blue collar' workers, but also 'white collar', managerial and professional occupations have been profoundly affected. Indeed, even those who have managed to maintain employment during this period have found their jobs rapidly changing and their organizations and communities changing around them.

It has become clear that the key to coping successfully with these changes is the consolidation of everything an individual, organization or community already knows and can do. Not only does this build or restore confidence – badly shaken by upheaval and uncertainty - but it provides the best possible base for the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and competencies. To a remarkable extent, therefore, everybody, in these circumstances, becomes a 'learner-in-transition'.

There is one further factor – a severely practical one - that also arises from the new 'learning-in-transition' challenges that now face so many individuals, organizations and communities. That is the fact that those involved in these learning transitions cannot afford to 'go back' or 'start over' in their further education and training efforts. Nor can they afford to waste time, energy and money in learning over again what they already know and can do.

These are the 'learning-in-transition' realities and challenges facing Canada and many other countries today. These are also the reasons why the principles and practice of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition – in one form or another – is emerging in Canada and elsewhere as a relevant, timely and efficient response.

These principles begin with the assumption that significant learning takes place in a wide variety of settings, including but not restricted to formal education and training institutions and programs. From that it follows that if individuals can satisfactorily document and demonstrate what they know and can do, their knowledge, skills and competencies should be recognized and used as a basis for further learning and development.

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION (PLAR) IN CANADA

In practice, the principles of PLAR are applied through a broad range of approaches and techniques and across an increasingly broad range of settings and applications. Although the field – especially in its broad sense – is relatively new, there seem to be at least three 'clusters' or 'types' of PLAR-related activity across the spectrum. While these sometimes work in relative isolation from one another, they are increasingly seen as complementary.

1. Reducing the Credentialing Barriers

The first of these focuses upon the necessity of gaining better recognition and interchangeability among the myriad of 'paper' credentials that currently exist. This effort involves the following

- improved recognition and equivalency across education and training institutions and agencies (i.e. degrees, diplomas, certificates, credits, etc.);
- improved recognition and equivalency amongst professional and occupational licensing and credentialing bodies;
- improved recognition and portability across provincial jurisdictional boundaries; and
- improved recognition and portability across national and international jurisdictions and boundaries.

At a time when a variety of factors make flexibility and change imperative, individuals, organizations and communities still face too many obstacles in gaining recognition and acceptance of the formal learning accomplishments and credentials they already have earned. This problem is especially acute and visible in terms of immigrant populations, but it also affects individuals within Canada attempting to shift from one occupational field, career path or province to another.

Although few involved in the effort to improve this situation may consider themselves to be PLAR Practitioners, the recognition and portability of the wide variety of learning credentials are nonetheless important elements in advancing the fundamental principles of PLAR in Canada and elsewhere.

2. Developing the Individual and Community Learning Base

To date, most of the focus and attention of Canadian PLAR Practitioners have been devoted to a developmental approach to Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition. In this context, support has been provided to 'learners-in-transition' through such things as advisory services, 'transferable skills' workshops and 'portfolio development' programs – all of which have been intended to assist individuals to identify and document their past learning achievements as a base for planning their further labour market, career or educational directions.

Of these development activities the portfolio approach has proven to be the most comprehensive, systematic and productive. This approach emphasizes both *process* – as a comprehensive in-depth inventory of life experience, learning identification, self-reflection and goal-setting – and *product* – with the development of a portfolio binder containing detailed action plans, resumes and documentation which individuals can continue to adapt and use in pursuit of their objectives.

Although the work involved requires a significant amount of individual time and effort, it also builds upon a strong element of 'peer' learning and support through its small-group, facilitated sessions. A number of versions and variations of the portfolio approach have been developed in recent years, seeking to systematize and/or 'fast-track' the process without sacrificing its basic development dynamic.

Initially used largely in the context of assisting 'adults-in-transition' to begin or to return to further education and training at the post-secondary level, these developmental approaches are now being more widely applied in the contexts of labour market transitions, workplace human resource development and community-based economic and social development. Among the roles that PLAR Practitioners play in this context are the following

PLA Adviser;
PLA Facilitator;
PLA Co-ordinator; and
PLA Evaluator/Assessor.

3. Searching for Competencies

Accompanying these two clusters of PLAR work has been an approach that focuses first upon identifying the tasks and competencies involved in fulfilling a particular job or role and then upon discovering the extent to which an individual possesses the requisite knowledge and skill levels, however or wherever she or he may have attained them. In this context the roles of PLA Adviser and PLA Assessor are usually combined. To date, this approach has been more quickly and fully developed elsewhere, but it has been receiving increasing interest and support in Canada in recent years.

It is this last 'cluster' of PLAR approaches that is the main focus of this Benchmarking Study. In drawing upon established British practice – with its framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – to illuminate Canadian PLAR practice, it was expected that both significant similarities and significant differences would be identified. This, indeed, turned out to be the case.

One significant difference may be the differences in national political cultures and administrative practices. Canada, as we know, is an extremely decentralized country. Although PLAR is developing across Canada as a whole, different jurisdictions, agencies and institutions are setting their own pace and directions. It may seem unlikely, therefore, that anything like the British NVQ system would be established in the near future. At the same time, there are a number of sectors in which a systematic, competency or outcomes-based approach to PLAR is relevant and viable. Indeed – as indicated in the study - there are already examples of where this approach is being applied in Canada.

In addition, led by such organizations as the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) and the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), a national network of PLAR Practitioners – innovative, committed, diverse and inclusive – is clearly taking shape. This study also indicates that there is a strong interest among those engaged in PLAR activities to develop high quality standards, to exchange 'best practice' information – nationally and internationally - and to develop an appropriate coordination mechanism to strengthen the field and its impact across the country.

It is the aim of this study and its sponsors to contribute to that process and that objective.

Project Steering Committee
January 2000

CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Six

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is the report of the CAPLA study *“Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment - Practitioner Perspectives” which* has been funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the Benchmarking Study was to develop and promote national benchmarks for those engaged in PLAR assessment across Canada, in all sectors and communities. The objectives of the study were to

- gain practitioner consensus on the development of benchmarks for PLAR assessment across Canada;
- produce a guide to support the implementation of national benchmarks for PLAR assessment;
- make recommendations for the promotion of the national benchmarks and distribution of the guide; and
- investigate the feasibility of developing a system to confirm the competence of PLAR practitioners, based on nationally agreed-upon benchmarks for practice.

In meeting these objectives the following outcomes have been achieved

1. A review of the outcomes-based approach to learning in Australia, United Kingdom and Canada, the context in which this approach is emerging, the tensions arising and how these are being resolved by post-secondary institutions. (Chapters Two and Three).
2. An overview of the diversity of PLAR practice in Canada and the emerging issues. (Chapters Two and Three). Case study presentations include
    - across-Canada PLAR initiative for the technology professions;
    - the development towards a national tourism learning system;
    - a focus on health and human service programs in two Canadian provinces;
    - a focus on the role of post-secondary institutions in two Canadian provinces; and

- a focus on community-based PLAR in two Canadian provinces. (This is not meant to be a complete picture of what is occurring in Canada but rather a number of case studies to show a variety of approaches.)[1]

3. A review of the benchmarking process and a report outlining the development of emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners (Chapters Four and Five).
4. An analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for using PLAR benchmarks in Canada.
5. The recognition of emerging benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners in Canada.
6. An example of a possible mechanism for validating the competence of PLAR practitioners (Chapter Six) based on feedback received from focus group participants.
7. Discussion of the development of a comprehensive policy for the establishment of PLAR training organizations in Canada. On the advice of the steering committee a suggested framework is included in Chapter Six.
8. Recommendations for the development and dissemination of a printed text-based guide for Canadian PLAR Practitioners have been made (Chapter Five). The practitioner guide will be published separately from this report.

SCOPE AND DEFINITION OF THE STUDY

An International Context

There are decades of PLAR practice in other countries, most notably in Australia, UK and USA. In these countries, a variety of processes have been used to apply PLAR to education, workforce development and the identification of occupational standards. Much is to be gained by examining the experiences of our colleagues in these countries - the pitfalls, the opportunities, the challenges – in order to apply that learning to a process of PLAR that is unique to Canadian culture and history.

That is not to suggest that PLAR is new to Canada. It has been practiced in universities such as Queens and Laurentian for more than thirty years[2]. In the 1980's PLAR was quite prevalent in Quebec. However, it is in the last decade that interest in PLAR has flourished and all stakeholders have begun to explore how to participate in the movement. A picture of the current status of PLAR in Canada and value statements from a variety of stakeholders - community colleges, industry, small business, community-

---

[1] *For a more complete picture of PLAR in Canada the reader may wish to contact the New Approaches to Lifelong Learning Project, University of Toronto at: http://nall.oise.utoronto.ca. and www.plar.com.*

[2] *The Status of PLAR in Professional Programs in Ontario Universities, 1999, prepared for the Council of Ontario Universities and Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation by Dr. Kathryn Barker and Dr. Charles Belanger.*

based organizations, First Nations, school boards and professional associations - can be found at www.plar.com and http://nall.oise.utoronto.ca.

The involvement of a variety of stakeholders and efforts to move PLAR into the mainstream has inevitably led to tensions within educational institutions, among various types of educational institutions, business, labour and equity groups in terms of how it is defined and implemented. There are strong advocates of the outcomes-based approach to PLAR and those who advocate for a developmental approach.

Labour has concerns about confidentiality, business's growing control of curricula, their exclusion from input into the new applications to apprenticeship training and the burdening of the individual in terms of time, organization and cost of training. Equity groups are challenging who determines the knowledge that is recognized. Business is concerned with access to and timely delivery of flexible, modularized training required by employees. Educational organizations are concerned about quality and costs. In attempts to become learning-centred, they are thoughtfully and cautiously exploring and implementing new structures and practices such as PLAR to facilitate and support the development of independent lifelong learners. Likewise, some Canadian training and certification bodies are using PLAR to evaluate occupational and professional competence.

The need to develop national benchmarks or standards to guide the practice of assessors in an international context cannot be overstated. It challenges Canada to act nationally and to think more globally in relation to issues of employability and labour force development. National benchmarks for assessment will promote consistency and credibility for Canada's PLAR implementation strategy. These, in turn, will augur well for its acceptance abroad and at home so that issues relating to currency, portability and transferability of credentials will be more easily managed. By providing provincially agreed-upon national benchmarks for best practice we are clarifying the expectations of learners and the responsibilities of those who conduct PLAR assessment.

If the full impact of PLAR as a tool for change is to be realized, it is imperative that clear, credible concise benchmarks with cross-sector applicability be created to guide quality practice.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking is a practice that allows a service to determine its standing within its field. It is a systematic analysis that compares activities, systems and processes to a recognized standard. Organizations use benchmarking to solve problems, plan and set goals, improve processes, innovate and set strategy. By using a number of well-defined and easily understood indicators, weak spots in internal processes can be identified and compared to the most effective operating systems or best practices in leading organizations.

Assessment

For the purpose of this study assessment is defined as *"…Whenever one person in some kind of interaction, direct or indirect, with another is conscious of obtaining and* *interpreting information about the knowledge and understanding or abilities and attitudes of this other person." Rowntree, 1987*

Brown et. al. (1996:16) indicate that the purpose of assessment is to

- classify or grade students;
- enable student progression;
- guide and improve student performance;
- facilitate students' choice of options;
- diagnose faults and enable students to rectify mistakes;
- give teachers feedback on their teaching;
- motivate students;
- provide statistics for the course, or for the institution;
- add variety to students' learning experience; and
- add direction to teaching and instruction.

Some of these activities are ongoing or *formative* e.g. diagnosing potential faults and enabling students to rectify their mistakes and others may be *summative* e.g. the assignment of final grades. Also, some activities may be *institutionally focused* e.g. providing statistics for a course while others may be *learner-focused* e.g. facilitating student options.

Prior Learning Assessment And Recognition (PLAR)

For the purpose of this study, Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition is defined as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e. skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences. Recognition of prior learning can be used toward the requirements of education and training programs, occupational and/or professional certification, labour market entry and organizational and human resource capacity building.

The goals of prior learning assessment and recognition have been stated by Challis (1993). They include

- identification of learning, wherever it has taken place;
- selection of that learning which is relevant to a desired outcome or progression route;
- demonstration of the validity and appropriateness of the learning;
- matching learning outcomes to those stated within a chosen accreditation or progression framework;

- assessment of evidence against pre-determined criteria to ensure the validity of the claimed learning; and
- accreditation within an appropriate and recognized accreditation framework.

Prior Learning Assessment Methods

The methods that might be used to assess prior learning include assessment of educational documents, portfolio review, demonstration or challenge processes (e.g. written/oral examinations, projects, assignments, performance observation, skill demonstrations, simulations and product assessments), standardized tests and program review.

The PLAR Practitioner

For the purpose of this study a PLAR Practitioner is defined as a person who utilizes *learner-focused activities* to *formatively* or *summatively* assess an individual's prior learning, either for academic credit or recognition of competence, using the goals and methods outlined above.

Within Canada this definition includes the work of the PLAR Adviser. It also includes the work of the PLAR Assessor - who is often but not exclusively, a subject matter expert from faculty. It may also include the work of the PLAR Co-ordinator - if he or she is directly involved in the guidance and assessment of individuals.

GUIDELINES FOR PLAR

The United States of America

In 1989 the following standards for the assessment of prior learning for academic credit were developed for the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) by Urban Whitaker.

- Credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience.
- College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
- Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
- The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
- Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.
- Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.

- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
- Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

The CAEL standards primarily address organizational issues, with little attempt to define the role of the PLAR Practitioner or the learner.

Canada

In 1997, the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) published the following minimum standards for PLAR.

- PLAR must be accessible and relevant to people as individuals. It must focus on the unique needs and abilities of the individual.
- Assessment and recognition must be of learning (knowledge and skills acquired through study or experience) not of experience.
- The PLAR process must be fair and equitable. It must be barrier-free and bias-free.
- The PLAR process must be efficient. It must make the best use of resources for the individual.
- The PLAR process must be effective. It must provide the opportunity for recognition of prior learning, but it must not hold out false promise.
- The PLAR process must be transparent. The individual must know the criteria and standards used to assess his or her skills and knowledge.
- * The assessment must be reliable. The criteria and standards must be recognized and respected by all the labour market partners. This principle applies to occupational and skills standards, the learning outcomes stated for a specific course or training program, and the credentials required for a specific job or occupational group.
- * The assessment tools and their PLAR application must be recognized and accepted by all the labour market partners.
- * Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform this task.
- * The assessing organization must provide a number of ways to carry out an assessment. Individuals should have the opportunity to choose how their assessment will be done. If necessary, they should get help to make their choice.
- Recognition awarded through PLAR should be considered equal to recognition awarded in the traditional manner.
- Recognition awarded through PLAR should be transferable between organizations, provinces and territories.

- PLAR must be an option or opportunity, not a mandatory process.
- If a person is not satisfied with the PLAR assessment, an appeal procedure must be available.

*This study is concerned with the development of benchmarks for four of the CLFDB standards i.e. those which deal with the assessment process, assessment practices and assessor training.

British Columbia (BC)

In March 1999 the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology published the following PLAR Guidelines.

Area A - Education and Administration

All institutions will identify any of their programs or courses which are listed in the BC Transfer Guide (or in other formal transfer arrangements) for which they will not accept credit awarded as a result of the assessment of prior learning.

Learners will receive recognition and credit for demonstrated knowledge, skills and attributes and not for experience alone.

Credit will be awarded for learning reflecting knowledge, skills, attributes and values which are appropriate to the subject, course or program.

In receiving institutions, credit will be awarded for learning that is consistent with the achievement levels required by the particular credential to be awarded.

The assessment and recognition of prior learning and the determination of credit awards will be made by content specialists, with external advice as necessary.

Learners will have access to prior learning assessment and learning opportunities appropriate to the content area.

Credit awarded as a result of the assessment of prior learning will be identified as such on the transcript issued by the institution and transfer credit will be granted on the same basis as is granted for equivalent courses as identified in the BC Transfer Guide or in other formal transfer arrangements.

Policies and information about the prior learning assessment process, including provision for appeal, will be readily available.

The fees for assessment will be based on the services performed and/or the number of credits requested. The fees will not be determined by the amount of credit awarded.

Institutions will regularly monitor, review, evaluate and revise prior learning assessment policies and practices to maintain and improve institutional standards.

Area B - Context

Assessment is integral to the learning process and is a vital component of fostering lifelong learning.

Prior learning assessment is a critical component of other educational and training reforms occurring in the province.

Prior learning assessment services involve a dynamic relationship among educators, business, industry, licensing and accrediting bodies, and professional associations.

Every effort will be made to meet the needs of all learners, including those with diverse and non-traditional learning backgrounds.

Learners need to be active participants in the assessment process.

Area C - Access

Prior learning assessment will be considered as a vehicle for enhancing access to education and training or accelerating a learner's progress towards a desired credential or other goal.

Prior learning assessment should be developed first for those programs where the labour market demand or learner need has been identified and institutional readiness and capacity are evident.

Area D - Assessment

Learning assessed for post-secondary credit should be

- linked to established learning outcomes or other criteria consistent with institutional standards for a given course; it should not be linked to time spent;
- transferable to contexts other than the one in which it was learned;
- current and relevant;
- at a level of achievement equivalent to that of other learners engaged in studies at that level in that program or subject area;
- assessed using a range of strategies consistent with institutional standards for a given course.

The number of credits to be granted is determined by the institution based on their published learning-outcomes or other criteria.

Assessment of the learning should be the responsibility of faculty who are content specialists from the accrediting institution and the names and qualifications of those making an assessment should be recorded.

Area E - Learner Orientation/Preparation

Learners should have access to adequate information about and orientation to the process.

Learners should be supported to make decisions throughout the learning process.

Institutions should offer a variety of opportunities to support learners to progress through the assessment process.

Area F - Professional Development

All personnel involved in PLAR (PLAR assessors, learner advisers, instructors of portfolio development/career/educational planning courses) should have appropriate skills and knowledge relevant to their roles and responsibilities in the process.

All personnel should work systematically towards continuous improvement in their own practice.

Institutions should assume the responsibility for supporting staff to acquire and maintain expertise in prior learning assessment services and provide opportunities for sharing information and expertise with other institutions.

Area G - Transcripts/Transfer

Grades or credits may be assigned to PLAR awards and will be entered accordingly on the learner's transcript.

Institutions will document PLAR credit awards internally.

The percentage of a program's credits that can be obtained through PLAR will be determined by the institution awarding the credential.

This study is concerned with the development of benchmarks for Areas E and F of the BC guidelines i.e. those which deal with the assessment process, assessment practice, assessor training and the role of the learner. However, unlike the BC guidelines, this study has not been confined to areas that are exclusively concerned with PLAR for academic credit.

The United Kingdom (UK)

Within the UK, occupational standards for assessment have been developed by the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB, 1995). These have been used to prepare National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) Assessors for their role in workplace and PLAR assessment. The TDLB standards are the external benchmarks that have been used for this study. Practitioners in Canada have been asked to compare their own practice against the TDLB standards in order to identify newly-emerging benchmarks and guidelines for Canadian PLAR Practitioners.

The TDLB standards outline the key purpose, functions, activities and performance indicators relating to the work of assessors. A **key purpose** is a functional definition of an occupational group e.g. **all** assessors including PLAR Assessors. It identifies why things are done (a function) not what things are done (a task). A **function** describes how the key purpose is to be achieved. An **activity** indicates how the key function is to be achieved. **Performance indicators** indicate the standard to be achieved within the field of PLAR.

According to the TDLB the key purpose of an assessor is to "r*eview progress and to assess achievement, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their education and training objectives."*

According to the TDLB the functions and activities of PLAR Assessors are to:

1. **Prepare the Candidate for Assessment**. This includes the following activities
   - *help the Candidate to identify relevant learning;*
   - *agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning; and*
   - *help the Candidate to prepare and present evidence for assessment.*

2. **Assess the Candidate.** This includes the following activities
   - *agree to and review an assessment plan;*
   - *judge evidence and provide feedback; and*
   - *make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.*

The performance indicators relating to each of these activities are outlined below.

FUNCTION 1 - PREPARE THE CANDIDATE FOR ASSESSMENT

Activity (I) Help the Candidate to identify relevant learning

a The Candidate is given clear and accurate information about the reasons for, and methods of, collecting and presenting evidence of prior learning.

b The Candidate is encouraged to review all relevant experience.

c Outcomes that the Candidate may currently be able to achieve are accurately identified from a review of his/her experience.

d The way in which support is given encourages self-confidence and self-esteem in the Candidate.

e If the Candidate expresses disagreement with the advice offered, possible alternatives are explained in a clear and constructive manner.

Activity (II) Agree to and review an action PLAR for demonstration of prior learning

a The Candidate is given accurate advice and appropriate encouragement to enable him or her to form realistic expectations of the value of his or her prior learning.

b Any outcomes to be achieved are appropriate to the Candidate's prior learning and future aspirations.

c Advice to the Candidate accurately identifies outcomes that might reasonably be claimed on the basis of prior learning.

d Opportunities to use evidence from prior learning are accurately analyzed.

e The plan agreed to with the Candidate identifies realistic targets to collect and present evidence of prior learning as efficiently as possible.

f The Candidate's motivation and self-confidence is encouraged throughout.

g If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the Candidate are explained clearly and constructively.

h The plan is reviewed appropriately with the Candidate.

Activity (III) Help the Candidate to prepare and present evidence for assessment

a The Candidate is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio of evidence.

b Guidance provided to the Candidate during portfolio preparation encourages the efficient development of clear, structured evidence relevant to the outcomes being claimed.

c Liaison with Assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio and maintains the Candidate's confidence.

d Opportunities are identified for the Candidate to demonstrate outcomes where evidence from prior learning is not available.

e Institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met.

f If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the Candidate are explained clearly and constructively.

FUNCTION 2 - ASSESS THE CANDIDATE

Activity (I) Agree to and review an assessment plan

a Possible opportunities for collecting evidence are identified and evaluated for relevance against the outcomes to be assessed and their appropriateness to the Candidate's needs.

b Evidence collection is planned to make effective use of time and resources.

c The opportunities selected provide access to fair and reliable assessment.

d The proposed assessment plan is discussed and agreed with the Candidate and others who may be affected.

e If there is disagreement with the proposed assessment plan, options open to the Candidate are explained clearly and constructively.

f The assessment plan specifies outcomes to be achieved, opportunities for efficient evidence collection, assessment methods and the timing of assessments.

g Requirements to assure the authenticity, reliability and sufficiency of evidence are identified.

h Plans are reviewed and updated at agreed-upon times to reflect the Candidate's development.

Activity (II) Judge evidence and provide feedback

a Advice and encouragement to collect evidence efficiently is appropriate to the Candidate's needs.

b Access to assessment is appropriate to the Candidate's needs.

c The evidence is valid and can be attributed to the Candidate.

d Only the criteria specified for each outcome is used to judge the evidence.

e Evidence is judged accurately against all the relevant outcomes.

f When evidence of prior learning is used, checks are made that the Candidate can currently achieve the relevant outcomes.

g Evidence is judged fairly and reliably.

h Difficulties in authenticating and judging evidence are referred promptly to the Internal Verifier.

i When evidence is not to the agreed standard, the Candidate is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.

j Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the Candidate's needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.

Activity (III) Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback

a The decision is based on all of the relevant evidence available.

b Any inconsistencies in the evidence are clarified and resolved.

c When the combined evidence is sufficient to cover the outcomes required, the Candidate is informed of his/her achievement.

- d When evidence is insufficient, the Candidate is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.
- e Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the Candidate's needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.
- f The Candidate is encouraged to seek clarification and advice.
- g Evidence and assessment decisions are recorded to meet PLAR audit requirements.
- h Records are legible and accurate, stored securely and referred promptly to the next stage of the recording/certification process.

In drawing upon each of these international examples, Canadian terminology has been developed to ensure that the newly-emerging benchmarks are culturally and contextually sensitive and that they are appropriate to PLAR practice in this country. For example, a common phrase used throughout the TDLB standards is *"Units, Elements and Performance Criteria"* which has been changed to *"Outcomes"*.

A RESEARCH STRATEGY FOR THE BENCHMARKING STUDY

The researcher and the steering group accept that research should be undertaken in a clear, logical and rigorous way so that it may contribute to a defined body of knowledge and that it recognizes the potential of two distinct but often complementary approaches towards research, namely *quantitative* and *qualitative.*

The *quantitative* approach uses positivistic methods in its design and construction of hypotheses, and is noted for its use of reproducible measurement and statistical analysis. The *qualitative* approach draws upon subjective description and judgment; it emphasizes the meaning of participants' experiences. For example, Bogdan and Bilken (1982:29) state: *"you are not putting together a puzzle, whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture which takes shape as you collect and examine the parts."*

McCall and Simmons (1969) identify the difference between these two approaches as being hypothesis testing versus the ability to penetrate and understand an individual's world. Hammersley and Aitkinson (1983) state that research questions within the quantitative approach may be leading, whereas the qualitative approach attempts to probe and illuminate.

A quantitative approach is often said to be based upon scientific objectivity, the need to operationalize concepts and an assumption that all individuals respond mechanistically to their environment (Cohen and Manion, 1980), whereas the qualitative approach assumes that the individual is an initiator of his or her own actions and is unique in his or her interpretation of events which surround and influence them (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The PLAR Benchmarking Study adopted a qualitative approach. This is because a quantitative methodology would assume that enough is known about the research in question to justify the selection of variables and the formation of a hypothesis about their relationship, before the application of a field test. However, since little is known in Canada about the use of benchmarks for PLAR practice (and no operational examples of their use in the field have been identified) it would be inappropriate to identify at the outset of this study potential variables, or to form any hypothesis about their possible relationship.

Rather, this study uses subjective accounts and personal meanings that will help to identify any possible variables, which can then be field tested by further enquiry. Thus the study uses a rigorous and systematic approach towards the development of concepts which are representative of the real world and attempts to illuminate the issues that practitioners wrestle with every day in order to make sense of their practice. This has been achieved using the following research methods

- ***a screening survey to determine an appropriate sample*** - 1029 individuals across Canada who were known to be involved or to have an interest in PLAR work were contacted and invited to participate in the study (Chapter Four);
- ***a Benchmarking survey of PLAR practitioners*** – items for the survey were developed at the CAPLA conference in May, 1998 using a focus group workshop (n=15). These items were piloted (n=17) and were then applied to 91 individuals across Canada (Chapter Four); and
- ***focus groups to determine policy application for PLAR benchmarks*** - A total of 45 individuals known to be involved in PLAR work across Canada were consulted. Twenty-six of these had not completed the original benchmarking survey. (Chapter Four)

A total of 168 PLAR Practitioners from across Canada participated in this study - including individuals from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Yukon. First Nations, labour, business and industry, community colleges, government, professional associations and universities were included in the consultation (Chapter Four).

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND PEER REVIEW

CAPLA established a Project Steering Committee that included representatives from CAPLA, the CLFDB, Business and Industry, HRDC, Provincial Government and the Adult Learner Community. The steering committee worked with the project manager/researcher to

- define and approve the research design and work plan;
- gain practitioner consensus on the development of benchmarks for PLAR assessment across Canada;
- assist in the development of a guide to support the implementation of benchmarks for PLAR assessment;

- make recommendations for the promotion of the national benchmarks and distribution of the guide; and
- investigate the feasibility of developing a system to confirm the competence of PLAR practitioners, based on nationally agreed-upon benchmarks for practice.

Steering committee members advised on research methodology; provided advice regarding access to participants; advised on education and training issues and methods of dissemination and approved interim and final reports.

Professor Chivers from the Division of Adult Continuing Education, University of Sheffield, England, was commissioned to ensure that the research methodology met the requirements of the original proposal; data was collected in an appropriate manner, analyzed and interpreted correctly and that conclusions and recommendations of this Report are appropriate to the data and their analyses.

A copy of his report is included in Appendix One.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTS AND TENSIONS

INTRODUCTION TO THIS CHAPTER

> *"The concept of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is not new. There are decades of practice in other countries, most notably in Australia, the UK and USA. In these countries, a variety of processes have been used to apply PLAR to education, workforce development and the identification of occupational standards." CAPLA submission to HRDC (1999)*

This chapter will describe the outcomes or standards-based approach towards education and training and the global forces that are shaping this approach towards human resource development.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTCOMES-BASED PROGRAMS

Outcomes or standards-based programs have the following characteristics

- *"assessment of individuals against defined standards or outcomes for practice;*
- *utilization of a wide evidence-base to support claims for "competence" i.e. the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, understanding and experience required to perform to an appropriate standard within the workplace;*
- *individualized approaches towards the compilation of evidence;*
- *adoption of a portfolio approach to facilitate reflection and link theory with practice; and*
- *adoption of external quality assurance mechanisms to validate the outcomes of assessment."*

Day (1999a)

The move towards outcomes-based education appears to be a global phenomenon that is being driven by

- *"constraints in public sector funding with demands for greater efficiency and productivity;*
- *advances in telecommunications and information technologies which are transforming delivery systems for education and training and learner support;*
- *the development of world class standards, which are now being used as a basis for marketing education and training programs across the globe;*

- *the need for international articulation. (leading nations have been developing national standards for education and training in order to achieve wider acceptance of qualifications and credentials); and*
- *the need for portability and transferability of professional qualifications to ensure that common standards for practice have been achieved and that these are transparent and open to public scrutiny."*

Day (1999a)

This chapter will highlight the similarities which exist in the development of the Australian, British and Canadian education and training systems and the factors which are driving these. It will highlight a newly-emerging strategy that challenges traditional approaches to learning delivery, knowledge acquisition and the role of faculty.

The United Kingdom

The UK government since the early 1980s has discussed the "fitness for purpose" of education and training programs. In 1981, the *New Training Initiative* published by the Manpower Services Commission was a forerunner to several major reports that recognized the need for training that was more relevant to industry so that the UK could compete more effectively with other industrial nations. The Manpower Services Commission also called for the introduction of 'new standards' for training which would facilitate progress and adaptability within employment and improve access to training for young people and adults.

Some of the recommendations of the Manpower Services Commission were introduced in the early 1980s - for example, the Youth Training Scheme and the Technical Vocational Education Initiative. Many political activists of the day, however, argued that these schemes had only been introduced to massage rising unemployment statistics. In 1986, the government undertook a review of vocational qualifications within the UK and concluded that there was no readily understandable pattern of provision; that there was duplication of qualifications by professional and industrial awarding bodies; and that there were barriers to access arising from the attendance and entry requirements of individual training programs.

Other problems arose including the lack of arrangements for progression and transfer of skills within and across occupational areas. Also, assessment within training programs did not adequately test or record employment competencies and was biased towards the recognition of knowledge and skills rather than occupational competence.

A consequence of this analysis was the recommendation that a new system of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) would be set up. NVQs were to have a considerable impact upon the future of education and training within the UK.

WHAT ARE NVQS?

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) endorses NVQs. They are qualifications that are based upon the skills, knowledge and understanding required for competence within a particular occupational area. NVQs are concerned with outcomes rather than the learning process and individuals may gain an NVQ in a variety of ways. They may follow a formal training program leading to an award, use a mixture of formal, informal or open learning approaches; or rely on their past experience.

NVQs allow open access to all, regardless of age, sex, race, special needs or prior qualifications. Individuals are given an opportunity to progress through a nationally recognized framework of qualifications that are based upon achieving competence no matter how it is acquired.

In order that a National Vocational Qualification can be endorsed by QCA it must be based upon national standards required for performance in employment. The award must also be free from any barriers which restrict access and progression and available to all those who are able to reach the required standard by whatever means.

NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

All NVQs are accredited within a national framework according to progressive levels of achievement and areas of competence. Refinements to the framework are made as qualifications are developed and routes for progression and transfer are identified. The function of the framework is to provide a coherent classification for NVQs and to facilitate transfer and progression both within areas of competence and between them.

The areas of competence defined in the framework are derived from an analysis of work roles, and provide the organizing structure for all competence-based qualifications within England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland these qualifications are known as Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs). Currently the national framework defines eleven areas of occupational competence. Examples include construction, engineering and manufacturing.

LEVELS, UNITS, ELEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

NVQs are being developed to cover areas of competence at all levels, from the application of basic skills to professional understanding (Figure One). At each level within the national framework an NVQ is made up of several units of competence. A unit is defined as the smallest grouping of performance standards that makes up a key task or function within an occupational area. Each unit of competence is made up of several elements (descriptions of employment expectations) and their associated performance criteria (the critical performances required in the work place).

Level 1	Competence in a range of routine and predictable work activities.
Level 2	Competence in a variety of work activities, some complex and non-routine, and ability to work both alone and in collaboration with others in different situations.
Level 3	Competence in a variety of mainly complex and non-routine work activities in differing situations, often while controlling or guiding others.
Level 4	Competence in a wide range of complex, technical or professional work activities in differing situations, often with responsibility for both other staff and allocation of resources.
Level 5	Competence involving the application of fundamental principles and complex techniques in a wide and often unpredictable range of work situations, together with responsibility for other people's work and the allocation of substantial resources.

Figure One: The NVQ Framework

NATIONAL TRAINING ORGANIZATIONS AND AWARDING BODIES

National Training Organizations (NTO's), are employer-led organizations which represent the views of employers, trades unions and other interested parties within an employment area. Often working as Occupational Standards Councils, NTO's are responsible for determining the standards required for satisfactory performance in employment

Once the standards have been agreed to they form the basis for an NVQ which is then endorsed by QCA. National Training Organizations are unable to award NVQs. This responsibility is undertaken by awarding bodies (e.g. City and Guilds) who must be able to provide a program that meets the requirements of the appropriate NTO and the QCA.

Once QCA has approved the performance standards agreed to by the NTO and placed them within an area of competence and at a level within the national qualification framework, the awarding body may then offer the qualification to individuals via one of their accredited assessment centres.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

QCA has responsibility for ensuring that awarding bodies have adequate arrangements and resources for quality assurance and that these systems operate effectively throughout the period in which the awarding body has received accreditation. For example, QCA requires awarding bodies to have satisfactory arrangements for ensuring the competence of assessors, for monitoring the consistency and quality of assessment, and ensuring adequate training and development of external verifiers (moderators). Awarding bodies are also required to allow external auditing of their NVQ programs.

Awarding bodies have responsibility for ensuring that assessment centres have adequate arrangements and resources for quality assurance and that these systems operate effectively. These relate to the recruitment and development of individuals, the recruitment and development of assessors and internal verifiers, the monitoring and evaluation of program delivery and the communication and administration systems required for supporting centre activities. The assessment centre is also required to participate in an audit that is carried out by an individual appointed by the awarding body - the External Verifier.

Central to the issue of quality assurance is the process of assessment, in particular the degree to which the assessment is valid, reliable and sufficient. The recruitment, training and development of assessors have an important part to play in this process. This fact has been recognized by the publication of occupational standards for assessors.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The responsibility for occupational standards development rests with NTOs. These are determined using the process of discussion, consultation and research. The principle method of standards development uses the process of functional analysis. This process involves experts from an occupational area identifying the key purpose of that occupation by observing individuals going about their daily work. Subsequent analysis of these observations results in the generation of a statement that will state what the employee has to do, and any qualifying factor. Thus a statement of key purpose could be written as follows

"DO / SOMETHING / TO AGREED STANDARD"
(Verb) (Object) (Condition)

McCrory, 1992

Each statement of key purpose (a unit) is further divided into elements (a description of key activities that make up a unit). Each element being further divided into the standards of performance required in order to successfully complete a key occupational role (performance criteria). For example, the key areas of training and development have been identified from a model of the training cycle (Figure Two).

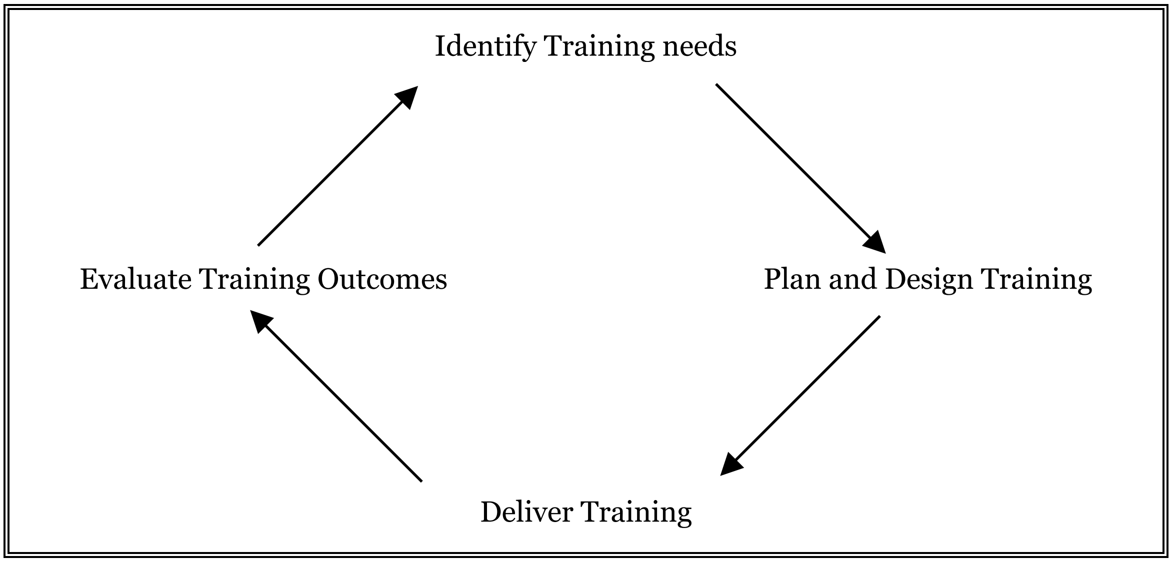

Figure Two: The Training Cycle

Each of the key areas relates to a stage in the training cycle. For example, the area of evaluation that is defined *"Area D: Evaluate the effectiveness of training and development"* is sub-divided into

"Area D1: Evaluate the effectiveness of training and development;
Area D2: Evaluate individual and group achievement for public certification; and
Area D3: Assess achievement for public certification."

The elements of Area D3 include those activities that relate to the NVQ assessor's role (see introduction).

Once identified, occupational standards are developed by a further and wider process of consultation with employers (usually by postal survey). They are then field tested within the appropriate occupational area and then modified accordingly.

STANDARDS FOR NVQ/SVQ ASSESSORS

The Training and Development Lead Body (1995) has developed occupational standards for assessors. Two major assessment roles have been recognized within these standards. Firstly, standards relating to the role of the" first line" assessor include the following elements

"D321 Agree and review a plan for assessing performance;
D322 Collect and judge performance evidence against criteria;
D323 Collect and judge knowledge evidence; and
D324 Make assessment decision and provide feedback."

The “first line” assessor is defined as an individual in a “front line” position within the workplace who will primarily assess the individual by direct observation of performance, supported by questioning in order to elicit underlying knowledge and understanding.

Secondly, standards relating to the role of the "second line" assessor which include

“D331 *Agree and review an assessment plan;*
D332 *Judge evidence and provide feedback;*
D333 *Make assessment decision using differing sources of evidence; and provide feedback.”*

The “second line” assessor is defined as an individual who is once removed from the workplace who relies upon the judgment of peers and other assessors regarding their performance as assessors. The second line assessor uses many diverse methods of evidence collection, including direct observation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT

Assessment for an NVQ is a process of continuous assessment that may involve formative (diagnostic) as well as summative (terminal) assessment.

The requirements for NVQs state that assessment should be valid, reliable and sufficient.

***Validity**:* is concerned with the degree to which the assessment is based upon the competencies outlined in the appropriate units, elements and performance criteria. An assessment is said to be valid if the assessor refers only to these competencies.

***Reliability**:* is concerned with the consistency of assessment the degree to which an assessor’s opinion may match that of another assessor in the same situation, with a similar individual using the same occupational standards. Many assessment centres have set up assessor panels that meet regularly in order to discuss consistency of approach towards assessment.

***Sufficiency**:* in order that an assessment may be deemed to be sufficient individuals must be able to demonstrate that all performance criteria and their range (specialized contextual and technical criteria) have been met. For example, the range for the assessors award includes assessment of individuals who are confident, as well as those who may be lacking in confidence, assessment of individuals within the workplace, as well as individuals within the training environment.

Evidence submitted in order to substantiate a claim towards competence must also be

Current: up-to-date; and
***Authentic**:* the individual’s own work.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

QCA sees the process of assessment as being “criterion led” as well as “individual centred”, the individual and assessor negotiate an appropriate plan of action in order to generate the evidence required to demonstrate competence. Much of this evidence can be generated within the workplace with the assessor directly observing (in a natural or planned way) the performance of the individual and making direct comparisons of this performance against the standards required.

When performance evidence does not occur naturally, the assessor can question the individual and make a judgment against the criteria set. Where assessment in the workplace is impossible (for ethical or safety reasons) simulations, projects or skills tests can be used in conjunction with oral questioning.

Prior learning can also be recognized, direct evidence (examples of workplace products) or indirect evidence (employer testimonials) being placed within a individual's portfolio. Evidence of prior learning must meet the requirements of validity, sufficiency, authenticity and currency. The methods for assessment of NVQ are summarized in Figure Three.

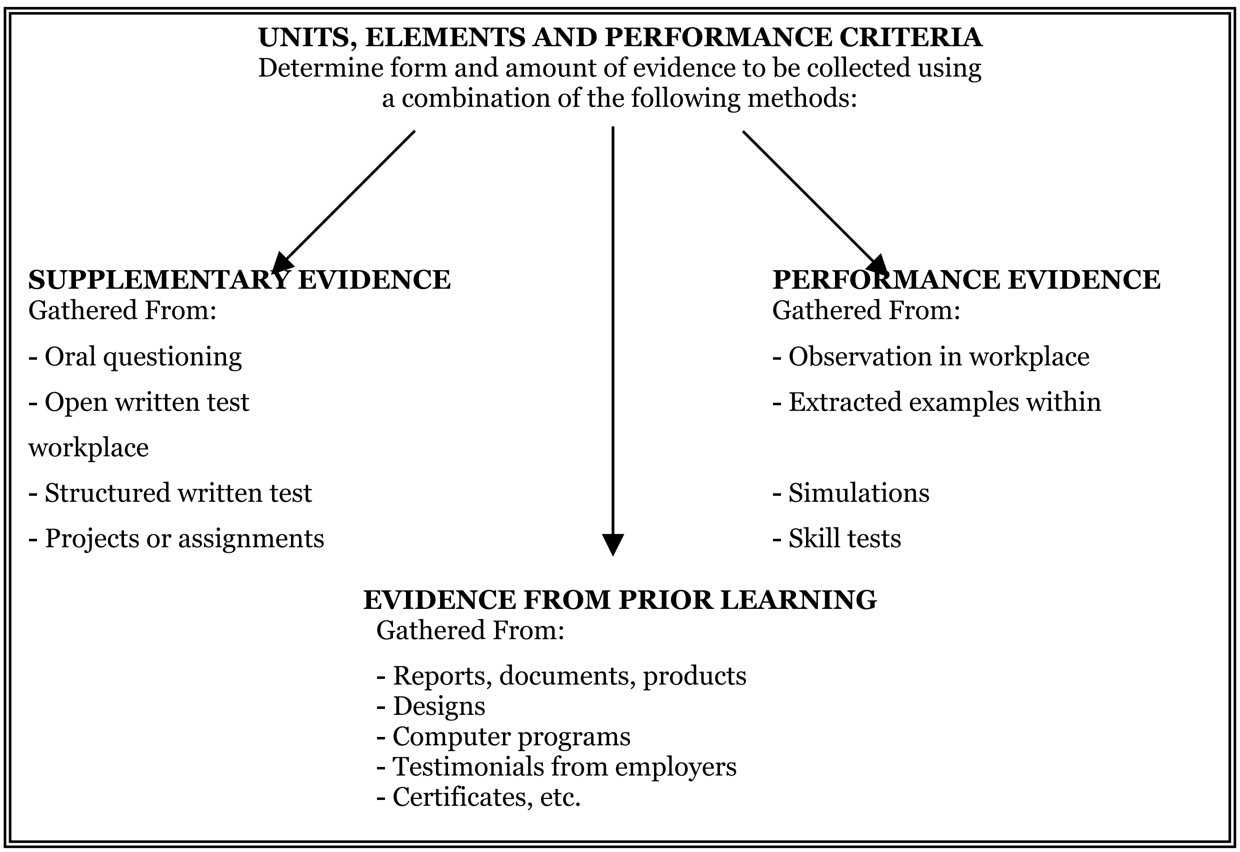

Figure Three: NVQ Assessment

NVQs AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PROFESSIONS

The National Health Service Executive (NHSE) are encouraging the use of occupational standards in nurse education programs, in the belief that students will be able to demonstrate that they are professionally and occupationally competent when they complete their training. For example, in a position paper on the use of occupational standards in professional education the NHSE states

> *"Bodies with responsibility for regulating professional education are encouraged to explore the use of occupational standards to underpin existing curricula. Additionally, within the post-qualifying arena, there may be benefits for health professionals in gaining NVQs in areas such as management and information technology."*
>
> *Jarrold, K. (1995)*

This view is consistent with the Department for Education and Employment's position paper on Higher Level Vocational Qualifications (D*f*EE, 1996). It is consistent with a report by the Higher Education Quality Council and the NHSE (1996), which examines quality assurance arrangements for purchasing non-medical education within the NHS. It is also consistent with the NHS Development Unit's research strategy, which includes the commissioning of studies which highlight the use of occupational standards in the education and training of health care practitioners within the UK e.g. Day, et. al. (1995a), Illot and Allen (1996), Day (1999a) and Edwards and Keeley (1998).

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS AND UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

Occupational standards are being used as outcomes for undergraduate programs in health care, for example, in the development of an assessment of competence strategy for students undertaking a Specialist Community Nursing Degree.

This strategy complies with professional body requirements for program approval laid down by the English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (ENB 1996 and 1997). Course outcomes for the program also meet statutory criteria for registration as a Specialist Community Nurse Practitioner (United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC), 1994).

The aim of using occupational standards is to produce a specialist practitioner who is fit for employment, as well as fit for professional practice.

FITNESS FOR PURPOSE

The notion of *"fitness for purpose"* currently dominates the education and training scene in the UK, where commissioners of education and training appear to have adopted an industrial terminology in an attempt to ensure that the products of education meet the quality assurance requirements of education and training purchasers (HEQC and NHSE, 1996). Hence terms such as *"outcomes-based learning"* or *"occupational standards"* are now common place, and reflect the interest and increased power that employers have in ensuring that the labour force is prepared and developed in a cost-effective and meaningful way.

These changes reflect the marketplace culture that now exists within the UK National Health Service, since purchasers of health care education and training are now concerned with determining an effective and economic means of preparing and developing professional and paramedical staff to a standard that is acceptable to managers, other users and health service customers (NHSE, 1994).

There has been some resistance from Statutory and Professional Bodies to the use of occupational standards in professional education, as these bodies maintain that they are responsible for determining (and maintaining) education and training standards (Day, 1995b). There has also been some resistance from organizations who provide professional education as they see this approach as being mechanistic, resource intensive and bureaucratic (Day, 1994 and 1998).

However, there is a wider view emerging which suggests that occupational standards can be used to complement the training and development of professionals, notably in the field of social work where occupational standards are being used to enhance learning outcomes for the new Diploma in Social Work (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1991). Other examples include the use of a competence-based strategy for medical graduates (Challis et al, 1993), and the work of Day and Basford (1995a), where occupational standards from NVQs have been incorporated into the undergraduate nursing curriculum in order to enhance the competencies of students undertaking nurse preparation programs.

This complementary approach towards the preparation and development of Nurses and Midwives is now receiving considerable support. For example, Day and Basford (1995a) are able to report that their programs have been initiated and supported by local NHS Trust managers. They are also able to report that the programs have been approved by the English National Board for Nursing and Midwifery and Health Visiting (ENB) and the University of Sheffield.

Australia

THE NATIONAL TRAINING BOARD

Australia and the UK appear to have adopted similar definitions of occupational competence. Australia's approach towards training and human resource development is also very similar to the UK's job competence model. The Australian National Training Board (NTB) has responsibility for standards development. The NTB was set up in 1990 by agreement between the Commonwealth State and Territory Governments. It has a tripartite Board of Directors. The NTB operates under a memorandum of understanding whereby Ministers have agreed to provide and accredit vocational education and training nationwide within a framework of National Competency Standards.

In Australia national competency standards define the competencies required for effective performance in employment. A competency comprises the specification of knowledge and skill, and the application of that knowledge and skill, within an occupation or industry level to the standard of performance required in employment. National competency standards embody the ability to transfer and apply skills and knowledge to new situations and environments.

THE COMPETENCY STANDARDS BOARD

The Competency Standards Body (CTB) develops national competency standards. The CTB is an organization that has been formally accepted by the NTB to

- develop national competency standards on behalf of industry and occupations;
- submit proposed standards to the NTB for endorsement and recognition; and
- carry out a review of competency standards that currently exist.

Like the QCA in the UK, the role of the NTB is to endorse national competency standards for occupations and classifications in industry; including entry level, operative, trade, post-trade, technician and para-professionals. The competency standards relate to core skills and other components determined by industry sectors and/or States and Territories for certification at any given level of occupation or classification. Like the QCA, the National Training Board

- provides guidance in defining and developing national competency standards for occupations;
- consults with States, Territories and the Commonwealth on the development and introduction of national competency standards;
- maintains and publishes a register of competency standards;
- promotes consistent methods of describing competency standards;
- liaises with any accrediting/approving authorities, to ensure that there is consistency in the implementation of national competency standards; and
- promotes awareness of the purpose of competency standards and the role of the National Training Board.

HOLISTIC OR INTEGRATED ASSESSMENT

Perhaps the most significant difference between the UK and Australian competency system is the degree of emphasis that Australia places upon *processes* as well as *outcomes*. For example, Gonzci et. al. (1994) describe an *"Integrated"* or *"Holistic"* approach towards assessment *and* argue that there is a relational notion of competence which looks at the complex interaction of contexts, knowledge, attitudes, values and skills. So that competence

> *"..is conceived of as complex structuring of attributes needed for intelligent performance in specific situations...it incorporates the idea of professional judgment."*

Gonzci et. al. (1994) claim that arguments against competency-based approaches can be overcome if this *"integrated"* approach is used, as this model encourages the development of ethical values and reflective practice. They further claim that this approach

- provides the professions in Australia with an opportunity to reflect on the nature of their work;
- makes professionals more accountable by demystifying the nature of their work;
- provides clearer goals for providers of education and training;
- makes clearer to learners what they are expected to achieve;
- improves the rather weak assessment systems that currently exist;
- facilitates the transfer of individuals from other associated professions; and
- helps governments to clarify the status of overseas professionals in Australia, which has a high population of immigrant professionals.

Furthermore, Gonzci et. al. (1994) indicate that by using a variety of assessments to sample the knowledge and competencies required, a broader evidence base could be developed, thereby increasing the validity of the assessment process.

Gonzci et. al. claim that the difference between the Australian and UK systems is that performance criteria that make up the units and elements of competence are written in plain English. For example, the authors outline a case study from the field of law where the following example is given from the unit: ***"gathers and assesses facts and instructions."*** The element from this unit is ***"taking instructions from clients";*** it reads:

> *"When taking instructions the specialist...displays thoroughness and persistence and awareness of relevance. The Solicitor structures the process to assist the client to develop a history and obtains from the client an initial statement. This would include the nature of the problem, what the client wishes to achieve, the client's account of the relevant facts, the position of children and any relevant third parties and a view of the opponent's position....."*

Such an approach avoids the terminology of the functional analyst, and the use of complex range statements and assessment requirements, as outlined within the outcomes-orientated NVQ approach.

Canada

Canada has a diversity of PLAR practice. It is outside the scope of this study to undertake a detailed analysis of PLAR in Canada. However the following case studies serve to illustrate the range and diversity of PLAR practice currently underway.

HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT CANADA AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

In its recent paper "*Making a Difference in Human Development. A Vision for HRDC. HRDC CA-363-04-98*" Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) stresses the value of building *"community capacity"* – the means by which a community may determine its own needs in order to fulfill its potential. HRDC's vision stresses the importance of a competency-based approach to human resource management, as this contributes to

- organizational flexibility;
- a multi-skilled workforce; and
- the development of learning organizations.

Associated with HRDC strategy is the need for new approaches to staff development and work-based learning, including the development of individual learning plans.

HRDC's vision clearly articulates the need for a more personalized and collaborative approach towards human resource development, based upon the need to empower people within their local community. Such an approach is fundamental to two new national sector-based initiatives, namely

- validation of technician and technologist competencies by the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board; and
- development towards a national tourism learning system based on work currently underway in the Western and Northwest Canada tourism learning system.

Each of these national initiatives is now discussed.

NATIONAL INITIATIVES

1. The Canadian Technology Human Resources Board

The Canadian Technology Human Resources Board (CTHRB) has established Canadian Technology Standards (CTS) which are

- based on standards required for competent performance in the workplace;
- based on the outcomes of learning regardless of any particular mode, duration or location of learning;
- validated on the basis of a valid and reliable assessment which ensures that individuals perform to the nationally agreed standard; and
- free from any unnecessary barriers which might restrict access, and available to all those who are able to reach the required standard, by whatever means.

The assessment system developed for the CTHRB framework is designed to meet the technology industry's needs for reliability and consistency in assessing the competence of technicians and technologists. It is based on the following principles (Day and Zakos, 1999a, b and c).

Relevance: assessment of individual competence is set against the standards laid down by the CTHRB, and is based upon individual career development needs. Individuals who are assessed as being competent are therefore considered to be employable in their chosen field of technology.

Flexibility: it is acknowledged that the unique way in which an individual responds and adapts to his/her learning environment is an essential part of the assessment process. The growing number of people with specific needs, who will be accessing the CTHRB framework, will mean that a diverse and individualized approach towards assessment needs to be undertaken.

Integrity: in order to maintain the unique status of the technology professions in Canada all stakeholders must be convinced that the assessment process is accessible, transparent, rigorous and credible. To this end a systematic approach to ensure the quality of the assessment process has been developed.

Utility: the assessment process should be efficient, straightforward, free from any unnecessary jargon and user-friendly. It should meet the needs of the learner and the requirements of the CTHRB, without overburdening the resources of the approved CTS Validating Agent.

The CTHRB estimates that around 100,000 technicians and technologists across Canada are eligible for assessment against the CTS. Only those organizations that meet the CTHRB quality seal of approval will be allowed to validate the outcomes of CTS assessment. Those involved in CTS assessment are included in the following descriptions.

Individuals: those seeking credit for their competence by showing that they can perform to Canadian Technology Standards by demonstrating the specified knowledge, understanding and skills required. Individuals are responsible for the quality of evidence they provide to Assessors.

Assessors: those who have sufficient occupational expertise to be able to make accurate assessment decisions in the areas for which they are responsible. They are appointed by an approved Validating Agent to assess Individual evidence. Assessors are in direct contact with Individuals. They judge Individual evidence against CTHRB Canadian Technology Standards. They decide whether the Individual has demonstrated competence. They ensure that their own assessment practice meets CTHRB requirements.

Centre Co-ordinators: individuals who can demonstrate specific competence in assessment. They understand the structure of the standards relating to each assessment and are able to draw upon sufficient occupational expertise to be able to authenticate assessment decisions made by Assessors. Centre Co-ordinators are appointed by an approved Validating Agent to ensure the consistency and quality of assessment within the agency. They work with Assessors to assure the quality and consistency of assessment. They sample Individual assessments to ensure consistency and make sure that assessment records and documents meet the aims of the agency and the requirements of the CTHRB. They also ensure that requests for validation are based on assessments that are of consistent quality. Centre Co-ordinators provide support and guidance for Assessors and act as a contact for the CTHRB and the External Adviser. They request Individual validation from the CTHRB.

Approved Validating Agents: organizations approved by the CTHRB to assess individual competence against Canadian Technology Standards. These organizations manage assessment on a day-to-day basis. They have effective assessment practices and quality assurance procedures and meet CTHRB requirements for CTS validation. Validating Agents have sufficient competent Centre Co-ordinators and Assessors with enough time and authority to carry out their roles effectively.

External Advisers: individuals who have competencies that qualify them to perform the duties of an External Adviser. They understand the structure of the standards relating to each assessment and are able to draw upon sufficient occupational expertise to be able to authenticate assessment decisions made by Assessors. They are appointed by the CTHRB to monitor the work of approved Validating Agents. They are the key link between the CTHRB and the approved agency and ensure that assessment decisions are consistent across agencies. External Advisers ensure that the quality of assessment meets CTHRB requirements. They sample Individual assessments and monitor assessment practice in approved agencies. They make regular visits to agencies and assessment locations in order to provide feedback on assessment practice.

CTHRB: the Board develops and validates Canadian Technology Standards on behalf of the technology professions in Canada. It ensures quality and consistency of assessment for validation. It produces guidance for approved Validating Agents. The CTHRB appoints, supports and develops External Advisers, allocates them to Validating Agents, and monitors their work. The CTHRB approves and monitors Validating Agents against the Validating Agent approval criteria. It collects information from agencies to make informed decisions about the delivery of Canadian Technology Standards.

As can be seen by these role descriptions, the Assessor guides and assesses; the Co-ordinator and the External Provider (subject matter expert) quality-assure assessment outcomes. This contrasts with other forms of PLAR assessment in Canada, where the Adviser and Assessor roles are often seen to be quite different and are not always subject to external quality control.

Also, the role of PLAR Assessors within the CTHRB framework is determined by benchmarks for practice (TDLB, 1995), while the agency responsible for assessment is required to meet performance indicators which relate to the inputs, process and outcomes of assessment and is continuously monitored against these i.e. the agency is required to demonstrate ongoing commitment towards, and development of, systems which relate to the

- planning and resourcing of an appropriate assessment system;
- marketing of assessment services to individuals;
- delivering and supporting individual assessment; and
- monitoring and reviewing records and procedures.

Day and Zakos (1999a)

2. Development Towards a National Tourism Learning System for Canada

Tourism is the world's fastest growing industry and generator of jobs. In 1997 the World Travel and Tourism Human Resource Council (WTTHRC) estimated that tourism generated $3.8 trillion (US) of gross output and 262 million jobs world-wide This figure is expected to grow to $7.1 trillion (US) of gross output and 383 million jobs by 2007. In Canada, there are roughly 1.3 million people working in the tourism industry, representing over 90,000 businesses. In 1997 the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council (CTHRC) estimated that tourism would generate 400,000 new jobs over the next five years.

Building on BC Provincial initiatives, in 1998 a co-ordinated tourism learning system for Western and Northern Canada was launched. As a result of the success of these efforts, a National Tourism Learning System has been proposed. This is a comprehensive and co-ordinated human resource development strategy for the industry which promotes

- industry endorsed education and training standards (i.e. common core curricula);
- career awareness for secondary schools;
- the marketing of tourism programs to employers;
- articulation and laddering of diploma into degree programs;
- a prior learning assessment framework (subject of this proposal);
- joint HRD planning with all stakeholders and joint funding of initiatives; and
- flexible and part time delivery as well as distance delivery of tourism programs.

The learning system which is being developed attempts to address each of these issues within the context of an industry sector approach. In particular it is attempting to

- improve the success of graduates (relevance, quality, accessibility, accountability);
- assist employers in knowing what is credible (relevance, quality, accountability);
- establish lifelong learning opportunities for those in industry (relevance, quality, accessibility, affordability);
- ensure quality of service/competitiveness, sustainability; (relevance, quality, affordability);
- tie into industry direction (relevance, quality, accountability); and
- enhance commitment and participation in tourism human resource development of employers, educators and government (relevance, quality, affordability, accountability). *White, Brian, The BC Tourism Learning System, 1996*

Tourism human resource issues are relatively common throughout the world. Canadian tourism HRD needs assessments have been conducted in most jurisdictions. Although not specific to every province and territory in Canada, the following generic list offers a broad range of human resource issues that are impacting the tourism industry

- changing demographics;
- skills shortages in certain occupations;
- recruitment, retention and staff turnover challenges;
- the tourism industry's image as an employer e.g. failure to attract school and college leavers;
- rewards and benefits/compensation;
- cultural and traditional perceptions of the industry;
- some education providers not meeting industry's needs;
- the failure of businesses to recognize long-term human resource benefits in the face of short term priorities;
- fragmentation of responsibility for tourism education and training policy; and
- recognition of the link between human resource concerns with service and service quality.

The Present State of Tourism Education and Training - over the past several years, and in response to the issues outlined above, both the public and private sectors have invested in a range of education and training-related activities. Tourism education and training is available by way of

- national tourism occupational standards and certification (in-house training);
- private training programs;
- secondary school tourism courses;
- post-secondary programs (certificate, diploma and degree); and
- tourism-related income assistance recipient programs.

Although there are many successful education and training programs, many of these initiatives have been developed in isolation from one another, with no link to other training opportunities for the graduate. This fragmented approach to education and training has led to

- employers questioning the value of, or not recognizing, the credentials of job applicants;
- prospective students wondering which training program is 'credible' and will get them a job; and
- public training dollars being ineffectively allocated.

It is within the context of the above two perspectives that the Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, provincial and territorial Education Councils and the Tourism

Standards Consortium were formed. These agencies have begun to coordinate human resource development activities across Canada.

New Directions in Education and Training Policy - In the larger context, and in response to widespread recognition of the importance of education and training to the economic and social development of a region, many provincial and territorial governments are developing new education and training strategies to address a range of related concerns. Some of the major planning documents include

- Charting a New Course (1996: BC Ministry of Education, Skills and Training);
- Saskatchewan Training Strategy (1997: Saskatchewan Post Secondary Education and Skills Training);
- The Yukon Training Strategy, (1998: Yukon Education); and
- Public Expectations for Post-Secondary Education in Canada (1998: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada).

In reviewing provincial and territorial training strategies one can identify common themes.

- Relevance and Quality: to enhance current and future job opportunities as well as to improve quality of life;
- Accessibility: to improve the availability of educational opportunities for people (removing barriers, alternative delivery methods);
- Affordability: achieving these goals within the fiscal framework available and what is affordable to students; and
- Accountability: measurement of performance for continual improvement.

The learning system under development attempts to address each of these issues within the context of an industry sector approach. In response to education and training needs identified in Canada, the CTHRC has launched a project to map the national occupational standards for the tourism industry. The resulting database (Human Resource Development Information Management System (HRD-IMS) or "Mapping" System will serve a variety of needs and will convert the occupational standards into functional skill and competency levels.

PLAR AND THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

PLAR enables employers to build up a better picture of the value of a particular individual to their organization. It does this by providing a reliable means of assessing and matching competencies to workplace needs. This enables employers to make better decisions about whom they recruit and how they may develop their existing workforce. The potential of PLAR has recently been recognized by The Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism (PRIT). It has identified the benefits of PLAR to the following stakeholder groups.

1. **Students and Industry Employees:**

- recognizes the considerable experience of many managers;
- encourages employers to support ongoing professional development;
- helps to build bridges between industry and education;
- creates clearer career paths for learners;
- builds a unified system that will maintain professional competitiveness for the tourism workforce;
- builds professionalism in the industry;
- creates opportunities for professional development that will lead to stronger marketing of industry;
- professionals (responding to increasing competition from other countries);
- creates efficiencies for learners/career professionals in the system; and
- helps tourism professionals think about how education will help them build their career.

2. **Industry Employers:**

   - integrates industry/public/private training;
   - extends professional development capabilities of HR (more opportunities to learn and develop);
   - creates cost-effective, efficient ways to provide outside training and shared training/professional development opportunities;
   - provides stability to rapidly changing professional development in HR;
   - provides less specific training in competencies and skills;
   - brings sectors together to consider efficient approaches for management development;
   - can provide just-in-time training that feeds into an industry-endorsed degree; and
   - joint development of programs becomes possible (industry and public/private educational institutions).

3. **The 'System' (education, government, etc.):**

   - provides marketing opportunities for participating institutions;
   - key elements of' 'Charting a New Course' will be brought to life with these agreements;
   - can be used as an example for other sectors.

The Pacific Rim Institute of Tourism concludes that PLAR has the potential to create links between industry-based credentials and the academic system.

EXAMPLES OF PROVINCIAL INITIATIVES

British Columbia

Like many Provinces in Canada, British Columbia is in the midst of economic and social reform. These reforms are influencing the provision of education, health and social care. For example, the Ministry of Education Skills and Training (1996) states. *"British Columbia's economy, labour market, educational and fiscal environments are undergoing fundamental change. These developments are placing unparalleled demands on the college, institute and agency system." Page. 1*

The Ministry goes on to indicate that economic restructuring, rapid technological change and competition within the global marketplace, are demanding that the Province moves towards a knowledge and information-based economy. Such changes increase the demand for highly skilled labour and the need to ensure continued upgrading of skills through the delivery of work-orientated training programs. Thus the issue of initial and continuing competence has become an important feature within the Provincial education and training system of British Columbia.

In addition, education institutions are experiencing a change in their client base, which is demanding a different approach to learning delivery at a time when constraints upon educational funding are being applied. As a result, *efficiency, effectiveness* and *economy* have become key words for a system which emphasizes outcomes-based learning and a common accreditation framework.

Hence the Ministry of Education Skills and Training (1996) has identified a strategy for the Province which promotes

- *a learner focus*: meeting the needs of individuals, as well as diverse groups - large or small;
- *outcome-based learning:* education and training linked to occupational standards and skills development;
- *integration:* the development of common credentials (qualifications) which have currency and transferability;
- *innovation:* recognizing learning partnerships and promoting organizational and individual accountability within a recognized quality assurance framework; and
- *flexibility*: recognition that learning opportunities exist at work, at home and in the community.

The reader will note the similarities that exist in this strategy with the philosophy that underpins National Vocational Qualifications in the UK. It would seem that economic constraint demands a particular approach from education providers, one that ensures that programs of instruction are

- practice led;
- outcomes based;
- concerned with equal opportunities;

- responsive to the needs of employers;
- undertaken in collaboration with key stakeholders; and
- accredited within a nationally recognized framework. *(Day, 1995b)*

However, it should be noted that strategies which have been developed within the UK, might not be adopted so easily within Canada. This may be partly due to the cultural differences that exist. For example, there is a long history of liberal arts education within the Provinces and recipients of this may be more resistant to criterion-based assessment (Day, 1996b).

The Influence Of Education Reforms On Health And Human Services Curricula In BC

It is the public education and training sector that prepares health and human service professionals within British Columbia, through the provision of university or college programs. This is the sector most directly affected by education reform. However, changes brought about by social and political reform do not occur in isolation and are likely to influence health and social care curricula (Angus and Turbayne, 1995 and Day, 1995a), either

- *directly:* through the delivery, content or structure of a course e.g. the application of new technologies in learning, the teaching of new approaches to nursing care delivery or a particular emphasis upon community-based care; or
- *indirectly*: cultural and socialization processes that may influence student behaviour (see earlier comment regarding the effects of a liberal arts education).

Recent examples within the UK include the development of a project 2000 curriculum to prepare nurse practitioners for a newly-emerging role in the community and the changing role of nurse teachers and nursing students, brought about by the expectations of a more academic culture, as a result of integration with higher education (Fairbrother et. al. 1995).

It is the initial preparation of health care practitioners that is most likely to be influenced by education reforms within British Columbia - for example, the delivery of basic nurse training by approved community colleges. This is because of the way in which the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training has set up government funding to support the new reforms.

As a consequence of these new funding arrangements community colleges are now encouraged to develop initiatives which promote the formation of learning partnerships with employers and key stakeholders; also the provision of flexible assessment strategies, including accreditation of prior achievement. This is expected to encourage a more worldly approach towards the delivery of education and training (Simosko, 1995).

However, universities involved in the delivery of health and social care programs have been given no such incentive, making the implementation of strategies which encourage a more utilitarian approach less likely, as the funding base for university programs is largely determined by tradition rather than *innovation*. In the UK in contrast, funding allocated by the Higher Education Council is directly related to a teaching assessment exercise, which measures the performance of academic staff against quality indicators.

This apparent lack of stimulus is becoming an important issue in British Columbia as universities are now being asked by the Provincial Government to deliver an accelerated social work degree, and although pump-priming money is available, academic staff have little or no history of providing the flexible work-based assessment strategies that will be required to support this important development.

Ensuring The Continuing Competence Of Health Care Professionals

There are eighteen educational institutions in British Columbia which provide education for nurses leading to registration and entry into the profession of nursing. These programs either lead to a nursing diploma or a baccalaureate degree in nursing. The lengths of the programs vary from twenty-two to thirty-eight academic months. Graduates are required to pass the nurse registration or licensure examination provided by the Canadian Nurses Association Testing Division, before they are registered within the province of British Columbia.

In order that an institution may provide nurse education programs, they must meet the requirements of the nurse registration bodies. The Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia (RNABC) is the largest of the nurse registration bodies. Its requirements are identified through the Education Approval Program that outlines Standards for Practice in British Columbia, and also outlines the Nursing Competencies and Skills required of the New Graduate. The latter are currently undergoing revision through the National Nursing Competency Project, which has identified the changes that will be required in the future delivery of health care; for example; a greater emphasis on

- primary health care, health promotion and illness prevention;
- competence in teaching, applying and using research;
- collaborative relationships with clients and other health care professionals; and
- self-assessment, accountability, ethical decision-making and self-directed learning skills.

The Scope of Nursing Practice. RNABC (1995) p.27

Within the United Kingdom similar issues have emerged, resulting in curricula changes that have been implemented at initial and continuing registration levels. For example, initial nurse training has become more generalist within the project 2000 foundation program, and on registering with the UKCC the practitioner now has to demonstrate that he or she has undergone a period of preceptorship.

Also, specialist practitioner programs have to meet education and practice outcomes laid down by the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing and Midwifery (UKCC Registrar's Letter 20/1994, circulated December 1994, see also ENB 1995). Requirements for continuing registration centre on the development of a professional portfolio, which is based upon areas of relevance for the nurse practitioner.

However, two major difficulties exist with the United Kingdom system, namely

- *the rather abstract and esoteric nature of UKCC and ENB outcomes* can lead to various and diverse interpretations, making consistency in approval, assessment and accreditation difficult; and
- *the requirements for keeping a portfolio* have become divorced from activities provided by educators. As a consequence many practitioners are now confused about the terminology and processes of reflection and how to record outcomes from their practice for the purpose of continuing registration.

Experiences of the UK NVQ system suggest that it is the *specificity* of learning outcomes that ensures reliability and consistency in assessment. In nurse education (as in other forms of education) this can be achieved by using occupational standards as indicators for practice, while occupational standards in assessment and verification can also be used as indicators for the assessment process (Day 1995b).

In British Columbia there is a particular interest in this type of approach as numbers for continuing registration are somewhat large (approx. 38,000 for the RNABC). Also geographical distances between organizations are vast. Therefore interest has been expressed in the use of electronic methods for recording continuing registration. This could be developed for use on the Internet. Thus competencies for continuing registration need to be specific, as process outcomes would be difficult to encode on the computer. The specificity of occupational standards seems to make them appropriate for this type of development.

Assessment-Led Curricula And The Changing Role Of Institutions, Faculty And Staff In BC

Colleges within British Columbia are already looking at the development of flexible assessment. This was confirmed when the researcher was asked to assist in the development of protocols and quality assurance mechanisms for prior learning assessment in Early Childhood Educator programs (see for example, Day 1992 and 1993). An ECE assessment service such as this could also provide verification and accreditation of portfolios, which may then be submitted as evidence for continuing registration of nurses. The advantages of this type of approach are that institutions may already comply with the educational approval criteria laid down by the RNABC. This would avoid the setting up of alternative (and costly) quality assurance mechanisms for continuing registration of nurses. Also education institutions already have facilities in information technology to complement the electronic portfolio approach and could offer instruction on the use of computers, as well as support for practitioners in the form of open workshops. The current trend to extend the college day could facilitate this.

Furthermore, there is a potential for colleges to work with employers in order to determine the learning needs of practitioners who need to re-register. Experience of NVQ assessment (Day, 1992) indicates that arrangements such as these could result in the development of education consortia, which are led by employers and supported by colleges. In these circumstances faculty and/or staff become involved in the accreditation and quality assurance of learning programs by

- undertaking training needs analysis;
- providing learning systems development;
- training workplace supervisors to undertake flexible assessment;
- developing quality assurance systems for flexible assessment; and
- providing specialist assessment e.g. when using PLAR.

Consortia with large numbers of employees benefit from this type of approach, as an increase in individual throughput ultimately reduces unit cost (Day, 1994b). Within British Columbia there is also the potential to attract funding which is directly related to new educational reforms.

Other advantages of this type of approach are that institutions can increase their own range of educational activities by providing units of learning on reflective practice, developing a portfolio and clinical supervision. These units could then become part of a core curriculum for all health and human service programs, which could be used to develop and foster qualities that promote the idea of lifelong learning. The Personal Qualities outlined within the Management Charter Initiative (1993) and the Training and Development Lead Body standards (1995) could complement such an activity.

The Implications Of A New Policy For The Training Of Social Workers In BC

As a result of the Gove Inquiry (1995) social work training within British Columbia will now undergo considerable change. Discussions with the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, the Faculty of Social Work at the University College of the Fraser Valley and the University of Victoria has highlighted these changes. They include the need for

- *an accelerated program:* conversion from a Bachelor of Arts degree to a Bachelor in Social Work Degree in ten months;
- *outcomes-based learning*: which reflects the professional nature of social work; and
- *recognition of prior achievement*: by developing flexible approaches to assessment.

These represent a significant challenge to faculty and/or staff who are shaped by traditional approaches towards program delivery, where the practicum is seen as a separate unit of learning for the curriculum. This is in contrast to the UK nurse training system, where practical placements are an integrated part of the modular training system.

As a consequence of these changes, faculty and staff will need to demonstrate that students are

- *fit for purpose*: in particular faculty and staff will need to be quite specific about the outcomes that are expected of students. Occupational standards derived from functional analysis might be useful here, in particular the personal competencies outlined by the Management Charter Initiative (1993) e.g. *using intellect to optimize results* (see Day and Basford 1995a); and

- *fit for practice*: faculty will be concerned that the principles of *professional* practice are not undermined. In particular they will be concerned that reductionist approaches, derived from utilitarian models of education and training, do not reduce *holistic* practice to a series of meaningless and unconnected tasks. An integrated approach towards *practicum* delivery will do much to bridge any potential gap between theory and practice. A two-dimensional approach towards assessment may also be relevant.

Within the two-dimensional approach towards assessment, occupational standards are underpinned by principles that relate to professional practice. For example, Day and Basford (1995a) have developed a framework where each performance required of the nursing student is also based on the following principles: - an awareness of multi-cultural and ethnic issues; an awareness of policy issues and how they might be determined and influenced; the need for evidence-based practice; and ethical codes and client confidentiality.

The work of the ASSET program at Anglia Polytechnic University (Winters and Maisch, 1996) outlines a more elaborate approach within the field of social work.

- *fit for award:* by determining the education and competence levels of prospective students on entry to the program and on exit. The use of educational taxonomies to assess prior and continued learning may be useful here, particularly in appraising portfolio narrative (Day, 1991).

In developing these assessment methods a distinction between *capability* and *competence* has to be made (Eraut 1994). In particular there is the notion that students emerging from a traditional university program may be *capable* but not yet *competent*. Mechanisms to develop both capability and competence could include

- *flexible and workplace assessment, involving direct supervision by faculty and staff:* the social work practitioner is the *gatekeeper* to the profession. Given the changes outlined by Gove (1996), university lecturers are probably the only individuals who can objectively determine, measure and assess the new competencies required of social work students. In this case considerable staff development will be required in order to facilitate workplace assessment skills in faculty and staff (for example see Day 1995d);
- *the development of a closer relationship between faculty and staff and students during practicum placements:* the new social work student may be perceived as an agent for change, and as a result may require considerable personal support to prevent undue stress and potential burn out; and
- *the need for students to develop a wider evidence base, to include examples of capability and competence evidence:* examples for portfolio building from an accelerated specialist nursing are seen to be particularly relevant here (Day and Basford, 1995a).

British Columbia And The Pharmaceutical Profession

As with other professions within British Columbia, Pharmacy recognizes the national and worldwide movement towards self-directed learning, public demand for high standards of health care, and the governmental mandate for ongoing quality assurance (College of Pharmacists of British Columbia, 1997). To support this, the College of Pharmacists has implemented a professional development program that is based upon

- *a practice review and audit:* practitioners compare their own daily practice with a model of practice description outlined within the College's framework of professional practice. This framework is comprised of different competency areas, which have been derived from an occupational analysis of roles within the Pharmacy profession. This framework includes a key statement of purpose, the identification of key roles, activities and their associated performance indicators (Figure Four);
- *professional portfolio assessment:* the professional portfolio provides a framework for practitioners to reflect upon and against which to record their professional and practice development activities. This enables pharmacists to assess and monitor their practice against the framework of professional practice;
- *knowledge assessment:* here multiple choice questions are used to evaluate the practitioners' knowledge of medicines and the expected effects upon patients; and
- *structured performance assessment* an interactive tool that is used to assess a range of practice-related clinical skills and competencies. Participants work through multiple stations performing tasks and responding to simulated patient problem scenarios.

Key Purpose Statement

To assist individuals and groups to achieve desired health outcomes by providing current, rational, safe and cost-effective pharmaceutical information, products and services.

Key Roles:

1. ***PROVIDE PHARMACEUTICAL CARE***
2. Produce, store, distribute and dispose of drug preparations
3. Contribute to the management of pharmacy practice
4. Maintain and contribute to the professional development of others
5. Contribute to the effectiveness of the health care system

Activities (from Key Role 1):

1. PROVIDE PHARMACEUTICAL CARE

A. ASSESS THE CLIENT'S HEALTH STATUS AND NEEDS

B. Develop a care plan with the client

C. Implement the care plan

Performance Indicators (from Activity A)

1. PROVIDE PHARMACEUTICAL CARE

A. ASSESS THE CLIENT'S HEALTH STATUS AND NEEDS

1. Establish and maintain relationship with the client

a) Client acknowledged and effort made to establish trusting relationship
b) A safe, quiet and private environment is created, as feasible
c) Confidentiality is maintained
d) Client is encouraged to express his/her needs and views
e) Role, responsibilities and accessibility of the pharmacist in supporting the client is clarified and confirmed with the client.

Figure Four: The Framework Professional Practice (College of Pharmacists BC, 1997)

The Continuing Assessment, Reflection and Enhancement (CARE) program is currently being piloted throughout British Columbia as a model for mandatory re-licensure. The CARE program encompasses many of the features of contemporary professional development programs. These include

- adoption of student-centred approaches towards assessment and compilation of evidence;
- assessment of individuals against defined standards for practice;

- utilization of a wide evidence base to support claims for *competence* and *capability;*
- adoption of a portfolio approach to facilitate reflection and link theory with practice; and
- adoption of quality assurance mechanisms to validate the outcomes of assessment.

These features are summarized in Figure Five.

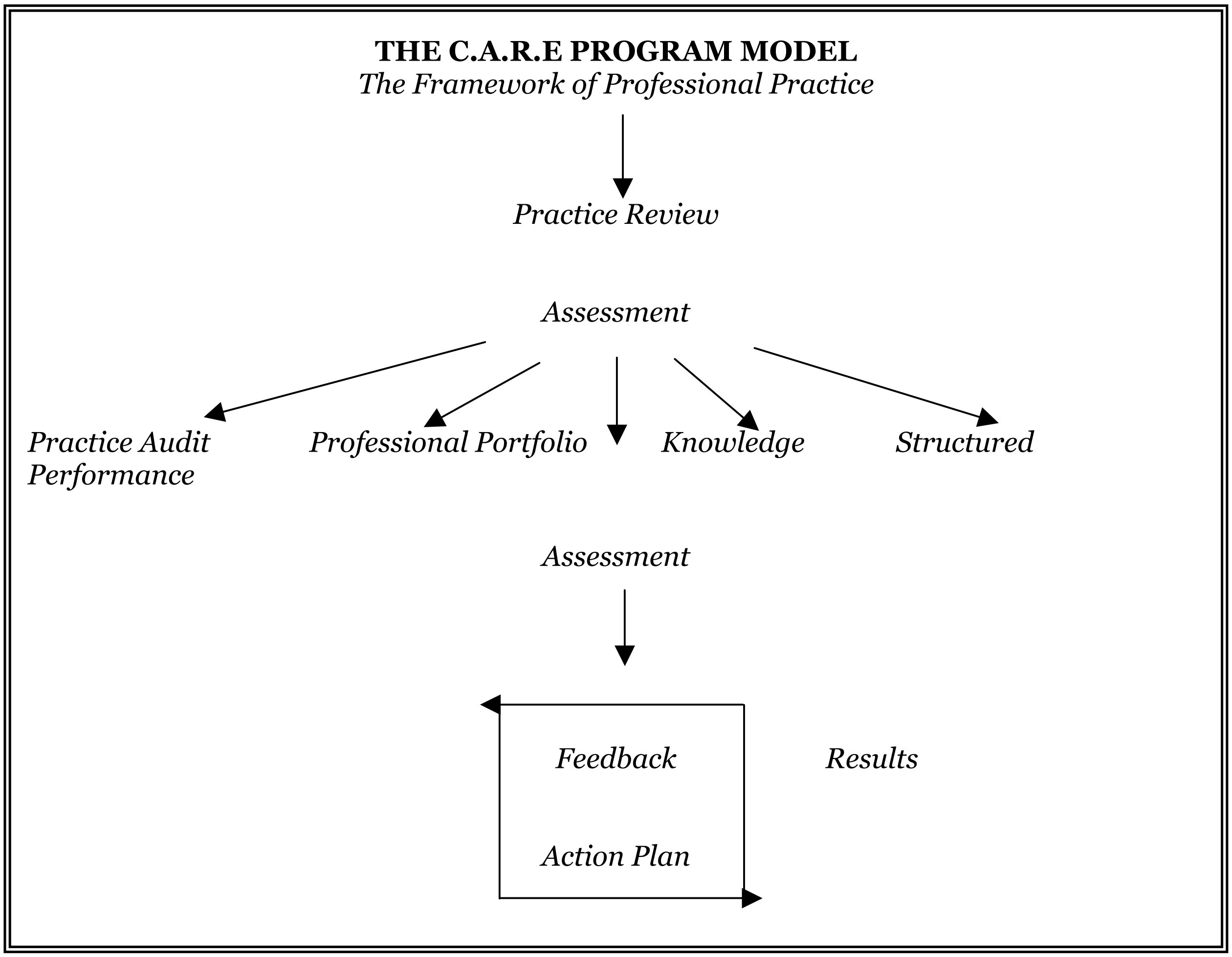

Figure Five: The C.A.R.E. Program (College Pharmacists BC, 1997)

Manitoba

Work in PLAR began in Manitoba in the early 1980's at Red River College in the program areas of Nursing, Early Childhood Education and Dental Assisting. In the mid 1990's Manitoba Education and Training began to provide an annual grant to the college to support a full-time PLA facilitator and PLA office. Funding this position was the first formal recognition by the provincial government of the need to formalize PLA within the college system in the province.

Since that time, Manitoba Education and Training has been an enthusiastic supporter of prior learning assessment and recognition as a cost-effective tool for improving the labour force development system. Department staff members have been active on the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) and the HRDC sponsored PLAR '95, '97 and '99 conferences.

The Department has supported significant development in the application and development of PLAR through its establishment and support of the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre in 1998. The Department and the Government of Canada jointly fund the PLA Centre under the Winnipeg Development Agreement.

The Department's Employment Training Services (ETS) Branch is exploring the use of PLAR as an integrated tool in employment training services through referrals to the Winnipeg based PLA Centre and through ETS-funded projects establishing PLA Centre Advisers/Development Officers in Brandon, The Pas and Thompson Employment Centres.

The Department's Workforce 2000 Program was a key initiator and partner with the Manitoba Aerospace Human Resources Coordinating Committee (MAHRCC) in the development of PLAR initiatives at Bristol Aerospace.

The Council on Post-Secondary Education (COPSE) which funds post-secondary institutions and approves all new programs, has adopted PLAR as an integrated element of its program approval and evaluation process and a major initiative under its System Restructuring Fund envelope.

The Department, through the Council on Post Secondary Education, also supports the PLAR partnership projects with Stevenson Aviation Technical Training Centre, Red River College and the Manitoba PLA Centre.

Post-secondary PLAR initiatives are underway at Assiniboine Community College, Keewatin Community College, Red River College, Brandon University and the University of Winnipeg. The University of Manitoba will be utilizing PLAR within the Faculty of Nursing as a way in which to encourage enrollment.

The Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre

A significant vehicle for change in Manitoba's use of Prior Learning Assessment is the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) Centre. The Centre was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization under The Corporations Act of Manitoba on February 24, 1998. At incorporation, the Board of Directors of the Centre was comprised of individuals representing the Alliance of Manufacturers and Exporters of Canada, Bristol Aerospace, Red River College and the University of Winnipeg. As of this date, the original Board of Directors membership has expanded to include representatives from Brandon University, the Manitoba Federation of Labour and the Manitoba Government Employees Union (MGEU). The Board is currently recruiting an additional member from the business community with an interest or commitment to the recognition of prior learning and the provision of prior learning assessment services.

The PLA Centre provides advisory services for individual clients and development services for practitioners, training providers and other interested organizations. The Centre delivers individual client advisory services to a wide range of clients and learners including employment insurance recipients, social assistance recipients, workers in transition, and individuals interested in career development. Clients are able to obtain information about prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) and receive guidance on how to document and validate their prior learning.

Clients receive individual and small group counselling and consultation services, including skills inventory development, transferable skills identification, individual portfolio development, assistance in preparing for assessment and referral. The appropriate content specialists from education, occupational/professional organizations or the workplace complete the actual assessments of prior learning.

The Centre's development services assist interested organizations to develop PLAR programs, policies and initiatives. Particular emphasis is given to

- coordination and provision of training and professional development for advisers and assessors of prior learning;
- development of PLAR partnerships and projects between educational institutions and the workplace; and
- development of PLAR processes for self-accrediting bodies.

The Centre is a not-for-profit corporation governed by a board of directors comprised of representatives from different sectors who have demonstrated a commitment to prior learning assessment. The Centre is a joint *funding* initiative of the Government of Canada under the Winnipeg Development Agreement and the Manitoba Department of Education and Training. The *staff* of the Centre includes an Executive Director, PLA Projects Manager, PLA Advisers in Brandon, The Pas, Thompson and Winnipeg, a Winnipeg-based Administrative Assistant, and short-term consultant and development personnel. PLA Advisers in Brandon, The Pas and Thompson are funded under separate project agreements with the Brandon, The Pas and Thompson Employment Centres. The aim of these projects is to demonstrate the applicability of PLAR in the delivery of employment and transition and training services.

Additional Centre-based PLAR development projects include

- establishing a PLAR Process for the Aircraft Maintenance Engineer (AME) Trade Qualification and Licensing Program (in partnership with Stevenson Aviation and Technical Training Centre);
- establishing a PLAR Process for the Manufacturing Technician Diploma Program and the Machinist/Tool & Die (in-school) Apprenticeship Program (in partnership with the Industrial Technologies Division of Red River College); and

- establishing a Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition Process for the Early Childhood Educator II Classification & Competency-Based Assessment Program (in partnership with the Department of Family Services and with the Applied Sciences Division of Red River College).

The Centre's long-term goal is to replace the need for a dedicated Centre with a fully integrated prior learning and recognition process that serves as an essential component of the Province's employment transition services and the post-secondary education system.

Red River College

Red River College (RRC) has a long history of PLA implementation. First implemented in the Nursing Diploma Program in 1980, PLA activity continues to expand across the college as program areas experience an increased demand from learners, business, industry and the community for PLA services. As part of RRC's Strategic Plan, a 5 year PLA plan which details key outcomes and strategies will be adopted to ensure the continued expansion of PLA in new and existing college programs as an integral part of academic design and curriculum renewal.

RRC is moving toward the development of a college-wide learning-outcome approach. This outcomes approach, including college, program and course learning outcomes, will further enhance RRC's capability to provide accessible, credible PLA services.

In addition to PLAR implementation in college programs, RRC is a key player and partner with business, industry and the community in PLAR project development. For example, the Manufacturing Technician Diploma PLAR Project developed in partnership with RRC Industrial Technologies division and the Manitoba PLA Centre, is a joint project to establish and implement PLAR for experienced workers in the manufacturing industry. The project has the support of sector groups (i.e. the Alliance of Manufacturers and Exporters Canada and the Manitoba Aerospace Human Resource Coordinating Committee) and industry (i.e. Bristol Aerospace and other aerospace companies). This unique project will result in an innovative model for accessing PLAR and delivering training for manufacturing technicians, machinists and tool and die makers. The first phase includes the development of program learning outcomes, PLAR methods, procedures and assessments and verification of the appropriateness of the PLAR processes by a subject matter expert review panel. Phase two will involve the application of the PLAR processes with experienced workers from the manufacturing industry.

Other projects currently underway at RRC include the Early Childhood Education Competency-Based Assessment PLAR project with the Manitoba PLA Centre and the provincial Department of Family Services and the Hotel and Restaurant Administration (HRA) program's joint project with the Manitoba Tourism Education Council (MTEC). The College, working in partnership with MTEC will develop PLAR processes for program outcomes in the HRA program to meet the needs of experienced workers in the hospitality industry.

Manitoba Family Services

Manitoba Family Services Child Day Care (undated) has designed a work-based assessment program. This is for individuals who are working in licensed child care facilities who would like to become eligible for the Early Childhood Educator certification.

The program is offered to individuals on a part-time, self-study basis. It develops skills, knowledge and abilities while the individual continues to work. The place of employment is integral to the program of study, since all practical learning objectives are carried out while the individual is working in a child care facility.

The basis of assessment are the child care competencies. These competencies have been adopted as the necessary **minimum** qualifications to be acquired and demonstrated by early childhood professionals working with children in licensed programs in Manitoba. The competency standards are divided into the following 6 competency goals

- establishes and maintains a safe and healthy learning environment;
- advances physical and intellectual competencies;
- builds positive self concept and individual strengths;
- promotes positive functioning of children and adults in a group;
- brings about optimal co-ordination of home and centre child-rearing practices and expectations; and
- carries out supplementary responsibilities related to children's programs.

Each of these goals is defined in more detail in 13 functional areas. Each of the functional areas describes the major tasks or functions that a caregiver must complete in order to carry out the competency goals. These are explained in a developmental context, which presents a brief overview of child development and provides a rationale for the functional area definition and examples of competent caregiver behaviours.

Each functional area is further explained by a list of sample caregiver behaviours. These examples describe behaviour that demonstrates that a caregiver is acting in a competent way or exhibiting a skill in a particular functional area. Specific caregiver behaviours are noted in the program manual.

The program recognizes the importance for caregivers to individualize their work with each child while meeting the needs of the group. In every area, caregivers must promote cultural diversity, support families with different languages, and meet the needs of all children. Caregivers must also demonstrate personal qualities, such as flexibility and a positive style of communicating with young children and working with families. Competence in child care is determined by the caregiver's ability to integrate and adapt skills and knowledge into the care of the whole child.

Nova Scotia and the Halifax PLAR Centre

The Halifax PLAR Centre offers programs and services to adults-in-transition, to assist them to identify and document their knowledge and skills. It provides these programs and services in a variety of workplace and community settings, working with a broad range of partners and sponsors. It encourages colleges, universities, schools, employers, unions and other bodies to recognize prior learning achievements for purposes of admission, advanced standing, employment, advancement and certification.

The Centre is a collaborative enterprise. It has a group of PLAR Advisers and Facilitators, drawn on a part-time basis from a range of partner institutions and agencies. It has a Board of Directors who represent the private sector and labour, community and governmental agencies, community colleges and universities.

The Centre raises the level of awareness and understanding of the principles, practices and applications of PLAR. It produces and distributes brochures, videos and reports. It has a website, advertises in newspapers, and provides its own display booth for trade shows and conferences. The Centre has organized three major provincial symposiums. It has networked extensively with opinion leaders and has conducted strategic roundtable discussions with key partners and stakeholders.

The PLAR Centre receives funding from HRDC. It is also supported through program and service contract arrangements by the Canadian Forces Base Halifax (DND) which uses PLAR as a core element in its Employee Confidence-Building Program for both civilian and military personnel. More recently the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services and the Nova Scotia Community College have provided major partnership backing and resources for the Centre's PLAR Practitioners Program. The Centre also receives support from Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture and from the Metro area Universities.

During the past three years, over 1500 clients have used the Centre's services - to meet one-on-one with a PLAR Adviser, to participate in a one-day Transferable Skills Workshop or to undertake a PLAR Practitioner Program. During this program each individual must complete an individual portfolio and then implement and evaluate a guided practicum. By March 2000 between 150 to 200 PLAR Practitioners will have been trained and certified by the Centre. This will form the basis for a Nova Scotia PLAR Practitioners Network, with enormous potential to further advance PLAR services and programs across the province.

SUMMARY

This chapter has attempted to define the characteristics of a newly-emerging strategy for education and training. This strategy is outcomes or standards-based and appears to be a global phenomenon driven by economic necessity and a demand that education and training be more open, explicit and accountable.

This chapter also highlighted the work of the Manitoba and Halifax PLAR Centres which emphasize process as well as outcomes. Although they are not directly involved in PLAR assessment, their advocacy role and development activities represent an important part of the adult learning culture that exists in Canada. The work of community-based PLAR

Centres provides an alternative, but complementary approach, to the outcomes-based model which is emerging in Canada.

The emergence of outcomes or standards-based learning is creating a tension between education providers and business and industry. These tensions are discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

PERSPECTIVES

INTRODUCTION

> *"The need to develop national benchmarks or standards to guide the practice of assessors in an international context cannot be overstated. It challenges Canada and the Provinces to act nationally and to think more globally in relation to issues of employability and labour force development. Inevitably this will give rise to tensions but the education sector is making great strides to thoughtfully and rationally implement new structures and practices, including PLAR, which facilitate and support the development of independent lifelong learners."*
>
> *CAPLA submission to HRDC (1999)*

As discussed in the previous chapter, outcomes or standards-based education and training is driven by economic necessity. It is a newly-emerging approach towards learning which is creating a tension between providers of education and business and industry. This chapter will discuss the origins of these tensions and how they are being resolved.

As it appears there are no policies to support nationally agreed-upon outcomes or credit frameworks in Canada or the United States, most of the examples will be drawn from the UK - where a nationally agreed-upon credit framework for post-secondary education has been in place for a number of years.

OUTCOMES-BASED LEARNING ISSUES AND TENSIONS

Within Canada there is a growing interest in the use of outcomes-based learning for occupations and professions. Standards for the workplace or occupational standards, including those for Early Childhood Education, Nursing, Pharmacy, Social work, Tourism and Hospitality and Technology, are derived from an analysis of work roles. As a result, many post-secondary education institutions in Canada are showing an increased interest in the use of occupational standards to ensure the employability of students completing professional education and training programs.

There is also a growing body of evidence to demonstrate that occupational standards are being used by organizations other than educational institutions

- to analyse clients' needs to determine service requirements;
- within contract specifications and service level agreements;
- to create multi-skilled or flexible roles;
- for workforce and skill mix planning for organizations, teams or services;
- as a basis for job and person specifications;

- as an aid to recruitment and selection;
- in job performance assessment and appraisal;
- for risk management; and
- for maintaining the quality of services provided.

In addition, occupational standards are being used to improve the quality of the assessment process, by defining standards for prior learning and workplace-based assessment (Day and Zakos 1999a, b and c).

The educational climate is changing; it seems that a more pragmatic approach is beginning to emerge. This is in response to

- an increased interest in how money is spent and resources are used within the public sector;
- demands for increased transparency and professional accountability to determine what it is that occupations and professions do and how this can be improved; and
- the need for portability and transferability of professional qualifications to ensure common standards nationally and internationally.

The development of occupational standards for competence-based education is a complex, systematic and carefully calculated process which aims to achieve a high level of validity and reliability through the process of consultation and field testing (McCrory 1992).

However, there is some skepticism regarding the values and beliefs underpinning this approach towards education and training. This has given rise to some specific tensions, namely

- competence versus excellence;
- competence versus capability;
- education versus training; and
- education for employment versus education for knowledge.

Each of these will now be discussed.

COMPETENCE VERSUS EXCELLENCE

Robertson (1991) challenges the notion of *"competence"* which he sees as being dependent upon: *"...a poorly defined concept of learning"*. Objections raised by Robertson (1991) include doubts about the origins and worth of competence-based outcomes, and the limitations of using linguistic statements to determine learning. With regard to the former, Professor Robertson questions the degree to which competence-based outcomes truly reflect occupational values and judgments. With regard to the latter point Professor Robertson argues that linguistic learning-outcomes are often ambiguous. Those which are unambiguous (he claims) often trivialize the learning processes by their specificity. It is with this last point in mind that many educators criticize the role of functional analysis in determining occupational competence, as it is regarded as being too prescriptive.

Elliot (1991) takes up this argument and criticizes what he sees as the development of a *"fundamentalist"* approach towards education and training. Such a movement (Elliot claims) attempts to reduce social practices to a small number of essential elements, competence being regarded as an atomistic representation of a whole. These essential elements are regarded as a unique and unquestionable (almost biblical) knowledge base, which are founded upon the science of management. This attempts to measure, control and predict human behaviour. Thus Elliot (1991) states

> *"As the bible offers the assurance of salvation, so management science offers educational administrators an assurance of quality in an educational process conceived as a mode of production."* *p.120.*

Elliot's concern is that competence-based systems have a potential to control and predict behaviour thereby devaluing the unique worth of an individual. Professor Robertson (1991) echoes this concern suggesting that if competence-based credentials are to have any credible influence upon the education system, they ought to be based upon the concept of "*excellence"* rather than *"competence"*.

COMPETENCE VERSUS CAPABILITY

The Higher Education for Capability movement (Stephenson, 1994) distinguishes between: *"Competence"* and *"Capability"*.

Competence is seen as

> *".. the necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes and experience required in order to perform an occupational role to a satisfactory standard, as characterized by NVQs."*

Capability is defined as

> *"Excellence in knowledge acquisition and skills of analysis. Excellence in doing, organizing, designing, communicating, creativity and imagination. Excellence in working with others with supervision."*

Shuttleworth (1993) defines capability as going beyond competence. So that capability is *"competence",* plus other factors. Shuttleworth (1993:12) writes

> *"...the combination of 'can think' and 'can do' may synergise to generate a 'can cope' expertise which transcends competence into the **capability** to deal effectively with contingency. This represents a powerful combination of the **reflective practitioner** and the **competent doer** to yield the practitioner who can do and who, equally, can **reflect**...on what she/he is doing...the competence movement will gain wider integrity and acceptance from being underpinned by a developmental approach of human need that must be satisfied to secure a solid foundation for a professional career."*

Eraut (1994) indicates that capability carries two possible meanings. The first is described as the *"quality of being capable",* that is - being able to do things. He identifies this as being synonymous with competence. The second meaning (Eraut suggests) is that of*: "an undeveloped faculty or property, a condition of being turned to use."* Eraut states that this does not refer to an existing state, rather it relates to a capacity or a potential. Eraut argues that it is the balance in which these two definitions are held which has the greatest value for professional education. For example; the professional is required to be competent in his or her current performance, but is also required to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for future professional work.

Thus Eraut (1994) argues that evidence of capability can

- supplement performance evidence and extend the range of what may be inferred from it, by demonstrating that the individual has the necessary knowledge and skills to perform in a broader range of situations than those directly observed;
- assess the quality of individuals' cognitive processes. These may include, for example; analysis of problems and issues relating to a particular client group, the ability to discuss alternative strategies or approaches to professional care, and an evaluation of the practices they observe;
- indicate that the individual has an appropriate knowledge-base that will serve to underpin future professional practice. These may include, for example, knowledge of how a technique is performed and a critical understanding of the principles that underpin it; and
- help individuals to understand the role played by their profession in society, either through direct interaction with patients and clients or through their contribution to employing organizations.

The Professions have argued that the *process* of education is as important as the *product*, or outcome. Proponents of the capability movement would agree with this view. For example, Stephenson (1994) argues that

> *"the process does matter; the nature of capability does matter; they each influence the extent to which people will continue to remain competent when circumstances change and previously tested competencies become obsolete."*

Capability is an appropriate and relevant concept for the professions. It promotes the idea that individuals should be

> *"**responsible and accountable** for their own personal, educational, vocational and professional development."*
>
> *Higher Education Council (1994)*

The UK Higher Education Council points out that student-centred learning helps to develop transferable *'core skills'*, for example, abstraction, conceptualization and problem solving, as well as the more common skills of communication, literacy and numeracy. The UK Higher Education Council adds that motivation and capability are enhanced if learners take responsibility for their own learning, especially if this involves collaborating with others.

Capability is concerned with knowledge in use, that is, applying theory to practice. If knowledge is not used or applied, it cannot be transformed and contribute to a person's capability. The challenge for all educators is in creating an assessment system which is representative of the context in which professionals work, so that appropriate and valid inferences can be made about an individual's capability.

Mitchell (1993) highlights issues that are likely to make the assessment of professionals more difficult

- the confidentiality involved in work between the professional and a client;
- the fact that there are often several possible solutions to any given problem;
- observable performance is often only a small portion of an individual's performance;
- competence is often hidden; for example, cognitive processing; and
- long term outcomes are not always predictable and may be outside a individual's control.

The danger is that institutional requirements for assessment might drive the system and, as a consequence, may weaken any inference which can be made about individuals' capabilities. Day et. al. (1995:38) have referred to this as the "*validity gap"*. The degree to which knowledge in use may become integrated into performance is an important aspect of the validity gap. For example, integrative assignments such as projects linked to real work situations may be strong on application validity, but may reduce the range of knowledge that can be demonstrated. If both the range of knowledge and use of knowledge are to be assessed, then a combination of assessment methods are needed to produce evidence of achievement.

In the ASSET program Winter and Maisch (1996) argue the need for a *"two-dimensional"* approach towards assessment of competence in a social work program. The program utilizes occupational standards derived through functional analysis, as performance items for assessment. These are complemented by assessment criteria, which have been validated in the field as being *"core"* to professional practice. Hence competence is assessed across occupational and professional domains.

The work of Winter et. al. (1996) has been applied to a Specialist Community Nursing program by Day and Basford (1995b). A two-dimensional matrix has been constructed to assess the occupational and professional competencies of nursing students undertaking a specialist community nursing degree. Occupational standards derived from functional analysis are assessed as *"clusters"* and "*descriptors"*. These are derived from potential NVQ units and elements (Care Sector Consortium, 1994) in the belief that the language at this level is more acceptable to assessors than the language outlined within any subsequent performance criteria.

This approach towards assessment recognizes the need for students to develop *"total competence"*. This is defined by Day (1994a) and Day and Basford, (1995a) as *"The necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes, understanding and experience required in order to perform professional and occupational roles to a satisfactory standard within the workplace."* This definition can be represented within the conceptual framework shown in Figure Six.

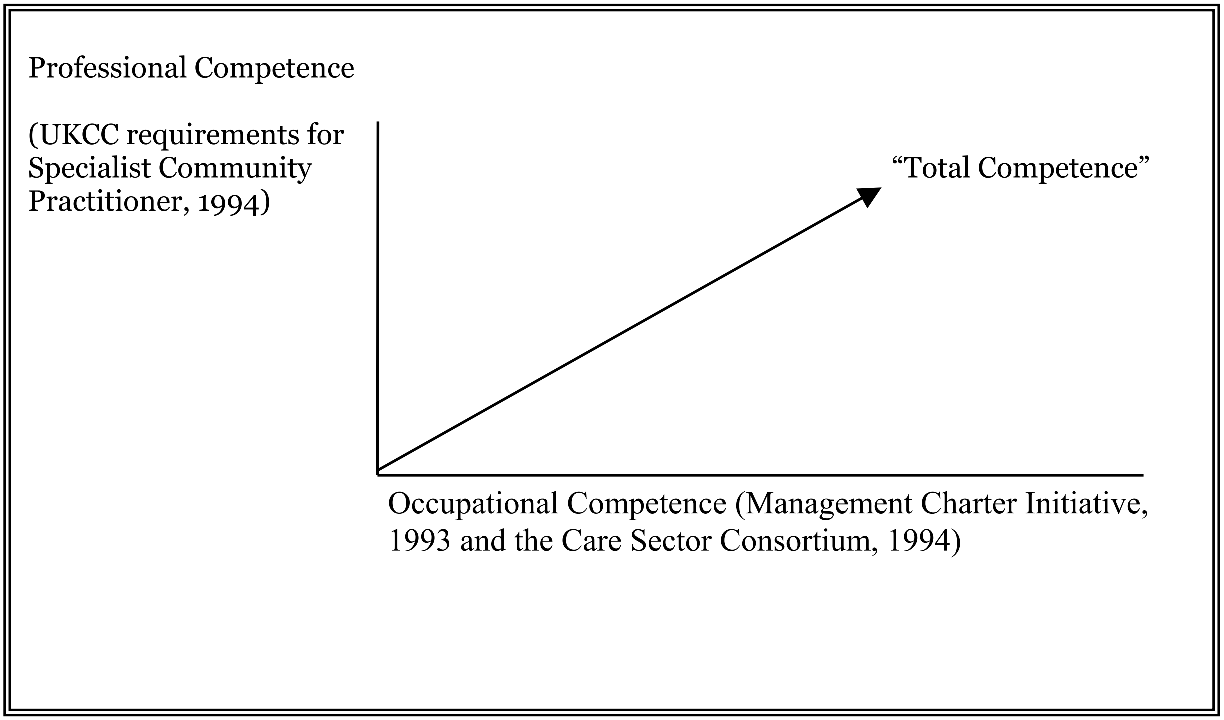

Figure Six: Total Competence

EDUCATION VERSUS TRAINING

As discussed, the *"fundamentalist"* approach towards competence-based education and training has been criticized as being trivial, and of little worth. Such a response is characteristic of the debate between the value and purpose of *training*, versus the value and purpose of *education*. For example, trainers often perceive education to be abstract, elitist and socially divisive. Educators perceive training to be limited, mechanistic and at best a paradox, as training can no longer guarantee employment (Day, 1996a). The debate concerning the nature and purpose of education and training is compared and contrasted in Figure Seven.

Training	**V**	**Education**
Subject-Centred		Student-Centred
Skills		Creativity
Instruction		Experience
Information		Discovery
Obedience		Awareness
Conformity		Originality
Discipline		Freedom
Standards		Expression
Structure		Style
Unity		Diversity

Figure Seven: Training versus Education – A Polemic View (adapted from Lawton, 1973)

In order to have value and a purpose, the outcomes of any program of instruction must be clear and measurable. With this point in mind many individuals may be forgiven for thinking that competence-based programs are an example of the *"training"* approach. However, the principles of procedure which are inherent in competence-based programs are drawn from philosophies which reflect a *student-centred* rather than a *subject-centred* model of education and training - for example, the discussion paper.

"Implications of competence- based curricula" outlines what the UK Further Education Unit (FEU, 1989*)* sees as a flexible and innovative response towards competence-based programs. That is

- the development of training access points to improve access to educational information;
- the provision of a comprehensive counselling and profiling service;
- recognition of prior learning and experience;
- a modularized approach towards program delivery;
- credit for individual modular achievements; and
- a wider use of information technology to aid learning.

These ideas have been brought together by the Further Education Unit (FEU) (1993) in its model of the *"the flexible College"*. (Figure Eight)

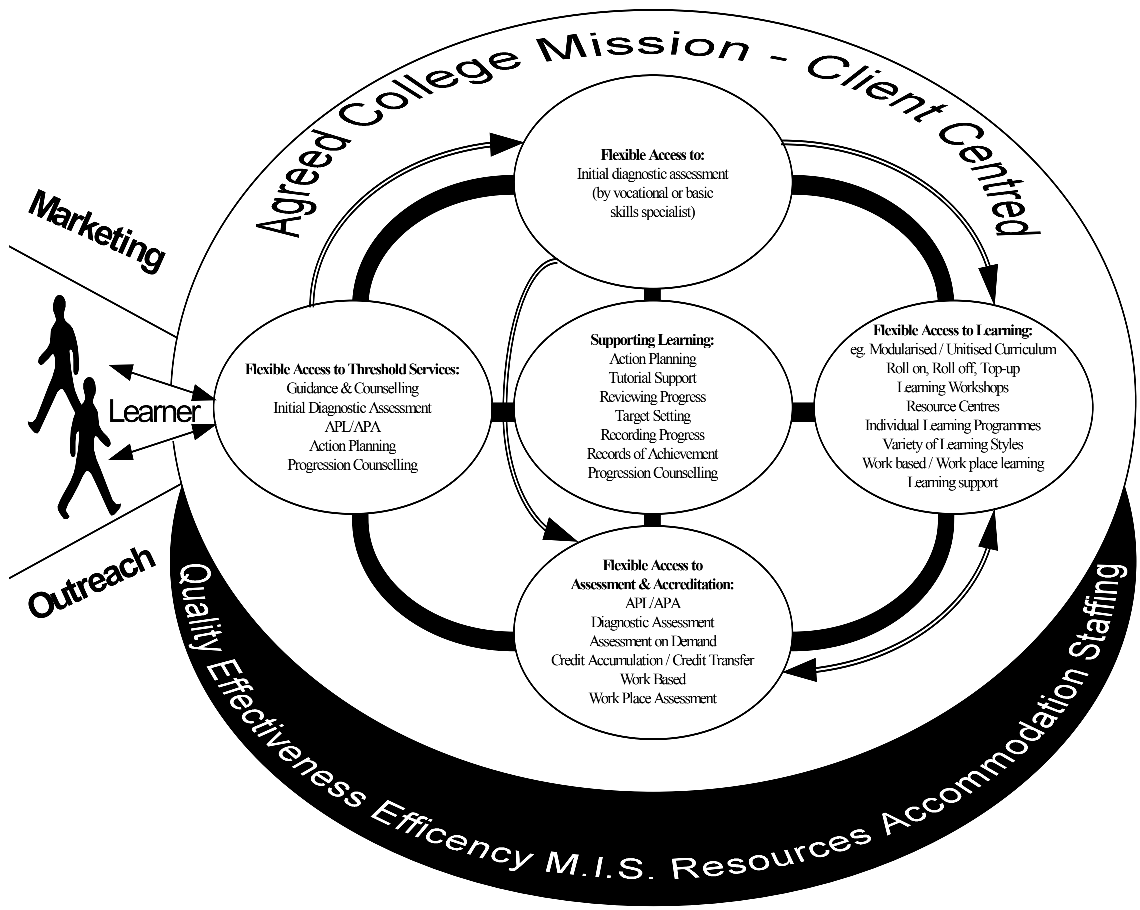

Figure Eight: The Flexible College (FEU, 1993)

Also, in summarizing the changes occurring within the (vocational) post-sixteen curriculum, Greenacre (1990) identifies a need for

- increased liaison with local industry (to include marketing and advisory services);
- increased communication with awarding bodies;
- the development of initial guidance and counselling services; and
- the development of workshop, open learning and resource-based learning activities.

Greenacre (1990) goes on to outline the importance of staff development within a college by indicating a need for *"Cross curricula competence-based focus groups."* This has also been recognized by the Further Education Unit (1989) which has noted that further education colleges are now purchasers rather than providers of staff development, particularly in preparing staff for their new role in competence-based assessment.

This cultural shift has significantly altered the power base of teachers within the public education sector, who have now become learners in association with their students, a feature which is identified by Stenhouse (1975) as being representative of a student-centred curriculum.

Day (1996a) argues that this shift in power, together with an emphasis on flexible and individualized programme delivery is consistent with the work of Jessup (1991), who outlines what he calls the *"Emerging model of education and training"*. (Figure Nine)

Day (1996a) goes on to state that traditional comparisons between education and training are unhelpful, as they can be artificial and contrived, often driven and reinforced by those individuals who feel threatened and stand to lose the status and power they have gained through academic credibility.

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE
(career guidance, NVQ database, training access points, educational counselling & credit transfer information service)

↓

INITIAL ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING
(profiling of educational, workplace & non-workplace experiences)

↓

INDIVIDUAL ACTION PLANS
(vocational and educational targets)

↓

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES
(workplace, college, open learning, resource-based learning)

↓

CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT
(varied locations, national records of achievement, unit accreditation)

↓

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION
(achievement of action PLAR)

Figure Nine: An Emerging Model of Education and Training (Jessup, 1991)

Day (1996a) indicates that this is particularly apparent within the UK government's occupational standards program, which is largely controlled and delivered by institutions outside the mainstream of traditional education. Organizations such as local authority youth training units, in-service or in-company training departments or private training companies have enjoyed the support of government funding in the implementation and delivery of competence-based programs. This funding has allowed these organizations to grow and expand at a time when public sector funding has been severely restricted in post-secondary education.

The view that traditional comparisons between education and training are outmoded is supported by Barnett (1994), who argues that neither vocational nor academic paradigms for competence are relevant within a culture of advancing technology and change. In his analysis Barnett (1994) describes two rival conceptions of competence by making a comparison between *"Operational Competence"* and *"Academic Competence"*. Barnett concludes that neither is helpful.

EDUCATION FOR EMPLOYMENT VERSUS EDUCATION FOR KNOWLEDGE

In general in the UK, the purpose and goals of universities are seen to be different from post-secondary colleges. Atkins et. al. (1993) state that the purpose of a university education is to provide

- a general educational experience;
- a preparation for knowledge creation;
- a specific vocational preparation; and
- a preparation for general employment.

Competence-based programs are seen to be about the creation of a workforce which is competent and appropriately knowledgeable in a particular occupation, whereas university education is usually concerned with the assessment of capability and the understanding of particular theories and principles.

In her conference paper, Mitchell (1993) argues that the purpose of a university education is to

> *".. create knowledgeable individuals who by their knowledge have more likelihood of becoming competent - to develop individuals with the capability to become competent or to do whatever they wish."*

Mitchell suggests that whether they actually become competent is not necessarily compatible with the interests of the university. However, Mitchell (1992) also indicates that the term*: "University Education"* is all embracing and hides a number of different interests and aims: between subjects, some being more occupationally focused than others; between institutions but within subjects, some institutions being more closely allied to occupational competence than others. Also between levels there can be key differences; most undergraduate courses are subject-based and related to developing knowledge and understanding rather than occupational competence, while at the post-graduate level there is more of a shift to an occupational focus which can be geared to developing competence e.g. teacher training.

The potential of competence-based programs in university education has already been recognized by a number of UK institutions. For example, the Vocational Qualifications Unit of the Open University (OU) has gone through considerable expansion and is involved in the development of learning systems to support workplace assessment and learning. In addition, it has been involved in the identification of guidance pathways for those individuals who wish to achieve both vocational and academic accreditation from the Open University (Hevey, 1994)

The Open University has also been involved in piloting a competence-based framework for core skills in undergraduate programs (Hodgkinson, 1996). This study explored the use of competencies in communication, application of numbers, information technology, improving own learning and performance, working with others, and problem solving. The advantages of such an approach (it is claimed) are that competency-based approaches towards core skills development take into account current models of how students learn. It encourages efficient and independent learning in a curriculum which might not otherwise recognize the importance of independent study skills. It is also claimed that in addition to subject knowledge, students are able to demonstrate a broader range of personal skills and qualities to potential employers and professional bodies.

Stephenson (1993) agrees that an integration of knowledge and skills within the curriculum (through the medium of workplace assessment) provides a coherent and relevant experience for the student. This view is supported by Robertson (1991), who sees the potential for both vocational and academic outcomes for students in university education. A representation of his views is shown by a progressive and cyclical model of learning from foundation to professional practitioner level (Figure Ten).

1. **Foundation Cycle:** encompassing access courses, franchises with Further Education together with level one (first year) of an undergraduate programme and NVQ level three.

   Outcome: ability to specialize

2. **Graduation Cycle:** encompassing levels two and three of an undergraduate programme, and level four NVQ.

   Outcome: ability to utilize

3. **Licentiate Cycle:** encompassing post-graduate and professional qualifications, career updating, and levels four and five NVQ.

   Outcome: licence to practice

Figure Ten: Cycles of Learning in Higher Education (Robertson, 1991)

However desirable, Day et. al. (1995a) state that the achievement of both vocational and academic outcomes may be problematic. Vocational assessment is concerned with whether an individual is competent or not (yet) competent to perform to a national occupational standard. When vocational assessment is included within university education programs, it is important to find some way of assimilating this type of assessment with the assessment grading criteria used in university education. The appropriate use of grading for underpinning knowledge can be quite complex and this together with vocational assessment criteria may lead to over-assessment of students. Furthermore, Eraut and Cole (1993) point out that the workplace-based training element of professional preparation within university education programs is often patchy in terms of the range and quality of experiences offered to students, arguing that workplace assessors either lack training for their role or have insufficient time allowed within their other professional duties to fulfill the role properly.

Issues relating to the validity of outcomes have also been raised. For example, Otter (1994) states that the concept of levels in university education and in competency-based frameworks are quite different. She points out that competency levels describe an "*increasing complexity of the occupational role and the autonomy and responsibility of the individual."* In contrast, levels in higher education are concerned with "*....increasing intellectual difficulty or academic autonomy"*. Otter (1994) argues that you cannot equate levels of competency directly with academic levels used in university education. She states that

> *"It is debatable whether newly graduated students could achieve competence in higher level occupations through their undergraduate study program, even when this includes periods of work placement. Such competence may not be*

achieved until the individual has demonstrated sufficient personal autonomy and responsibility which underpin competence in the profession."

Otter (1994) adds that this may take several years after completing a university education program.

Mindful of these issues the UK Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC, 1994) undertook a consultation exercise with a wide range of further and higher education institutions and professional bodies. The report made a number of recommendations, namely

- there should be a national credit framework for all post -secondary education;
- an associate degree, coupled with competence-based programs, should be developed as an interim qualification within university education; and
- professional bodies should produce policies on mobility and flexibility by linking in with credit systems and modularity within higher education.

This report has been superseded by the UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) which indicates that the four main purposes of higher education should be to

- *"inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;*
- *increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application to the benefit of the economy and society;*
- *serve the needs of an adaptable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels; and*
- *play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised inclusive society."*

Higher Education and the Learning Society (1997)

Clearly this promotes a more "*utilitarian*" view of university education in the UK - one which emphasizes the needs of employers. For example

"The evidence we have had from employers shows that, while the intellectual development that comes from the single honours degree is valued, they see advantage in graduates being able to study their specialism within a broad context. We favour being able to choose between different types of higher education programme, including more offering a broader knowledge range of subjects."

Higher Education and the Learning Society (1997)

The report goes on to indicate that

> *" ... there is much evidence of support for the further development of a range of skills during higher education, including what we term the key skills of communication, both oral, written, numeracy, the use of communications and information technology and learning how to learn. We see these as necessary outcomes of all higher education programmes."*
>
> *Higher Education and the Learning Society (1997)*

The review argues that these skills should be developed within a framework which encompasses work-based learning.

> *"The strongest single message which we received from employers was the value of work experience. This is particularly emphasised by small and medium sized enterprises who need new employees to be able to operate effectively in the workplace from their first day. Further development of work experience opportunities requires action by both employers and institutions."*
>
> *Higher Education and the Learning Society (1997)*

In support of this, the review advocates the use of a *" Progress File"* which all students could use to record their achievements in lifelong learning. A national format for a transcript of achievement in university education is also advocated, which students in higher education could add to their progress file. The review also proposes a new qualifications framework for university education which

- provides for progression;
- emphasises a range of achievements;
- is consistent in its use of terminology and therefore understood by institutions and employers;
- incorporates provision for credit accumulation; and
- facilitates the transfer of credits between institutions.

In outlining this framework the report emphasises that it should be based on achievement, with less emphasis on the length of study required. Also that there should be emphasis on a framework that will cater to a range of aspirations and achievements and will enable students to progress through higher levels, as well as to move between programs.

Finally, the report recommends that the new qualifications framework should encompass both vocational and academic qualifications, with individuals building up a portfolio of achievements at a range of levels throughout their working lifetime.

SUMMARY

The use of occupational standards or benchmarks to complement occupational and professional curricula is a newly-emerging but important strategy for educators to consider. Occupational standards and benchmarks can be used to define both the process and outcomes of education and training in order to make them more explicit and relevant to the needs of stakeholders and learners.

This chapter described the emerging tensions which underpin the standards or outcomes-based approach towards education and training. In particular it identifies how educational institutions, at the post-secondary level, are responding to the demands of business and industry in order to demonstrate that their programs are “fit for purpose.”

The term “fitness” implies quality and consistency; these are issues which are fundamental to the development of benchmarks for PLAR (see SWOT analysis, Chapter Five). The development of benchmarks for PLAR is discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS FOR PLAR PRACTITIONERS

INTRODUCTION

> *"National benchmarks for assessment will promote consistency and credibility for Canada's PLAR implementation strategy. These, in turn, will augur well for its acceptance abroad and at home so that issues relating to currency, portability and transferability of credentials will be more easily managed. By providing national benchmarks for best practice we are clarifying the expectations of learners and the responsibilities of those who conduct PLAR assessment. If the full impact of PLAR as a tool for change is to be realized, it is imperative that clear, credible concise benchmarks with cross-sector applicability be created to guide quality practice."*
>
> *CAPLA submission to HRDC (1999)*

The development of benchmarks for PLAR practitioners has involved the following developmental activities

- a consultative workshop to develop questionnaire items;
- a pilot of questionnaire items to test for clarity, face validity and utility;
- a screening survey to determine an appropriate sample;
- a benchmarking survey of PLAR practitioners; and
- the use of focus group activities to cross-validate the outcomes of the benchmarking survey and to determine the policy application of the newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR.

This chapter will introduce the reader to the concept of benchmarking and discuss activities one to four. (page 67)

WHAT ARE BENCHMARKS?

The term "benchmark" was originally a surveyor's term. It referred to a distinctive landmark which might be used as a reference point to determine a position on a map. The term is now used to describe a standard against which others can be measured.

Benchmarking is a continuous, systematic search for, and implementation of, best practices which may lead to improved performance. It involves

- setting standards according to the 'best' practice that can be found;
- identifying the 'best' organizations and finding out how they meet the standards;

- adapting and applying the lessons learned to avoid "re-inventing the wheel"; and
- generating new ideas to go beyond the standards identified.

The goals of benchmarking are to build on the success of others and to address current best practice. Benchmarking is carried out with the intention of making improvements. Patterson (1996) believes it is a beneficial process as it

- focuses on client needs – *this is fundamental to adult learning;*
- adapts industry-best practices – *this study focuses on the practice of PLAR assessors;*
- helps to set relevant, realistic and achievable goals – *an open and transparent PLAR process for individuals and assessors; and*
- tests the quality of program delivery – *individuals, employers and educational institutions must be able to see that the PLAR process is rigorous and credible.*

Benchmarking is not

- *spying or industrial espionage* - just visiting other organizations 'to find out what they are doing';
- *keeping up with the neighbors* – benchmarking just because 'everyone else' is doing it;
- *cloning* – copying rather than adapting practices from elsewhere without regard to culture, strategy, mission, etc.; and
- *number crunching* – you need sufficient measurement only to be able to effect and monitor improvements.

The American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC, 1997), the Benchmarking Center Ltd. (1999) and Arabian (1999) outline various models and processes for benchmarking. However, they also stress the need for benchmarkers to take into account the culture and context in which they are working, together with the time and resources available, so that an appropriately sensitive approach can be constructed. For example, Patterson (1996) favors the "PDCA" approach i.e. Plan, Do, Check and Act.

1. **PLAN**
   - Select subject area
   - Define process to be benchmarked
   - Identify benchmarking participants
   - Identify data required, sources and appropriate methods of collection

2. DO

- Collect the data
- Determine the performance gap
- Target future performance

3. ACT

- Develop an improvement plan
- Make recommendations for implementation of benchmarks
- Review and **CHECK** progress made
- Dissemination and Communication

In this study the benchmarking process includes the following activities.

1. ***An identification of what is to be measured and the comparisons to be made***. The practice of PLAR across Canada has been compared with occupational standards for assessment in the UK (TDLB 1995).
2. ***The development of a profile for organizations that are going to be compared***. This study focused on individuals currently performing PLAR assessment. They have been targeted according to their geographical location, funding source, PLAR policies and guidelines, and the number of individuals who utilize PLAR services.
3. ***Performance measurement to determine relative strengths and weaknesses***. In this study, UK standards have been tested for face validity and then used as questionnaire items in a postal survey of PLAR practitioners within Canada. The survey asked PLAR practitioners to compare their own practice against the TDLB standards in order to identify areas of commonality or areas for improvement. This has led to the development of newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR practitioners.
4. ***Dissemination.*** A strategy for dissemination and implementation has been explored which is based upon a structured consultation with PLAR practitioners who were asked for their views on the adoption of national benchmarks for PLAR assessment, the development of national PLAR practitioner guidelines and a strategy for national validation of PLAR practitioner competence.

DETERMINING A SAMPLE FOR THE BENCHMARKING STUDY

The researcher and the steering committee recognize that quantitative and qualitative research strategies differ in their approach to sampling. For example, a quantitative approach relies on large randomly selected samples which are representative of the population under study. This allows generalizations to be made concerning the population. However, there appears to be a dearth of valid and reliable data concerning the practice of PLAR within Canada; therefore it is extremely difficult to decide who or what the sample might be. For this reason a purposeful sampling approach has been adopted. Patton (1990: 169) states

> *"The logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling."*

A screening survey was used as a mechanism to identify knowledgeable subjects who are actively engaged in PLAR (Appendix Two). This was felt to be important as assessment skills are known to deteriorate if they are not continuously practiced (Day, 1996a) - this phenomenon is known as "competence decay". Therefore an opinion expressed by an individual not actively engaged in PLAR is less likely to be valid than an individual who is actively engaged in the PLAR process. The screening survey sought participation from individuals who were practicing PLAR within an organization which had the following characteristics.

- ***Actively process PLAR individuals*** – responses varied from one or two individuals seen per year (in pilot projects) to anything from 200 to 7,800 individuals seen per year in large community colleges. However, it should be noted that most respondents indicated a turnover of between 10 to 100 individuals per year.
- ***Has an established policy for funding of PLAR work*** – responses indicated that funding was either on a cost-recovery basis, or cost-recovery plus provincial grant aid, or provincial grant aid plus staffing costs from central college/university budget. In employment-based PLAR programs responses indicated that fees are refunded by the employer if the individual is successful.
- ***Has a recognized policy for PLAR assessment*** – most respondents indicated that they either use a combination of CAEL and CLFDB guidelines (Chapter One), or that these guidelines have been influential in developing their own policy and practice.

Nominations for the screening survey were provided by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (600), CAPLA (350), Steering Committee members for the Benchmarking Study (50), the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (51) and the Canadian Association of University Continuing Education (3).

The Ministry of Education in Quebec also gave advice regarding potential research subjects, but was unaware of the total number practicing PLAR assessment within the post-secondary sector. On the advice of the Ministry an e-mail copy of the screening survey was sent to post-secondary institutions/CEGEPS within Quebec (46).

A total of 1029 individuals were sent the initial screening survey (Appendix Two). Where possible, the survey was conducted via e-mail to speed up response time and reduce the cost of mailing.

A reminder to complete the screening survey was sent to nominees two weeks after the initial contact. The deadline for return of the screening survey was extended twice on the recommendation of the Steering Committee to capture any potential responses from new nominees e.g. the list serve provided by the Ministry of Education in Quebec and the mailing list provided by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board.

This initial fieldwork helped the researcher to identify a sample of 91 subjects (Table One).

Forty-four (48%) of these met the sampling criteria (Table Two). Forty-seven (52%) did not, but as they were known to be influential in the development of PLAR policy, the steering committee felt it important to identify these as a second cohort for the study (Table Three).

Table One: Overall Sample for the Benchmarking Survey (N=91)

PROVINCE	**AB**	**BC**	**MB**	**M***	**NF**	**ON**	**Q**	**SK**	**YK**	**TOTAL**	**%**
College	3	3	7	4	2	16	-	2	1	38	**41.75**
Bus. & Ind	1	3	2	2	-	9	1	-	-	18	**19.76**
University	1	2	2	6	-	1	-	-	-	12	**13.18**
Gov.	2	-	5	-	1	3	-	-	1	12	**13.18**
Profession	-	-	1	1	1	5	3	-	-	11	**12.08**
Total	7	8	17	13	4	34	4	2	2	91	**100**

*** Maritimes = NB, NS, PEI**

Table Two: Characteristics of those who met the screening criteria (Cohort One)

PROVINCE	**AB**	**BC**	**MB**	**M***	**NF**	**ON**	**Q**	**SK**	**YK**	**TOTAL**	**%**
College	2	2	5	3	1	10	-	1	-	24	**54.54**
Bus. & Ind	1	1	-	1	-	3	-	-	-	6	**13.63**
University	1	1	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	6	**13.63**
Gov.	-	-	3	-	-	1	-	-	-	4	**9.09**
Profession	-	-	1	-	1	2	-	-	-	4	**9.09**
Total	4	4	9	8	2	16	-	1	-	44	**100**

*** Maritimes = NB, NS, PEI**

Table Three: Characteristics of those who did not meet the screening criteria (Cohort Two)

PROVINCE	AB	BC	MB	M*	NF	ON	Q	SK	YK	TOTAL	%
College	1	1	2	1	1	6	-	1	1	14	**29.78**
Bus. & Ind	1	2	2	1	-	5	1	-	-	12	**25.53**
Profession	-	-	-	1	-	4	3	-	-	8	**17.02**
Gov.	1	-	2	-	1	2	-	-	1	7	**14.89**
University	-	1	2	2	-	1	-	-	-	6	**12.76**
Total	3	4	8	5	2	18	4	1	2	47	**100**

*** Maritimes = NB, NS, PEI**

A total of 136 nominees were followed up by e-mail or telephone to determine their reasons for not responding (Appendix Three). Only one indicated that they had difficulty in coping with the e-mail survey – he or she had accidentally erased the initial contact message, but had requested a further copy. He or she subsequently completed and returned this by the extended deadline.

The non-respondents who replied to the follow-up indicated they were no longer involved in PLAR assessment or were not directly involved in assessing individuals. They felt therefore that they were unable to contribute to the study in a meaningful way.

The following are the responses that were received.

> *"I see my role at the college as enabling others to implement educational practices and innovations, but it really is the practitioners such as (names stated), as "coordinators," who are best able to address the benchmarking questionnaire."*
>
> Respondent, Community College, British Columbia

> *"The information on the bench marking exercise has been sent out to individual colleges in NB and any responses were to originate from these institutions. In my capacity as the PLAR provincial coordinator, I was not offering these services, but supporting the colleges in their delivery of such service."*
>
> Respondent, Provincial Government, New Brunswick

> *"Unfortunately, at this time I am not actively involved in PLAR and feel that my response would not be of much benefit to you."*
>
> Respondent, Community College, Ontario

> *"...PLAR practice at this (name of institution) is in the infancy stage... We don't have any designated PLAR staff members. The Academic Council appointed the*

Registrar and two other members to a PLAR sub-committee to look into various possibilities and options. However, with budget cuts and no possibility of any PLAR designate in the near future…we're simply taking an interest and gathering information."

Respondent, Community College, Yukon

"It looks like an interesting survey. However, the nature of the service we provide does not involve assessing prior learning, so we would not add constructive suggestions to your survey at this time."

Respondent, Business Sector, Yukon

"Sorry, we're not doing PLAR activities currently. Have been focusing on NS credit-granting status for less than 21-year-old students. School Board undergoing large re-structuring as we speak. I want to keep up-to-date on PLAR and possibly begin to use parts of it in credit-granting in the future. Please keep me posted on interesting things that are happening."

Respondent, Community College, Nova Scotia

"I would very much like to participate in the postal survey and focus group meetings. However, at the present time we are not actively involved in any specific PLAR activities, and as such I am not sure how valuable my input will be to the project…. While I do have clients who can benefit from PLAR, I make referrals to the more appropriate services."

Respondent, Labour Market Services, Manitoba Government

"…It began to become apparent to me that I wasn't knowledgeable enough to give valid answers, so I gave up."

Respondent, Business Sector, Ontario

"The Ministry does not do Prior Learning Assessment at this level, nor does it develop benchmarks. The individual institutions provide this service to the population. I therefore recommend that you send your questionnaire to each college on the attached list serve."

Respondent, Ministry Education and Training, Quebec

Outdated information contained within membership directories is a typical problem encountered by researchers. However, this error may have been compounded by confusion over the meaning and interpretation of PLAR roles and titles. For example, the term *"PLAR Co-ordinator";* it seems this term is used at provincial government level to describe an administrative and policy function. However, at community college level it is used to describe an advising, training and quality assurance role. This only became apparent to the researcher when the screening criteria were applied and may explain why some individuals did not respond to the screening survey. Of those who did respond to the screening survey it appears that only 44% practice within a structured policy framework for PLAR practice i.e. they meet the screening criteria. These findings indicate how relatively new the practice of PLAR is within Canada and may serve to strengthen the case for PLAR benchmarks in order to clarify roles and responsibilities for PLAR assessment.

Another reason for non-participation in the study might be that there is no common interest in defining the role of the PLAR practitioner. The use of occupational standards or benchmarks for the post-secondary curriculum is controversial (Chapter Three). Also, benchmarks are potentially threatening for faculty. It might be that some individuals are not ready to embrace this approach at present.

A further reason for non-participation might be that potential research subjects are already fatigued by requests to participate in PLAR studies. For example, one respondent from Newfoundland and Labrador and one from Nova Scotia asked how the screening survey and focus group work for the PLAR benchmarking study differed from the requirements of the cross-Canada study on PLAR[3]. The steering committee also noted that in recent times a number of PLAR-related projects requested information from a relatively small group of people.

THE BENCHMARKING PILOT

A focus group was held at the CAPLA conference in May 1998 (n=15) to determine the structure and content for a pilot PLAR benchmarking survey. Responses from this focus group were used to construct draft items for a pilot survey. In March 1999, these draft items were tested with two members of staff from the PLAR Centre in Halifax, two members of staff from the PLAR Centre in Manitoba, one PLAR practitioner from Alberta, one from British Columbia, one non PLAR practitioner from HRDC and all steering committee members (10). A total of 17 individuals were asked to comment on the

- face validity of the questionnaire items i.e. the TDLB benchmarks; and
- the clarity, structure and time it took to complete the questionnaire.

1. ***Face Validity*** - Overall, it was felt that questionnaire items were representative of PLAR functions within Canada e.g. the Director of the PLAR Centre in Nova Scotia stated

   "As far as I can see the questionnaire covers the objectives, activities and issues involved in being a PLAR Assessor."

   Practitioner feedback indicated that the terminology used within the TDLB benchmarks differed slightly from that used in Canada. In particular, use of the term *"portfolio"* in the UK is a specific reference to an individual's record of achievement and competence; it is therefore an exclusive, rather than an inclusive term. It was also suggested that the word *"outcomes"* be replaced by the word *"criteria"* as it was felt that use of the word *"outcomes"* over-emphasized PLAR for academic credit.

[3] *The Cross Canada Study is a retrospective, longitudinal study of PLAR activities in 7 pre-selected post-secondary colleges which reported in November 1999 (see "A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross Canada Study of PLAR).*

Feedback also indicated that within Canada the role of PLAR Adviser and PLAR Assessor are often seen as two separate functions. However, the respondent from British Columbia seemed to indicate there was a need to review this, and TDLB standards could be used as a benchmark to define the difference between *"new"* and *"old"* PLAR practice in Canada.

2. ***Clarity, Structure and Time Taken to Complete*** – No difficulty was reported with regard to completion of the questionnaire. It took the British Columbia respondent 15 minutes to complete all of the questionnaire items. The British Columbia respondent felt that the covering letter should contain more information on benchmarking. The respondent from the PLAR Centre in Manitoba felt that the information on benchmarking was adequate.

REFLECTIONS ON THE BENCHMARKING PILOT

It became apparent from this initial work that there is a need to identify how many PLAR Assessors there are in Canada, their age, gender, experience, credentials, how often they assess and where they are situated - both geographically and by occupational sector. In this way an occupational profile of the PLAR assessor can be constructed. This would provide baseline data for any further study into PLAR. This is important if valid generalizations concerning PLAR practice are to be made. Also it seems there is a need for a more strategic approach towards research into PLAR to ensure that objectives for implementation are timely and appropriate. This would reduce the potential for research fatigue among what appears to be a relatively small population for study.

It appeared that PLAR Practitioners within Canada either give advice to PLAR individuals, or assess PLAR individuals. They rarely undertook both roles. This approach towards PLAR has implications for the development of PLAR practice i.e. if the role of Adviser and Assessor is regarded as being mutually exclusive and PLAR Practitioners only carry out one particular role, this raises concerns regarding the validity of PLAR assessment.

For example, if PLAR Advisers never assess, how are they made aware of continuing requirements for a successful outcome i.e. how do they address issues relating to *content validity?* Similarly, if subject matter experts from educational institutions are the only Assessors, how are they made aware of ongoing developments in their field i.e. how do they address issues relating to *predictive validity;* for example, assessment of competence?

These factors may influence the outcomes of both formative (diagnostic) and summative (terminal) assessment, to the extent where PLAR Advisers and Assessors may only be addressing the *face validity* of individual evidence, rather than *content* and *predictive* validity. If this is so, then there is a prima face case for ensuring that PLAR Practitioners are competent in both advisory *and* assessment roles.

That is not to say that PLAR Advisers would necessarily assess the individual they have advised, although there are examples of this in the UK and in Canada (Chapter Two). Rather, organizations and/or faculty may wish to consider a team approach towards assessment and ensure there is an appropriate skill-mix of Advisers and Assessors in every department.

There seemed to be an imperative for the development of benchmarks for all PLAR roles, including those who train the trainers and those who provide quality assurance of assessment. This would lend clarity to existing roles and enable organizations to develop an appropriate and cost-effective skill-mix for PLAR assessment. Also there should be a standardized approach towards the quality assurance of PLAR assessment. Particular attention should be paid to the continuing development of PLAR Co-ordinators, PLAR Assessors and PLAR Advisers to ensure that any formative or summative assessment decisions can embrace both content and predictive validity.

THE BENCHMARKING SURVEY

Originally, the benchmarking survey was planned to take place in April/May 1999. However, the steering committee recommended an extension to this date in order to increase sample size. Consequently the benchmarking survey (Appendix Three) was administered at the end of the summer semester to both cohorts (n=91). A reminder to complete and return the questionnaire was mailed out two weeks after this initial contact; the reminder included an additional copy of the benchmarking questionnaire. An incentive was offered to research subjects to encourage completion and return of the questionnaire - any participant who returned the completed questionnaire on time had his or her name placed in a prize draw for one free registration at the next annual CAPLA conference.

Forty-three completed questionnaires were returned by the stated deadline (47%) - a response of 55% (24) for Cohort One and 44% (19) for Cohort Two. Given that the original deadline had been extended into the peak summer vacation period on the recommendation of the steering committee, the response rate for Cohort One was unexpectedly high.

The response rate for Cohort Two (44%) was not surprising. The benchmarking survey was primarily aimed at PLAR Practitioners who met the screening criteria. It would appear that the majority of subjects from this group had recognized this and excluded themselves from the study.

A small number of individuals who had completed and returned the survey were asked to comment on the structure and complexity of the questionnaire and the time it took for them to complete it.

The following comments were received.

> *"With all the reading it probably took about 3/4 hour to 1 hour. I did not find it too onerous an exercise and in fact it made me reflect further on my role in the process."*
>
> Respondent, University Sector, Nova Scotia

"Once I had thought about it, the questionnaire wasn't difficult to complete. It was quite clear and only took me about 10 minutes."

Respondent, Community College Sector, Ontario

"In answer to your questions regarding the questionnaire - I had no difficulty completing it. It took me approximately forty-five minutes to complete."

Respondent, Business Sector, Ontario

"I found this questionnaire clear, comprehensive and easily answered (not that I did it the way you asked - I circled "yes" and then explained it anyway!) Excellent - all the best."

Respondent, Community College, Alberta

Although these comments confirm the utility of the benchmarking survey, it should be noted that no test for internal consistency has been applied to the completed questionnaires.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Respondents to the benchmarking questionnaire were asked to consider whether the TDLB benchmarks accurately described their current practice. They were asked on a three point scale, to indicate "Yes" (it did), "No"(it did not), or if they were "Not Sure".

The results of the survey are expressed as percentages of those who agreed, disagreed, or were unsure as to whether TDLB benchmarks accurately describe their current practice. Percentages have been rounded up or down to the nearest whole number. The percentages were calculated from the raw data presented in Table Four and Table Five

Those who answered "No" or "Not Sure", were asked to explain the reasons for their disagreement or uncertainty. These comments are presented in the text, so that any specific differences can be explained and accounted for.

Participants were also invited to make changes to any of the wording contained within the TDLB benchmarks, so that any specific differences in the use of language can be identified. Only one respondent did this, his/her suggestions are also included in the text.

Table Four: Raw Data for Cohort One

QUESTION*	YES	NO	NOT SURE	TOTAL
5 - Key Purpose	15	5	4	24
6 - Function 1	16	5	3	24
7 - Function 2	16	5	3	24
8 - Function 1 Activity I	19	4	1	24
9 - Function 1 Activity II	17	3	4	24
10 - Function 1 Activity III	15	5	4	24
11 - Function 2 Activity I	16	5	3	24
12 - Function 2 Activity II	15	5	4	24
13 - Function 2 Activity III	15	6	3	24

*** Questions for the benchmarking survey are outlined in detail in Appendix Four**

Table Five: Raw Data for Cohort Two

QUESTION*	YES	NO	NOT SURE	TOTAL
5 - Key Purpose	7	4	8	19
6 - Function 1	10	7	2	19
7 - Function 2	11	4	4	19
8 - Function 1 Activity I	11	6	2	19
9 - Function 1 Activity II	7	8	4	19
10 - Function 1 Activity III	9	7	3	19
11 - Function 2 Activity I	9	7	3	19
12 - Function 2 Activity II	12	5	2	19
13 - Function 2 Activity III	9	6	4	19

*** Questions for the benchmarking survey are outlined in detail in Appendix Four**

THE KEY PURPOSE OF A PLAR ASSESSOR

> *"The key purpose of an assessor is to review progress and to assess achievement, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their education and training objective."*
>
> TDLB (1995)

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**62%**	**No 17%**	**Unsure**	**17%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**36%**	**No 21%**	**Unsure**	**50%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one agree that the key purpose (as stated above) is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

Respondents from cohort two also agree that the above statement is an accurate description of their role. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution as participants from this cohort do not actively practice PLAR i.e. they did not meet the screening criteria.

Comments received included

> *"The second part of the statement assumes the purpose is solely education and training. My clients may look for this, but many are looking at career changes, life-style changes, part-time retirement, etc."*
>
> Respondent, PLA Centre

Also

> *"Yes (I agree) when the assessor is working within the context of a corporate training and development structure, but it is best to have the individual as the focus of assessment – to realize their goals and objectives."*
>
> Respondent, Government Organization

These respondents are emphasizing the importance of personal development and formative or developmental assessment, for the individual. Other respondents have emphasized the importance of assessment for academic credit

> *"This is such a general and broad statement, it could mean almost anything. It would be closer if it read.... grant or gain an award of credit for previous learning toward their chosen education and training objective, such as a credential."*
>
> Respondent, University Sector

And

> *"If it meant that review progress and/or to assess achievement AGAINST A STANDARD – A LEARNING OUTCOME, then yes."*
>
> Respondent Government Organization, Policy Development (Cohort Two)

Also

> *"It may be intended within your statement, but the progress and/or assessed achievement needs to be completed against some kind of agreed upon standard, set of outcomes, competency statement."*
>
> Educator, First Nations (Cohort Two)

Others have emphasized the importance of assessment in preparing individuals for the professions.

> *"More than to review progress and /or to assess achievement. Perhaps this is due to the "newness" of PLAR in the academic scene. As of review progress/assess achievement I advocate for a fair equitable process. I educate colleagues about the possible robustness of PLAR assessment; I promote and market the idea to anyone who will listen."*
>
> Respondent from Professional Body, Nursing

Also

> *"Our purpose fits but would best be described as assessing achievement, so that individuals with the appropriate education and training can achieve their employment objective."*
>
> Respondent from Professional Body, Occupational Therapy (Cohort Two)

Respondents have indicated that PLAR in Canada is used in a variety of ways

- to assist with individual and personal growth;
- for human resource development;
- the preparation of professionals; and
- the achievement of academic credit.

In light of this feedback, the TDLB key purpose statement has been modified to capture each of the above elements of PLAR practice in Canada i.e.

> *"The key purpose of a PLAR Practitioner is to review progress and/or to assess achievements, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their personal development and/or education and training objectives."*

FUNCTION 1 - PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT

Cohort One:	**Yes 67%**	**No 21%**	**Unsure 12%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes 52%**	**No 36%**	**Unsure 10%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one agree that this function is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

Respondents from cohort two also agree that the above statement is an accurate description of their role. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution as participants from this cohort do not actively practice PLAR i.e. they do not meet the screening criteria previously outlined.

The following comments were received.

> *"In our situation, the assessor function is clearly separated from the preparation, or close knowledge, of the individual. We believe this separation aids in a dispassionate assessment process."*
>
> Respondent, University

> *"Currently my role involves assessing portfolio for credit – this includes an interview with the individual. The preparation for assessment is done by the college's PLAR facilitator."*
>
> Professor, Community College

> *"Assessment is done by someone who has not prepared the individual. If the individual is prepared by the same person who did the assessment then their assessment could be biased."*
>
> Respondent, Government Organization, Policy Development (Cohort Two)

These respondents are describing established practice for PLAR in public educational institutions, where the PLAR Facilitator or PLAR Coordinator has responsibility for preparation of individuals e.g.

> *"(The) Facilitator helps in application process/registration, subject outlines, referrals and portfolio development. (The) Assessor answers specific content questions."*
>
> Respondent, Post Secondary Education

Should benchmarks for PLAR Assessors become established in Canada, PLAR Facilitators and Co-ordinators might well express some concern about a potential erosion of their roles. However, in some post-secondary institutions in Canada the PLAR Co-ordinator has taken on a more differentiated and complementary role which relates to the quality assurance and development of assessment practice. This important role includes activities such as

- maintaining and submitting assessment documentation and records e.g. registration, induction plans, assessment plans, assessment and certification procedures, appeals procedures etc.;
- providing advice and supporting Assessors e.g. initial training of PLAR Assessors, trouble shooting, developing assessment methods and maintaining resources, the continuing professional development and update of Assessors, etc.; and
- monitoring assessments and ensuring consistency in the assessment process e.g. defining sampling frameworks, conducting assessor standardization meetings, monitoring individual needs of learners and equal opportunities for access to assessment.

Other respondents feel the Assessor does have a responsibility for preparing the individual. This may be a philosophical stance.

> *"My preference is to assist the individual with his or her own self-assessment. This is consistent with established principles and practices in adult education (andragogy)."*
>
> Respondent, Business and Industry

Or, it might be driven by demands for efficiency i.e. training departments in the private sector may not be as well resourced as community colleges and universities. Therefore the use of PLAR Facilitators, as well as Assessors, to prepare individuals for assessment may be regarded as unnecessary.

> *"The Assessor helps the individual prepare for his or her challenge examination through a mandatory 1 hour telephone consultation."*
>
> Respondent, Business and Industry

Increasingly, funding in the public sector is being rationalized. This could lead to a change in policy regarding allocation of resources for PLAR.

The following comments indicate how educational institutions and public organizations are beginning to develop new approaches to PLAR assessment

> *"...We would see ourselves providing information about resources available to serve this capacity. We could also see ourselves publishing clear guidelines/written materials to assist the individual in preparing for assessment."*
>
> Professional Body, Occupational Therapy (Cohort Two)

Clearly this approach toward individual preparation would be important for professional registration bodies as "one to one" preparation with a individual would not be feasible, due to the number of potential individuals involved.

The following comment appears to support a team approach towards PLAR.

> *"An Assessor may also be a preparer, but not necessarily so, and vice versa."*
>
> Educator, First Nations (Cohort Two)

FUNCTION 2 - ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**67%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**12%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**58%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**21%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one agree that this function is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

The majority of respondents from cohort two also agreed with this function. However, this result should be interpreted with caution as respondents have limited experience of

PLAR assessment. It is likely that responses to this item are the result of being a student or a faculty member, rather than the experience of being a PLAR Assessor.

Comments received include

> *"In my role as coordinator I prepare all students for assessment through interview, provision of a PLAR handbook. In some cases, if I am the only available content expert, I will do the assessment – it is not my preferred option."*
>
> Respondent, Social Work (Cohort Two)

This comment demonstrates the difference between espoused theory and the theory of practice. For example, previous responses from Cohort One and Cohort Two indicated that the preparation of individuals is undertaken by the PLAR Co-ordinator and assessment of individuals is undertaken by the subject matter expert – two different people. However, it would appear that this rule is modified when resources within the institution are deficient.

FUNCTION 1 - ACTIVITY I - Help The Individual To Identify Relevant Learning

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**79%**	**No**	**17%**	**Unsure**	**4%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**58%**	**No**	**32%**	**Unsure**	**10%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one indicate that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

The majority of respondents from cohort two also indicate that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. This result should be interpreted with caution, as respondents from this cohort have limited experience of PLAR assessment.

Comments from respondents confirm the role of the PLAR Co-ordinator/Facilitator e.g.

> *"The PLAR facilitator assumes this role at our college."*
>
> Professor, Community College

This may not be appropriate from a cost benefit point of view.

Further comment outlines the activities involved in helping the individual.

> *"This is done using problem-solving or other strategic questioning, review of any documentation/work experience, resume, etc., in a pre-screening session – more specific and intensive exploration conducted in concert with discipline experts in the faculty."*
>
> Assessment Co-ordinator, Community College

Also

> *"I am responsible for assisting learners to identify learning through providing general information on PLAR, portfolio development courses, referring to program PLAR advisers, exploring their work and life experiences and helping them document learning as part of the portfolio process. I am often the initial contact in the PLAR process. Activity "C" is covered off by a combination of PLAR facilitator and faculty input, particularly if PLAR is not well established in a program and faculty may need assistance from PLAR office."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College.

> *"The PLAR orientation book and information session introduce the individual to all components of the assessment process. This book includes sample test questions and a self-assessment section that can identify relevant areas for review, and orientates the individual to the type of assessment. Resources for review are suggested with the book."*
>
> Respondent Professional Body, Midwifery (Cohort Two)

These activities appear to be compatible with those outlined in the TDLB benchmarks.

FUNCTION 1 - ACTIVITY II - Agree To And Review An Action Plan For Demonstration Of Prior Learning

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**71%**	**No**	**12%**	**Unsure**	**17%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**37%**	**No**	**42%**	**Unsure**	**21%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one indicate that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

The majority of respondents from cohort two also indicate that this activity is not an accurate description of their current practice. Although the majority opinion is negative, this result has low validity as respondents have limited or no experience of PLAR assessment.

Comments received included

> *"We do help the individual out with how to obtain the evidence we need for assessment. Calling it an action plan seems too directive...."*
>
> Respondent, University (Cohort Two)

It is likely that an action plan for PLAR assessment is no more directive than the guidance given to students in university programs e.g. for written assignments or dissertations.

The following comments clearly demonstrate an attempt to address the content validity of individual evidence. However, the cost benefit of involving several other faculty members in preparing the individual, when the advice of the subject expert is the most valid, is doubtful.

> *"This is done in concert with the discipline expert as they can best decide which assessment strategy to use in their own subject area – the PLAR applicant is also apprised of the plan."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College

Also

> "*I do this with individuals who are involved in a portfolio development course, workshops or through individual advisement on the collection/documentation of evidence The action plan for individuals may have a challenge process identified by faculty as to how learning is to be demonstrated. The PLAR program advisers and assessors are often involved in this stage of PLAR activity. In many instances information packages are available for the learner to use in preparing evidence and/or preparing for assessments i.e. interview, skills demonstration, case study, projects, assignments, tests, etc."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College

FUNCTION 1 - ACTIVITY III - Help The Individual To Prepare And Present Evidence For Assessment

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**62%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**17%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**47%**	**No**	**37%**	**Unsure**	**16%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one indicate that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents from this cohort have a clear understanding of their role e.g.

> *"This varies according to the particular programs involved with PLAR. Some programs provide guidelines, handbooks or special PLAR instruction sheets. Other programs make faculty available for consultation while the individual is preparing evidence. Others may only give the criteria or testing topics and leave the individual to prepare independently."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College

Also

> *"This is done through individual advisement or portfolio development course/workshops and advisement. I provide individual advising with resource modules for development of a portfolio. The college also offers a portfolio development course, available in a classroom situation and through distance education..."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College

Forty-seven percent of respondents from cohort two indicate that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice, 37% indicate it is not. It would be inappropriate to draw any conclusions from this data as the number of positive and negative responses only differ by 10%.

FUNCTION 2 - ACTIVITY I - Agree To And Review An Assessment Plan

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**67%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**12%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**47%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**16%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one (67%) agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice, 21% indicate it is not, 12% are unsure. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents from this cohort have a clear understanding of their role e.g.

> *"Some but not all part of my current practice. However, as an assessor I was involved in the following activities a, b, c, d, e (not always options available), f (completed a student learning assessment agreement with learners)... g - learner provided with information re: ensuring authenticity and sufficiency…. f - usually the plans are developed on a course-by-course basis unless the learner is requesting significant credit in a program."*
>
> PLAR Facilitator, Community College

It is clear from this comment that the respondent has spent some considerable time undertaking a line-by-line analysis of the TDLB functions and activities presented in the benchmarking questionnaire.

Other comments included

> *"I agree with these indicators, they are part of my current practice. However, as I read through these indicators I realize that I don't always provide the individual with a written assessment plan. I do record the plan for the assessment for my benefit but will also document the same in the future for the individual."*
>
> Respondent Professional Body, Nursing

The majority of respondents from cohort two also agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. Although this result appears to support the findings from cohort one, it should be interpreted with caution as respondents have limited experience in undertaking PLAR assessment.

Other comments included

> *"Assessors who grant the credit do this. We only prepare individuals for this. It is sometimes difficult to obtain outcome information from colleges and universities so that students can know what kind of evidence to collect."*
>
> Respondent, PLAR Centre

This comment supports the concerns expressed about the validity of evidence for PLAR assessment.

FUNCTION 2 - ACTIVITY II - Judge Evidence And Provide Feedback

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**62%**	**No**	**21%**	**Unsure**	**17%**

Cohort Two: Yes 63% No 26% Unsure 10%

The majority of respondents from cohort one agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. This result appears to have a high degree of validity as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role.

The majority of respondents from cohort two also agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. However, this result has low validity as respondents for this cohort have limited or no experience of PLAR assessment. Most individuals know that judging evidence and giving feedback is a logical conclusion to the assessment process because they have experienced this as a student. Therefore, responses to this item are more likely to be intuitive than informed through practice.

Comments received included

> *"These indicators are part of my current role. However, I am unclear as to the intent of (d). This statement appears rather ambiguous."*
>
> Respondent Professional Body, Nursing

The performance indicator for (d) was subsequently found to have a typing error i.e. "*Only the criteria specified for each outcome* ***or criteria*** *are used to judge the evidence."*

This has now been corrected to ***"Only the criteria specified for each outcome or the agreed-upon criteria are used to judge the evidence."*** (see newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners, Chapter Six).

Other comments included

> *"I do not judge evidence but rather provide feedback upon evaluation or review of evidence. I don't agree with the term "judge" when describing a PLAR process – too harsh a word particularly if you are using this term in any PLAR outreach material. A prospective PLAR participant/learner may be concerned about "judging" his or her past knowledge or experience."*
>
> Respondent Business and Industry

This comment is interesting; it is the only example of a specific language difference that the researcher has found. Clearly the respondent describes an outcome which is consistent with TDLB activities i.e. a summative decision has to be made about the worth of an individual's evidence. However, the word *"judge"* seems to be culturally unacceptable to this individual. Other comments did not support this viewpoint.

> *"They (the assessors) are asked to score learning numerically based on criteria. In other words, they answer questions or respond to criteria with a ranking, a score for the evidence shown – against a statement about the qualities seen, or otherwise experienced. Once the assessor has made these specific* ***judgments*** *(researcher's underline)"…*
>
> Respondent, University

It seems likely that the previous comment regarding use of the word *"judgments"* is indicative of the general anxiety that many adult learners experience when their learning is formally assessed.

FUNCTION 2 - ACTIVITY III - Make an Assessment Decision Using Differing Sources of Evidence and Provide Feedback

Cohort One:	**Yes**	**62%**	**No**	**25%**	**Unsure**	**12%**
Cohort Two:	**Yes**	**47%**	**No**	**32%**	**Unsure**	**21%**

The majority of respondents from cohort one agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice. The validity of this result appears to be high as respondents are experienced in PLAR assessment and have a clear understanding of their role e.g.

> *"Activity (111) a - I can ensure that all evidence is available for the faculty expert and ensure (111) b. The Final decision is faculty 'experts'. I can advocate and ensure fairness. Yes definitely to all."*
>
> Respondent, Professional Body, Nursing

It is clear from this comment that the respondent has spent some time undertaking a line-by-line analysis of the TDLB functions and activities presented in the benchmarking questionnaire.

Forty-seven percent of respondents from cohort two agree that this activity is an accurate description of their current practice, 32% indicate it is not, 21% are unsure. It would be difficult to draw any conclusions from this data as the number of positive and negative responses only differ by 15%.

One respondent from cohort two indicated that the overall activity statement should be changed.

> *"Wording is awkward, a more precise statement would be: Determine whether credit will be granted through a review of all sources of evidence and provide feedback to the individual."*
>
> Respondent Government Organization, Policy Development (Cohort Two)

However, the suggested change excludes PLAR for personal growth and development, or for human resource development and assumes that all PLAR individuals only require academic credit.

FURTHER COMMENTS

From the comments received there seems to be a general agreement that TDLB benchmarks accurately describe the work of Canadian PLAR Assessors who took part in this study.

> *"I am keeping the TDLB supplement - since I did not revise it at all anyway. I*

think it is a comprehensive summary of the roles and tasks of assessors and would be excellent information for colleagues in assessment, and give faculty/administration a better understanding of the concept of PLAR."

Assessment Coordinator, Community College

Also

"As a former principal of one of the Toronto District School Board's reception and assessment centre, all of these steps outlined – purpose, function, activity were followed. Our purpose was to put in place a process to access the achievement of high school students entering our system for skills in numeracy and literacy. There was a defined culturally-specific preparation component and approach followed by a sequence of activities from which an assessment can be made, measured against some standard indicators. The process you have outlined is thorough, repeatable and can be replicated."

High School Principal

However, two respondents (n=91) who work with PLAR individuals in the area of personal growth and development have a concern that the TDLB benchmarks over-emphasize assessment for academic credit e.g.

"I have no conflict with the benchmark statements. However, they do reflect a bias towards educational institutions which have internal PLAR systems."

Respondent, PLA Centre

This is an interesting observation, given that the TDLB benchmarks were originally developed to support the NVQ framework (Chapter Two). The NVQ framework is vocational in its origin, and is based upon an occupational rather than an educational taxonomy. Employers, voluntary and charitable organizations, as well as post-secondary educational institutions can assess individuals for NVQs.

Nevertheless the concerns of these two individuals have been recognized in this study, particularly as PLAR for personal growth and development is such an important part of the adult learning continuum. Therefore, the following performance indicators from the TDLB benchmarks have been re-constructed

a *the Individual is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio of evidence;*

c *liaison with Assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio and maintains the Individual's confidence; and*

e *institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met.*

These are described in the newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian Practitioners as

a *the Individual is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio or other appropriate forms of evidence;*

c liaison with potential Assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio or evidence, and maintains the Individual's confidence; and

e any institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met.

In addition the emerging benchmarks for Canada emphasize use of the phrase "outcomes or agreed-upon criteria" to indicate the value of academic and other achievements e.g.

d opportunities are identified for the Individual to demonstrate outcomes where evidence from prior learning is not available.

TDLB (1995)

This is now described in the newly-emerging benchmarks (Chapter Six) as

d opportunities are identified for the Individual to demonstrate outcomes or agreed-upon criteria where evidence from prior learning is not available.

Finally, a comment was received concerning the potential application and use of PLAR benchmarks.

"I think there should be a national professional body and certification for (PLAR) counsellors and assessors."

Respondent, Government Organization

This issue is discussed in the next chapter.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The benchmarking survey confirms that the PLAR activities of Canadian practitioners who took part in this study are comparable to those outlined in the TDLB benchmarks. The survey also confirms that PLAR roles in Canada differ from the UK. It would seem that the issue for discussion is not what is practiced, but who practices it?

For example, within the public education and training sector in Canada, PLAR roles have developed into two diverse and disparate activities i.e. advising and assessing. This has been confirmed by one respondent who stated

"At one time my role involved assisting individuals in the preparation of their portfolios and with the assessment phase as well. When PLAR was more formally introduced into the college system my role changed to that of assessor and a PLAR Facilitator took on the role of assisting individuals prepare for assessment."

Professor, Community College

The stated rationale for this is to prevent any possible bias in the assessment process e.g.

"Assessment is done by someone who has not prepared the individual. If the

> *individual is prepared by the same person who did the assessment, then their assessment could be biased."*
>
> Respondent, Government Organization, Policy Development (Cohort Two)

However, in an attempt to prevent bias, some community colleges and universities may have created a paradox, where the validity and efficiency of PLAR assessment is now open to question.

This report is not recommending that Assessors should assess the individuals they advise, although there are examples in Canada where this is the case. Rather, now that PLAR has become established both as a concept and an educational process, it is suggesting that PLAR resources be used more efficiently and effectively**.** For example, a team of faculty-based PLAR Assessors, who are subject matter experts and able to demonstrate competence in PLAR advisory and assessment roles, could be developed. Members of this team could be responsible for assessing the PLAR advisory work completed by their colleagues. The PLAR Coordinator – who would become responsible for quality assurance and the development of the PLAR assessment process (as well as the training of Assessors), could oversee the work of the assessment team.

Such an approach would ensure that PLAR practice becomes integrated at faculty level. This is essential to the mission of adult learning and flexible assessment. Integration of the Adviser role at faculty level would prevent duplication of effort e.g. in preparing individuals, and would be a more efficient use of the total resources available for PLAR. Finally, the role of the existing PLAR Co-ordinator would be differentiated into one that is more appropriate to his or her level of expertise and understanding.

The adoption of benchmarks to support key roles within the assessment team will ensure that an appropriate skill-mix is designed and total quality assurance is maintained. The possible use and application of benchmarks to develop the assessment team is discussed in the next chapter.

Newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR practice in Canada can be found in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES

INTRODUCTION

> *"Much is to be gained by examining the experiences of our colleagues in these countries (Australia and the UK) - the pitfalls, the opportunities, the challenges – in order to apply that learning to a process of PLAR that is unique to Canadian culture and history."*
>
> CAPLA submission to HRDC (1999)

The previous chapter identified how newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR practitioners have been developed using UK standards as an external marker.

This chapter will outline how the focus group method has been used to cross-validate the outcomes of the benchmarking survey and to examine the policy application of benchmarks for PLAR within Canada.

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

Bulmer (1998) states that

> *"A focus group is best described as eight to 12 participants in a homogeneous group, using techniques to examine their discourse and formulations in order to discover their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions on a particular subject."*

Focus groups have also been described by Nyamathi and Shuler (1990) as

> *"A qualitative research method for gathering information which when performed, in a permissive non-threatening group environment...allows the investigation of a multitude of perceptions in a defined area of interest."*

Although the focus group has been used since the 1920s, its popularity has increased during the past 30 years. As a qualitative technique, it found its initial use in marketing research. More recently, the focus group interview has been used in sociological studies to explore the attitudes and needs of communities and by organizations to improve communication networks.

The relevance of focus groups for qualitative research has been identified by Sloan (1998), who states

- focus groups encourage a greater level of interaction between respondents;
- focus groups create an environment where sensitive topics can be discussed;
- group pressure inhibits individuals from providing misleading information;

- time/cost implications are less than they would be with other research methods; and
- focus groups enable the researcher to check various responses with other group members to confirm or contrast opinion.

Sloan (1998) argues that focus groups are particularly suitable for qualitative forms of research as they allow the exploration of a topic using the participants' own views and thoughts, in their own words.

Focus groups can also be used to explore the results obtained by other data collection methods (Kitzinger 1995). For example, in this study the results of focus group discussions will be used to cross-validate the outcomes of a postal survey of PLAR Practitioners.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The strengths of focus groups are summarized by Bulmer (1998), who states that they

> *"Provide data that is rich in human experience and a reflection of the real life and experiences of group members."*

Stycos (1981) indicates that the major advantage of focus groups is the spontaneous exchanges of ideas, thoughts and attitudes.

Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) indicate that "spontaneity "occurs when the respondents are stimulated by the topic and then begin to share their ideas and expose their feelings as the level of excitement increases within the group. In order to achieve spontaneity the researcher must provide a supportive environment, encourage all group members to share their views, facilitate interaction and summarize the discussion at various stages (Basch 1987).

However, Sloan (1998) indicates that the researcher may become so concerned with providing the conditions for spontaneity that it may be difficult for him or her to observe and record the outcomes of any discussions that occur. The use of a "schedule" will ensure that the researcher uses a systematic approach towards focus group activities. Also, the use of a tape recorder will help the researcher to capture the intensity and depth of group discussions.

The success or failure of the focus group process rests with the facilitator's ability to understand and manipulate interpersonal dynamics within the group. Behaviours such as monopolizing, remaining quiet (hiding) or devaluing comments are best managed by those who have experience and knowledge of managing group dynamics (Hisrich and Peters 1982).

It important to bear in mind that the facilitator will influence the interpersonal dynamics of the group. The facilitator must guard against putting words into people's mouths. Group members need to be managed to ensure that all members are included and that no one is isolated. The facilitator must also manage time without excluding participants, and encourage the mainstream discussion without losing the peripheral or fringe ideas from members.

The researcher must also minimize the impact of the "Asch-effect" (Atkinson et. al. 1993) i.e. that all ideas are voiced and explored, thereby minimizing the risk of compliance to the dominant contributions, which may limit group members' confidence in contributing ideas and discussion.

Finally, it is important to realize that focus groups can be time consuming to organize and run. They may also be expensive if group members' expenses need to be covered.

ANALYZING THE DATA

Bulmer (1998) and Sloan (1998) indicate that the analysis of data from focus groups is the same as analyzing qualitative data from other sources. For example, Bulmer (1998) has combined the use of focus groups with analytical techniques adapted from grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990), to produce one overall methodological approach called the "grounded focus group process."

Bulmer (1998) argues that this makes a useful combination as both techniques lend themselves to discourse analysis i.e. examination of language use and the assumptions underlying ways of talking and thinking about a topic. He also argues that by combining the two methods, the quality of the results is retained.

Bulmer (1998) states that the grounded focus group process is comprised of five stages

1. *Preparing focus group activities* - establishing the aims and identity of the group i.e. in this study focus groups will discuss the validity of TDLB benchmarks for PLAR practitioners. Group members will be PLAR practitioners who have been identified as having agreed to participate in this activity.
2. *Generation of labels* - a label is a statement, word, description or concept stated by members of the group. Labels are normally generated by private brainstorming, individuals then offering up their ideas for verification by the group.
3. *Collapsing the data* – a technique used to organize data generated by the group. Group members are instructed to pull together labels that members think are related in some way, in order to generate categories e.g. one might take the words car, bus, truck, train, plane and boat. Individually each word has its own meaning, but one could suggest the higher order label 'transport'. In this way transport could be a category heading and is more conceptual in nature.
4. *Maintaining links and connections* – exploration of relationships that may exist between categories. This establishes category groups whose properties have theoretical relationships to one another.
5. *Analysis and formulation* - the task of the focus group at this stage is to formulate an overall description of the problem they have considered, reflecting the ideas from the categories, the category groups and category relationships.

Sloan (1998) reports on the use of the nominal group technique as a basis for analyzing focus group activities. This procedure consisted of five stages which are described below.

1. Individual silent generation (private brainstorming).
2. Individual 'round robin' feedback (public brainstorming).
3. Group clarification of each idea (categorization).
4. Individual voting and ranking of each idea (analysis and prioritization of data).
5. Discussion of group consensus results.

Sloan (1998) also discusses the value of using thematic analysis to help clarify the results of group discussions.

Finally, Bulmer (1998) and Sloan (1998) state that it is important to indicate the impact of the group dynamic and to analyze the session in a way that takes full advantage of the interaction between research participants.

As a research method, focus groups appear to exist within the qualitative paradigm. Focus groups may be used as a primary research tool or they can be used to cross-validate other research methods. Researchers who utilize focus group methods attempt to discover the social reality of subjects.

Focus groups provide a unique opportunity for producing exciting qualitative data. The technique attracts face validity (Nyamathi and Shuler 1990) or trustworthiness (a research term used by Guba and Lincoln (1995) to replace the term validity in qualitative research) and is a reflection of the lived social experience (Fielding 1993, Guba and Lincoln 1985).

The focus group method is sufficiently versatile to be used in any number of settings to examine a range of views, perceptions and beliefs (DeWolf 1985, Nyamathi and Shuler 1990) providing that the safeguards and protocols for their implementation are agreed in advance.

DEVELOPING PROTOCOLS FOR THE PLAR BENCHMARKING STUDY

Initial Strategy

Originally, focus groups for the benchmarking study were planned for May/June, 1999. This was to ensure that the results of the benchmarking survey (originally planned for April/May, 1999) would inform the focus group work.

However, the steering committee twice recommended an extension to the return date of the screening and benchmarking surveys in an attempt to increase sample size. This meant that the original dates for the focus group work had to be re-scheduled for September, 1999.

At the request of the steering committee the return date for the benchmarking survey was extended to August, 1999. This meant that the results of the benchmarking survey would not be known until after the focus group work had been completed. Therefore, a new strategy to ensure that protocols for focus group work were “grounded” had to be planned.

Revised Strategy

Two one-hour discussion groups were held. The first was held at the 1999 CAPLA Conference held in Ontario (n=12). The second was held at the 1999 ACCC First World Congress of Community Colleges and Polytechnics held in Quebec (n=5). Abstracts for the discussion groups were circulated in advance via the conference agendas. In delivering these workshops the researcher made the following assumptions i.e. those participating would

- *have an interest in participating in, and/or influencing the outcomes of the study*. Those who had not had an opportunity to take part in the initial screening survey were given a copy of this and were invited to respond; and
- *be PLAR Practitioners i.e. Advisers, Facilitators, Co-ordinators or Assessors*. This was subsequently confirmed at the first workshop by the attendance register, which participants were asked to complete. However, in the second workshop, all participants were involved in PLAR at the policy level e.g. student representative committees (2), a college CEO, a policy adviser from government and a staff development adviser. These groups had a profile similar to the cohorts emerging from the screening survey.

An information package was presented and discussed at the beginning of each discussion group. This included

- an outline of the study and the research objectives;
- a briefing on the role and use of benchmarks in PLAR;
- a copy of the TDLB Benchmarks;
- a SWOT questionnaire (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats); and
- a copy of the Screening Survey.

Participants were informed that the facilitator would play a non-directive role and only answer questions relating to aims and objectives of the benchmarking study or to clarify the structure of the discussion groups.

In groups of four or five, each participant was asked to consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and potential threats associated with developing benchmarks for PLAR. Personal reactions were recorded on the SWOT questionnaire supplied in the information pack. These reactions were then offered up for discussion to achieve group consensus. The results of the group discussions were recorded on flip charts and presented orally to the facilitator and the rest of the group.

RESULTS OF THE INITIAL DISCUSSION GROUPS

The following is a list of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of using PLAR benchmarks, as recorded by participants of the initial discussion groups.

1. The Strengths of Using Benchmarks for PLAR

- Use of benchmarks will ensure that PLAR will become a defensible process.

- Provides a sense of reliability, equality and fairness.
- Improves accountability and transparency in the PLAR assessment process.
- Identifies what is possible, what is feasible, and what is acceptable.
- Ensures consistency of approach, particularly for workplace-based assessment.
- Will improve the rigour and fairness of the assessment process.
- Identifies the resources needed for assessment.
- Individuals will become more aware of requirements for assessment, thereby improving access to PLAR.
- Protects the rights of the learner.
- There will be more direction for faculty, thereby increasing confidence in the process.
- Provides a common understanding and communication between stakeholders.
- Identifies an ethical process for the PLAR professional.
- Improves mobility for the PLAR assessor within Canada.

2. The Weaknesses of Using Benchmarks for PLAR

- Potential cultural or class bias.
- The language and standard adopted may be inappropriate.
- Danger of a "cookie cutter approach" i.e. one size fits all.
- There is a potential conflict of interest if a PLAR practitioner advises and assesses e.g. see TDLB standard.
- Costly, will only happen if government funding is available or if employers e.g. community colleges can commit the resources.

3. The Opportunities for Using Benchmarks for PLAR

- There is little information on PLAR available – practitioners will welcome the direction that benchmarks can provide.
- Can provide a methodology and/or a process for adult learning e.g. learning in the workplace; the promotion of client-centred approaches to learning.
- Can assist in the accreditation and articulation process between institutions.
- Can be used as a basis for training and certification; this will lead to credibility and acceptance of the PLAR Assessor role.
- Benchmarks for PLAR may be transferable e.g. quality audit, workplace assessment, academic assessment.

- Can give credibility to what are traditionally known as “soft” skills e.g. employability skills by identifying a rigorous and consistent approach for assessment.
- Can motivate educational institutions to define curricula in outcomes-based language.

4. The Potential Threats of Using Benchmarks for PLAR

- The individual or the Assessor may see benchmarks as unrealistic expectations.
- Benchmarks may re-define the role of the PLAR practitioner – a potential threat for faculty.
- Assessors will come under greater scrutiny, especially if there is an appeal.
- There may be a demand for *“*perfection*”* by the purchasers and commissioners of education.
- Universities may reject any prescriptive process or “top down” approaches to certification of PLAR Practitioners e.g. from government departments.
- Traditional values and beliefs about assessment may well generate resistance e.g. a credential is only valuable if few people possess it.
- Potential bureaucracy of assessment e.g. UK and NVQs.
- Risk of reductionism i.e. there may be a “whole” which is overlooked.

FOLLOW-UP OF CONFERENCE DISCUSSION GROUPS

Those who participated in the initial conference discussion groups (n=17) were sent a copy of the outcomes of their discussion by electronic mail. They were asked to make further comment and observations, as appropriate. The following response was received

> *“I was surprised by two things in your report - that those attending seem to think PLAR is new, and that PLAR is costly. I'd say that PLAR is new only in the sense that the contest over it is heating up as it begins to invade spaces it has not occupied before. Those "new" to it have not accessed the information on it (i.e. the recently developed bibliography on line and in paper format, as well as several very good books). The cost factor is significant only if those wishing to use it try to invent it anew from the ground up, taking no advantage of the decades of experience already on record. The act of portfolio development and assessment can be quite simple and low-cost if those wanting to use it will just accept that there are lessons from past experience, processes that can be used, research findings that can be employed, etc. In making up a simple, straightforward assessment process, my own experience has been that "lack of information" and "high cost" concerns are often thrown up as barriers by those who either oppose or fear PLAR in one or more of its forms. I firmly believe, from experience, that a good portfolio assessment program can be set up in one day, using program development exercises that draw on the academic*

> *knowledge of faculty, professionals, students (as peers) and others. Most of the work and cost is about overcoming resistance to PLAR."*
>
> Respondent, University Sector, Ontario

The raw data collected from the initial discussion groups, and the follow-up, has assisted the researcher to construct a series of questions for use in focus group activities. These questions have been administered via a pre-focus group questionnaire, according to the instructions outlined in Appendix Five.

PROTOCOLS FOR FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES

The following roles and responsibilities were agreed upon by the Steering Committee.

1. Roles and Responsibilities

- Project Manager/Researcher to conduct focus groups.
- In Quebec a French-speaking consultant to conduct the focus group, this person will be briefed by the Project Manager.
- One steering committee member to attend as **participant** observer.
- Steering committee members responsible, through Project Manager, for planning and coordinating focus group activity.
- Steering committee members to submit an outline budget for this activity to the Project Manager.

2. Structure and Content

- Each focus group to last 2.5 hours.
- Each focus group to consist of 10 - 12 participants with a range of assessment experience.
- Each focus group to include participants from industry, professional bodies, community colleges, Universities and the Aboriginal Community.
- Focus groups will be unilingual.
- Each focus group to use a structured pre-focus group questionnaire (Appendix Four) plus group feedback through open discussion.
- Results of group discussions to be recorded on audio tape and on flip charts.

3. Incentives

- Lunch to be provided for participants.
- Participant's mileage to be paid at 37 cents per kilometer i.e. no reimbursement of air fares or accommodation.
- CAPLA to provide a certificate of attendance.

- Prize draw for one $50.00 CAD book token, with an equal chance for all focus group participants to win, except steering committee members and the researcher.

4. Timing and Venues

- Focus Groups to be held in September/October.
- Focus groups to be held in British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes and NewFoundland and Labrador.

Attempts were made to employ a French/English speaking consultant to undertake focus groups in Quebec. However, due to a labour dispute the Quebec focus groups could not be held as planned. At the request of the steering committee contact was made with Francophones (4) at the 1999 PLAR conference in Vancouver. These individuals were consulted about the benchmarking study and agreed to complete a translated copy of the pre-focus group questionnaire and to return their responses via a French/English speaking member of the group, who would translate the group's responses to the researcher. At the time of reporting no responses have been received from this group.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Table Six outlines the profile and numbers of those who attended the focus groups. Forty-five practitioners attended, of these 26 were newcomers to the study (Table Six, Z=26) i.e. they had not completed the screening or benchmarking survey.

Forty-five pre-focus group questionnaires were distributed, 42 were returned (93%). A content analysis of the completed questionnaires was undertaken in order to determine the main issues emerging. The results of this analysis were compared with audio tape transcripts and the "flip charts" completed by focus group participants. Audio tape transcripts were examined by the project steering committee to cross-validate the data analysis undertaken by the researcher. These transcripts are used in the text to illustrate the main issues emerging.

Table Six: The Structure of the Focus Groups

Province	Bus. & Industry	College	Govern.	Profession	University	Total	Z*
BC	2	3	2	1	1	9	8
MB	-	2	4	-	1	7	3
Maritimes	2	2	2	-	2	8	2
NF	1	2	2	-	2	7	7
ON	2	5	3	4	-	14	6
Total	7	14	11	5	6	45	26

Maritimes = NB, NS and PEI
* Had not previously completed the benchmarking survey (Z=26)

RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUP ACTIVITIES

What Are The PLAR Roles Of Focus Group Participants?

- 31% coordinate PLAR activities
- 29% advise PLAR individuals
- 20% coordinate, advise and assess for PLAR
- 7% advise and assess PLAR individuals
- 4% assess PLAR individuals
- 8% involved in policy development or research into PLAR

Thirty-one percent of respondents indicated that they coordinated PLAR activities, 29% indicated that they only advised individuals. If these practitioners do not assess, how do they become knowledgeable of the ongoing specialist or curricula requirements for assessment of learners? The issue of content validity for PLAR evidence and how this impacts on the efficiency of the initial advice given to individuals is discussed in Chapter Four.

Twenty percent of respondents indicated that they coordinated PLAR activities, advised and assessed individuals. Seven percent indicated that they advised and assessed individuals. Four percent indicated that they only assessed PLAR individuals. This finding supports the newly-emerging role for the PLAR practitioner in Canada. A role which now includes both advising and assessing. This issue is discussed in Chapter Four.

Do Focus Group Participants Carry Out Most Of The Functions And Activities Outlined In The TDLB BenchMarks?

- 33% carry out the advisory and assessment functions identified within the TDLB benchmarks
- 29% only carry out the advisory functions identified in the TDLB benchmarks
- 24% do not carry out the functions and activities identified in the TDLB benchmarks
- 14% of responses to this question were incomplete

The majority of respondents (62%) indicate that the TDLB benchmarks accurately reflect their own practice, either as an Adviser or an Assessor. This response was similar to the scores achieved for each item of the benchmarking survey (Chapter Four) and confirms that the TDLB benchmarks are a good indicator of the work undertaken by those who participated in this study.

Which Of The Functions And Activities Are Not Practiced By Focus Group Participants?

- 29% indicate they are engaged in PLAR research or policy development
- 35% are involved in advising PLAR individuals, rather than assessing
- 26% undertake both advisory and assessment
- 10% of responses to this question were incomplete

Twenty-nine percent indicate they are engaged in PLAR research or policy development e.g. at provincial government level. This in effect excludes them from learner-focused PLAR activities.

Thirty-five percent (35.8%) were involved in advising PLAR individuals, rather than assessing, as institutional or provincial guidelines prevented them from undertaking both advisory and assessment roles.

However, a large number of respondents indicated that they undertook both advisory and assessment functions either as part of a program team, or part of a faculty-led initiative (26.2%). This finding supports the discussion which identifies a team approach towards PLAR.

For clarity, and in order to eliminate any potential bias in the assessment process, it is suggested that roles within the team should be based on the performance indicators for the advisory and assessment functions outlined in the newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian practitioners (Chapter Six).

In What Form Should Emerging Benchmarks Be Developed?

The consensus was that any newly-emerging benchmarks should be used as a complementary set of generic standards for best practice in PLAR - on the understanding that employers, post secondary institutions, professional and trade associations and community-based PLA centres would continue to set their own individual criteria with regard to the selection, preparation and development of PLAR Assessors.

The benchmarks should be set out as a checklist to include function, skills and knowledge. They should build on standards already developed for PLAR (see Chapter One) and in the light of practice should be reviewed on a regular basis. To facilitate this, respondents felt that a variety of "packages" should be available to practitioners. For example, transcripts of the group discussion indicated

> *"They (the benchmarks) should be available in lots of different media. They should be interactive like checklists or workbooks or something which allows the individual to use it, rather than a plain document that you just have to read. The document should not be guidelines alone, but go with some sort of rationale document or a backgrounder that talks about the history of why the (benchmarks) are here, why (the benchmarks) are needed, why are guidelines important and what are the future plans for them? We also talked about the need for assessor kits, some sort of pre-packaged piece that the individual could use."*

Also

> *"We felt that a number of formats could be used. Online resources, plus a hard copy workbook. Formats that would be very accessible, easy to use and non-threatening - backed up with an annotated reference document which contained updates of current work. Although there would be some cost to development and implementation, the benefits would far outweigh this cost. Some of the benefits would be that assessor practice would be more consistent and also that the individual's experience would be more consistent. If there is a low cost attempt at doing it, then it might not be done well. If the cost is too high, it will fizzle out and people will not continue to use it."*

The value of "web-based" materials was emphasized

> *"The electronic format is favoured. The benchmarks should be fluid so that adaptation can be made. A hard copy doesn't get revised for 5 years – that is the reason why we chose to go electronic."*

Any funding for this type of development work would be considerable and is certainly outside the scope of this study. However, it seems feasible that the newly-emerging benchmarks could be published on the existing CAPLA "web site", at least until appropriate funding can be found for a fully maintained site which is dedicated to the implementation and development of PLAR benchmarks. The benchmarks should be published as a functional map (Chapter Two) and include the knowledge which underlies Assessor and Adviser performance.

With regard to the publication of a printed text, this is well within the scope of the benchmarking study. Respondents felt that it should be a quick reference guide, a *"how* *to manual"* with a self-assessment checklist. For example, transcripts from the group discussion indicated

> *"We thought that the most accessible and most useful would be a checklist approach so people could see whether they do it or don't do it. The checklist would be divided into the functions and sub-functions which relate to PLAR practice, whether it is assessment or whether it is advising.* ***It would include sample options, so that you could determine the most appropriate assessment format for a particular individual in his or her field.*** *We certainly thought that the checklist approach had a cost benefit, and that anyone could use it. It is a relatively non-threatening kind of format."*

However well intentioned, the idea expressed in the third sentence (bolded) would be almost impossible in a printed document, due to the number and diversity of occupations and professions which utilize PLAR in Canada. However, it would be feasible to develop this idea on a web site, each profession or association providing an example which could be accessed through the main menu.

With regard to the structure of any printed text, a more specific comment was recorded on a pre-focus group questionnaire

> *"I prefer the formats developed by Malcolm Day - these are concise and accurate and it is easy to construct a portfolio using these guidelines."*

The respondent is possibly referring to the PLAR Assessor guidelines developed for the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board (Day and Zakos, 1999b and c). Each describes an holistic outline of the Assessor's role which is cross-referenced to the TDLB benchmarks (Chapter One). Each identifies a "tool box" for use by workplace PLAR Assessors - including a Self-Assessment Grid, an Assessment Plan, a Learning Diary, an Assessment Log, Letter of Validation and an Assessment Record. Each explains the need for "triangulation" in assessment and addresses issues such as validity, reliability, sufficiency etc. Finally, each was tested and piloted with Assessors and learners prior to its acceptance by the CTHRB (Day 1999b). It is suggested that these and other Canadian publications, such as Fenwick and Parsons (1999) become a reference point for the PLAR Practitioner guide.

In What Form Might Benchmarks For PLAR Practitioners Be Disseminated?

Consensus was that the benchmarks should be promoted as a voluntary tool for the continuing professional development of PLAR Practitioners and Faculty e.g. transcripts of group discussions included

> *"The benchmarks could be seen as an issue for professional development i.e. they would be used more than if they were disseminated as something you (assessors) must do. We also suggested that they (the benchmarks) might down play the uniqueness of PLAR work. Instead they (benchmarks) should be seen as part of faculty's expertise in teaching learning and assessment, work that we all do and have done for a long time…"*

The following group felt that benchmarks have a value in helping the PLAR Practitioner to reflect on his or her own practice. This is a benefit which educational theorists often fail to recognize in their criticism of outcomes or competence-based education (Chapter Two).

> *"We thought they (the benchmarks) should be used as professional guidelines. We thought that maybe they ought to be a set of core or generic guidelines that can be used and considered in almost any setting. They (the benchmarks) would have a complementary or value-added benefit, so that if you are talking PLAR, you are talking the same concepts or guidelines or basic standards across the board, so that variations would no longer exist. …We talked a little bit on how this might help people to really step back and take a look at what they are actually doing right at the moment…."*

It was felt that the benchmarks should be used as a guideline rather than a prescription for practice. In this way the benchmarks could be disseminated in a collaborative way through provincial stakeholder groups, led by CAPLA. For example, transcripts from the group discussion indicated

> *"The group was uncomfortable with benchmarks being determined as the only rules that would apply to any government, provincial organization, institution or business. We did not want to see rules dictated. We would like to see uniformity brought into the situation, however we don't want to see rules dictated. We prefer the term guidelines."*

Also

> *"We felt it important to have a collaborative approach and that CAPLA play a lead role in soliciting a collaborative approach. We talked about the need for training sessions, and in terms of a process, by using various associations and existing PLAR centres. There needed to be a driving force and we felt that CAPLA could be that driving force."*

The "politics" associated with dissemination of the benchmarks were captured by the following group.

> *"How can you get something like this out to a number of people across the country who have various political agendas, small p, big P, labour, business, industry, institutions, etc. We thought you had to do something in terms of common non-threatening language. We can't use any of those words that are value-laden. We also thought you needed to have some kind of a group that had*

credibility to offer these (benchmarks), but to offer these as something you may want to choose to use, if you choose to do PLAR. We thought it could be CAPLA in partnership with HRDC, in partnership with the Conference Board of Canada, in partnership with groups that had some kind of recognized credibility factor. We thought it was important to remember that education in Canada is a provincial responsibility, so the federal government can't come out and dictate on this because the provinces would get up in arms about that. So all of those realities are central here. It has to be a very tentative, very gentle, very non-threatening offer to those who wish to use them (the benchmarks)."

The interests of one provincial group of PLAR practitioners are highlighted in the following transcript.

"In BC there is a code that everyone adheres to, now what is it called? (question from a group member to the whole group). Institutions adhere to these guidelines and so the benchmarks (arising from this study) would need to be a guideline, as opposed to the BC code, which is provincially mandated. They (the benchmarks) could take the form of a training package."

The British Columbia (BC) Code of Practice (Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, 1999) is presented in Chapter One. A close inspection of this will reveal its true purpose i.e. it is organizationally-focused, whereas this study is concerned with PLAR benchmarks for client-focused activities. Practitioners involved in this study indicate that previous national and provincial guidelines lack definition i.e. they have been written as a series of general statements and principles, rather than definitive standards or benchmarks for practice. It is clear that any benchmarks emerging from this study, together with the BC guidelines, can be used in a complementary way to pin-point organizational and practice issues.

One example of this type of approach is the work undertaken by the Open Learning Agency (OLA) in BC, who have developed a post-diploma assessor qualification which meets BC guidelines for PLAR practice and also utilizes international benchmarks or occupational standards as a basis for assessment of PLAR practitioner competence[4].

The OLA standards include a reference to the external benchmarks used in this study (TDLB, 1995). This has been recognized by focus group participants in BC who have indicated

"(Presenter). The process outlined in these benchmarks is very similar to our own process, but the language is dissimilar. In BC the language tends to be much more simplified.... Is simplified a good term? (Another participant) ...Yeah!... the language is simplified...not the process..."

The TDLB standards were originally developed for the UK NVQ system (see Day, 1996). However, there are no NVQs within Canada. So functional analysts in BC have been able

[4] *Personal Communication by E-Mail with Lurline Langbell. Open Learning Agency November 2, 1999 5 pm*

to utilize the work of the TDLB (1995) without following UK protocols for occupational standards development (Chapter Three). Hence the language used in BC is less complex than the language used in the UK. Having said this, assessment processes in the UK and BC are very similar (as observed by the focus group participants). It would appear from this finding that it is possible to develop benchmarks for PLAR which transcend cultural or political biases.[4]

> *"We think they should be delivered in all forms, in as many vehicles as possible and through trainers at national conferences. Benchmarks coming down from HRDC may not be as well received. Coming in an information package which could be compared to other benchmarks in BC and Canada i.e. the educator/facilitator package from C2T2 and the assessors certificate would be helpful to make a comparative analysis. A web site inventory of other benchmarking (in PLAR) that's been done in Canada. Concern was raised about making the guide too complicated (the PLAR practitioners guide), that it should be simple."*

Standards and guidelines developed by CAEL in the USA, the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology in BC, the CLFDB (as well as the benchmarks emerging from this study) have been included in this report so that PLAR Advisers and Assessors can make comparisons, draw appropriate conclusions and apply these to their own practice.[4]

How Might PLAR Benchmarks Be Used To Develop Those Involved In PLAR?

Consensus indicated that benchmarks can be used as a quality assurance tool to develop organizations involved in PLAR. For example, transcripts from group discussion indicated

> *"We would market the benchmarks as a tool to ensure the quality of PLAR performance in organizations. The benchmarks would provide the basis for the training and the certification that is necessary for those practicing PLAR. It would be credible because it would be developed and validated by those who do the job by the practicing assessors and advisers.* ***I think the importance of this benchmarking study is that it is the "doers" who are saying what we should be doing and to me that is very important, it has a ring of credibility to it.***

The latter part of this transcript (bolded) was thought to be very important, as it was felt that any attempt to impose standards which were not "grounded", would be resisted by Practitioners.

[4] *Personal Communication by E-Mail with Lurline Langbell. Open Learning Agency November 2, 1999 5 pm*

Further discussion highlighted the importance of developing benchmarks to ensure a consistent approach towards the PLAR process.

> *"...We think it (benchmarks) should be part of the quality management of the institution They are the ones who are responsible for this. Benchmarks could ensure consistency in sister institutions."*

Also

> *"The benchmarks could also be used to review organizational aims for PLAR e.g. through development seminars or policy documents. Organizations would have committees that would use the guidelines for development of their own personnel. We thought it really important that practitioners be knowledgeable about PLAR and not just decide that this is the latest fad and take it on and do it. We started to get into what is the pre-requisite learning or pre-requisite knowledge that people should have in order to go on and become a qualified PLAR adviser or assessor."*

And

> *"They (the benchmarks) can facilitate a level playing field for the PLAR user, particularly for someone who is dealing with more than one institution – which is becoming more and more common particularly with distance education. Can provide a common language for users in industry and education. We talked about the advisers and assessors, not always separated, but that these functions should be explicit. Sometimes an individual who does both needs to make a decision about what is needed and at what point. We need to be clear about functions in each of these roles. We had a discussion about "big A" adviser as opposed to a "little a" adviser... (sustained laughter from the whole group)... basically a "big A" adviser is a designated assessor who also does advising, but a "little a" adviser can't be an assessor."*

It would appear from this comment, that a new role for the PLAR Practitioner in Canada is emerging. This is confirmed by the results of the benchmarking survey.

The value of benchmarks for continuing professional development has been discussed and reiterated in the following transcript.

> *"The benchmarks would be a valuable resource for organizations, because they would be better trained and have more organized rules for their employees. It could also be used in PLAR as a self-assessment tool. We talked about something which MPLAN (the Manitoba PLAR Network) has planned for the Spring, where we will be having a presentation on the benchmarking study, then having an interactive session discussing the results and the implications for PLAR practice. At this meeting we will also be reflecting on our own practice, to self-assess where we are and come up with an action plan of what it is we need to do in order to reach the standards (emerging benchmarks)."*

Also

> *"The benchmarks could be used as a self-assessment tool by practitioners and*

assessors to clarify their role and to ensure they are keeping up to date in their field. The benchmarks could be a certification tool for the individual practitioner. They could be used as a certification tool for assessors as individuals or as part of a team i.e. a team of assessors in PLAR. The benchmarks can also be used to educate management in allocation of resources for PLAR."

The importance of self-assessment and peer feedback in developing the PLAR Practitioner has also been reiterated.

"There is also that element of self-assessment by the assessor to reflect upon their practice. To identify how well they are doing, where the gaps are and what is it they need to learn to improve what they are doing. There is also the element of peer feedback from the people with whom you work so that you can have a sense of the areas in which you need to improve. There is a certain amount of responsibility and accountability for assessors in maintaining the standards (benchmarks). There is also the performance management element, to have better assessors and to have ongoing opportunities for learning."

Benchmarking is a continuous search for best practice, which can lead to superior performance and the achievement of excellence (Chapter Four). The importance of using newly-emerging benchmarks as a baseline on which to develop PLAR practice through an ongoing process of reflection, review and further refinement, cannot be over emphasized.

How Might Benchmarks For PLAR Be Used As A Credential For Those Involved In PLAR?

Overall, consensus opinion indicated that emerging PLAR benchmarks should be used as a credential for PLAR Practitioners to ensure that

- the mobility of PLAR Practitioners can be assured;
- existing programs of teacher education are contemporary in their outlook;
- existing programs of teacher/assessor education are producing practitioners who are fit for purpose; and
- the quality of PLAR process can be maintained.

However, there were reservations about the development of a specific credential for PLAR Practitioners.

"Credentials are a good idea, but they cannot be an idea that is forced upon people and something that is compulsory across Canada, because it won't go. So we felt that if people were going to get this credential and be certified as a PLAR practitioner, then it needs to begin with people who want to do this. If we did this, we would need to ensure quality so that it would build the masses, and people would say, "Hey, this is a good credential". I want my college to have qualified assessors, and I want to hang my shingle out and be able to say that

they can meet the standards set out in the benchmarks. We talked about the credential being non-compulsory and perhaps always being non-compulsory for practitioners, but that people would see the need. If it were nationally recognized then theoretically someone could move from province to province with this credential and be accredited for it. It (the credential) could be in an adult education program as a specialization or as an "add-on." It would be good practice for the credential to be integrated into an adult education training program."

Examples of the use of benchmarks or occupational standards as a complement to existing education programs to ensure the fitness for purpose of Practitioners are discussed in Chapter Two.

There was a concern expressed about the potential for bureaucracy.

"We didn't think that a credential was a good idea. Our decision was based on a discussion about risk. What risks are we talking about here? Whose interests are we talking about? Are we talking about the interests of Assessors? Or are we talking about the interests of individuals being assessed? If we are talking about the interests of the individual being assessed, what is the piece we are trying to protect and will credentials protect that? Or are we moving into another piece of bureaucracy around how we credential or create certification processes? We might create unintentional barriers or systems like the regulatory colleges. So the idea of credentials is a bit premature, we don't want one more system that doesn't work."

This point is well made, given the bureaucracy of the UK NVQ system.

However, in order that PLAR can be integrated into existing education systems, there is a need to make the PLAR process more open and explicit. This issue was recognized by one group who stated

"If business or industry knew that benchmarks existed it would encourage them to form partnerships and to work with us (educational institutions), but it would be really important that business and industry knew that assessors were current and contemporary in their practice. We tended to think that a credential would help, because although faculty feel competent in doing it (PLAR), it should be made public that PLAR assessment decisions meet the same scrutiny and quality and standards as any other assessment decisions."

Another concern about the development of a credential for PLAR was meeting the requirements of business and industry in Canada.

"How can you develop an umbrella credential that is going to meet the requirements of industry specific recognition? Well, we looked at a collection of subjects that could be dealt with that related generically to PLAR, things like adult learning principles, preparation for PLAR, decision making, interviewing skills - the ones that relate across the board. But in addition we thought it

necessary to add the specific requirements of industry."

In the UK, for example, NVQ assessors need to demonstrate that they meet TDLB benchmarks as well as being occupationally competent, so that valid assessment decisions are being made. This is an important consideration for PLAR Assessors who may not be up to date with recent developments in their occupational field or in PLAR.

With regard to the importance of establishing PLAR Practitioner competence, the following comment was made.

> *"The benchmarks could act as a guide to developing an accreditation program for the PLAR practitioner. Before an assessor becomes involved in PLAR they should go through a formal course on assessment of prior learning technique. There is an assumption that those who work in adult education already have these skills, but I would be happier if faculty took the assessment course in the vocational education program, than talk about multiple choice exams (sustained laughter by the group)."*

Although the achievement of a PLAR credential might establish the competence of a novice to practice, it does not address the issue of continuing competence to practice or the issue of competence decay. It was for this reason that many participants saw the value of benchmarks in establishing a framework for continuing professional development, rather than as a specific credential for the PLAR Practitioner. For example

> *"We have an education system here which is not a national system. However if professional bodies and associations used the benchmarks for self–assessment and professional development as we have described, then I could see a ground swell occurring. If, on the other hand, you just say we now have a new credential, then I am not sure we will get the same buy-in or the same process occurring."*

Others were concerned about maintaining quality, as well as establishing individual competence. For example,

> *"I was questioning this whole area of a credential, until I was informed that there were people who called themselves PLAR consultants, but have never done a PLAR assessment, or have never been a PLAR adviser before. That made me realize that a credential is important, as it confirms the competence of the individual to do these things… (Another group member)… but I think a credential has a lot of merit as it raises the stakes i.e. if it becomes known that you have certified PLAR assessors at one institution and you don't at another, then I think consumers will begin to drive the process."*

Also

> *"… even though we can't force the credential, we could work with someone like HRDC- the Federal Department who spends most on PLAR work and convince them that they shouldn't hand out any more money for projects until they know that the consultant has a valid credential in PLAR - just as a little bit of an assurance that they are not going to give someone $200,000 to do PLAR work*

who doesn't really know anything about PLAR."

Finally, the importance of a credential for quality assurance has been recognized.

> *"We accepted in principle the notion of credentials, but we had a number of big issues that went along with this. Using the example of ISO9000 we thought that people might be coming in and looking at our practice, and we thought who would be the body that was going to do this? A professional organization would not take too kindly to someone coming in and saying given this criteria you are doing a rotten job. We didn't want it to become mechanistic or too rigid, given the nature of PLAR we wanted it to have a kind of flexibility. Then we came to the conclusion that we were looking at quality assurance rather than a legislative control issue."*

Who Should Be Responsible For Validating The Practice Of PLAR Practitioners?

Consensus was that there should be a non-government, practitioner-based organization which should be responsible for the quality assurance of PLAR Practitioner training, as well as non-mandatory validation of PLAR practice. For example, the following transcript indicated

> *"We did see CAPLA (as the validating body) with provincial partners because I believe there is that aspect within its structure (i.e.) they have the potential to develop the credibility and profile for umbrella recognition of PLAR assessors and advisers. Our feeling is that the government does not want to be involved in regulating. Typically there is an expectation that professional associations will self-regulate, and it would be up to the individual to decide whether he or she just needed guidelines or whether he or she wanted accreditation."*

Also

> *"We have enlarged further about the role of CAPLA as a central resource but a two–way resource, not just in disseminating information, but maybe taking a look at what they could provide in terms of education and training. We also talked about the concept of an external review, where maybe an external person or body (e.g. CAPLA) can take a look at it (the PLAR process) and maybe say well here are the pros and cons on that - the sort of support mechanisms that acknowledge individual professionalism."*

Further discussion began to reveal a strategy for validation. For example,

> *"The professional body, I guess CAPLA, plays a really important role in terms of determining what the code of practice should be and also offering a form for developing best practice. There needs to be accountability. There has to be a way to assess, measure, check back and validate. That process has to be in place, otherwise it's going to be all over the map. There seems to be two roles in the validation process. The role of government to make these standards recognizable and public, also the role of CAPLA who would have the*

> *professional ability to say these are best practices in PLAR, and these are the standards which we uphold."*

Also

> *"We talked about a need for validating agents or validating peer groups, whatever we want to call them, to validate skills and abilities, and in order to have that, and to make it quality practice, we would need to have buy-in from all of the provinces. The national group, and maybe it is CAPLA, would provide the guidance and training for those validating agents in the different provinces, almost like an accreditation. We talked about the credential meaning the same thing across Canada, so we had to ensure that the quality of who was assessing and validating was at the same level. Otherwise the whole certification process would be meaningless. Something like this would need to build a mass in order to gain credibility for the benchmarks, the training and the certification to ensure that there were quality advisers and assessors. We actually had a little plan, although we didn't draw it, of who would be here, how the provinces would tie in and who could certify and then who could provide the training for people to reach that certification, because there are going to be people who can do the certification with little training."*

Further comments were more specific in their direction. For example,

> *"There needs to be a national body, which there is – CAPLA, which needs to take on a monitoring role on a global or national concept. We also suggest that there should be a provincial or governing body to monitor the institutions involved with the guidelines or benchmarks. They would work with CAPLA through a provincial association or chapter of CAPLA. For example, the CTHRB envisioned that individuals would not receive credential, or accreditation or qualifications. Rather institutions or trade unions or professional organizations would actually have to apply to be passed as a PLAR crediting board. So before you could even give PLAR to a carpenter, nurse or whatever, your organization would actually have to receive accreditation from a national body."*

Both the researcher for the PLAR Benchmarking Study and the President of CAPLA are very familiar with this type of approach, as they have developed and evaluated national policy guidelines for approval of CTHRB Validating Agents. Based on this experience the researcher recommends this approach as one example of a non-mandatory or voluntary mechanism for validation of PLAR Practitioner competence (Chapter Six).

SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined and discussed the consultation process which was undertaken to examine the policy application of newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners in Canada. A SWOT analysis has confirmed the strengths and opportunities for using benchmarks for PLAR in Canada.

Responses from focus group participants have established the validity of the newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR practice. Focus group participants have also confirmed the newly-emerging role of the PLAR Practitioner in Canada. Focus group participants have also given their advice on how a Canadian PLAR Practitioner guide might be developed. Fundamental to the development of this guide is the need to include a self-assessment tool for professional development which will encourage reflective practice and an holistic approach towards assessment.

Finally, focus group participants have identified a possible mechanism for non-mandatory validation of Assessor competence. As a consequence, a detailed policy for validation of PLAR training organizations has been developed by the researcher. These are briefly outlined in the next chapter as an example for both CAPLA and HRDC to consider.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will

- outline the advantages of using PLAR benchmarks, as defined by Canadian Practitioners;
- present newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners and the holistic framework in which they have been developed;
- outline an example mechanism for validation of the competence of the PLAR Practitioner;
- discuss the strengths and limitations of the PLAR Benchmarking Study; and
- present the conclusions and recommendations of this study.

INTRODUCTION

The aims and objectives of the benchmarking study are outlined in Chapter One. In meeting these aims and objectives the following outcomes have been achieved.

1. A review of the outcomes-based approach to learning in Australia, United Kingdom and Canada, the context in which this approach is emerging, the tensions arising and how they are being resolved by post secondary institutions.
2. An overview of the diversity of PLAR practice in Canada and the emerging issues. (Chapters Two and Three). Case study presentations include
    - across-Canada PLAR initiative for the technology professions;
    - the development towards a national tourism learning system;
    - a focus on health and human service programs in two provinces;
    - a focus on the role of post-secondary institutions in two provinces; and
    - a focus on community-based PLAR in two Canadian communities.

This overview is not meant to be a complete picture of what is occurring in Canada but presents several case studies to demonstrate a variety of approaches.

3. A review of the benchmarking process and a report outlining the development of emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners.
4. A SWOT analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for using PLAR benchmarks in Canada.
5. The recognition of emerging benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners in Canada.

6. An example of a mechanism for validating the competence of PLAR Practitioners. This is based on feedback received from focus group participants.
7. Discussion of the development of a comprehensive policy for the establishment of PLAR training organizations in Canada. On the advice of the steering committee a suggested framework is included in this chapter. (Figure Eleven)
8. Recommendations for the development and dissemination of a printed text-based guide for Canadian PLAR Practitioners have been made. The practitioner guide will be published separately from this report.

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING BENCHMARKS FOR PLAR

PLAR Practitioners in Canada have indicated the advantages of using PLAR benchmarks. They

- ensure that PLAR will become a defensible process;
- provide a sense of reliability, equality and fairness;
- improve accountability and transparency in the PLAR assessment process;
- identify what is possible, what is feasible, and what is acceptable;
- ensure consistency of approach, particularly for workplace-based assessment;
- improve the rigour and fairness of the assessment process;
- identify the resources needed for assessment;
- make learners become more aware of requirements for assessment, improving access to PLAR;
- protect the rights of the learner;
- provide more direction for faculty, thereby increasing confidence in the process;
- provide a common understanding and communication among stakeholders;
- identify an ethical process for the PLAR professional; and
- improve mobility for the PLAR Assessor within Canada.

NEWLY-EMERGING BENCHMARKS FOR CANADIAN PLAR PRACTITIONERS - AN HOLISTIC FRAMEWORK FOR QUALITY PRACTICE

This study is concerned with the development of benchmarks for four of the CLFDB standards (7, 8, 9, 10), and for the principles of the BC PLAR code which cover *“learner orientation”* and *“professional development”,* (Chapter One). When implementing the benchmarks emerging from this study it is recommended that organizations consider both the CLFDB standards, and areas E and F of the BC Code of Practice as an appropriate philosophy and context for PLAR practice. In this way the need to maintain a common standard as well as an holistic approach towards PLAR practice can be fulfilled.

THE KEY PURPOSE OF THE PLAR PRACTITIONER

This study has found that the key purpose of the PLAR Practitioner in Canada is to

> *"review progress and/or assess achievements, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their personal development and/or education and training objectives."*

The key purpose recognizes the range and diversity of PLAR in Canada. This includes

- assisting individuals with their personal growth and development;
- human resource development;
- the preparation of professionals; and
- assessment of individuals for academic credit and occupational certification.

EMERGING ROLES FOR PLAR PRACTITIONERS IN CANADA

This study has found that the main functions and activities of the PLAR Practitioner's role is to

prepare the individual for assessment. This may include the following activities

- *help the individual to identify relevant learning;*
- *agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning; and*
- *help the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment.*

assess the individual. This may include the following activities

- *agree to and review an assessment plan;*
- *judge evidence and provide feedback; and*
- *make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.*

PLAR Practitioners in Canada carry out both of these functions, more recently as part of a team approach towards PLAR assessment. Practitioners should be made aware of the potential conflicts and biases which exist when undertaking both roles but they should also be encouraged to develop competence in both advisory and assessment functions, so that the *content validity* and *predictive validity* of PLAR evidence can be addressed.

INDICATORS FOR PRACTICE

The performance indicators relating to each of the functions and activities of the PLAR Practitioner are outlined below. They have been developed from the UK TDLB standards (after extensive consultation) to ensure that the culture, context and diversity of PLAR practice in Canada has been appropriately captured. For example, the term *"outcomes"* was inserted to replace the phrase *"Units, Elements and Performance Criteria"* - specific terms used in the UK which only relate to NVQs. They are inappropriate for

Canadian Practitioners. The italics reflect the changes made to the TDLB benchmarks, based on feedback from community-based PLAR centres in Manitoba and Halifax.

FUNCTION 1 - PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT

Activity (I) Help the Individual to identify relevant learning

- a The ***individual*** is given clear and accurate information about the reasons for and methods of, collecting and presenting evidence of prior learning.
- b The ***individual*** is encouraged to review all relevant and appropriate experience.
- c ***Outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** which the ***individual*** may currently be able to achieve are accurately identified from a review of their experience.
- d The way in which support is given encourages self-confidence and self-esteem in the ***individual.***
- e If the ***individual*** expresses disagreement with the advice offered possible alternatives are explained in a clear and constructive manner.

Activity (II) Agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning

- a The ***individual*** is given accurate advice and appropriate encouragement to enable him or her to form realistic expectations of the value of his or her prior learning.
- b ***Any outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** to be achieved are appropriate to the ***individual's*** prior learning and future aspirations.
- c Advice to the ***individual*** accurately identifies ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** which might reasonably be claimed on the basis of prior learning.
- d Opportunities to use evidence from prior learning are accurately analyzed.
- e The ***individual*** plan agreed to identifies realistic targets to collect and present evidence of prior learning as efficiently as possible.
- f The ***individual's*** motivation and self-confidence is encouraged throughout.
- g If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the ***individual*** are explained clearly and constructively.
- h The plan is reviewed appropriately with the ***individual.***

Activity (III) Help the Individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment

a The ***individual*** is provided with suitable support to prepare a portfolio ***or other appropriate forms of evidence.***

b Guidance provided to the ***individual*** during evidence preparation encourages the efficient development of clear, structured evidence relevant to the ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria being claimed.***

c Liaison with ***potential*** assessors establishes mutually convenient arrangements for review of portfolio ***or evidence***, and maintains the ***individual's*** confidence.

d Opportunities are identified for the ***individual*** to demonstrate ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** where evidence from prior learning is not available.

e ***Any*** institutional documentation, recording and procedural requirements are met.

f If there is disagreement with the advice given, options available to the ***individual*** are explained clearly and constructively.

FUNCTION 2 - ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL

Activity (I) Agree to and review an assessment plan

a Any possible opportunities for collecting evidence are identified and evaluated for relevance against the ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** to be assessed and their appropriateness to the ***individual*****'s** needs.

b Evidence collection is planned to make effective use of time and resources.

c The opportunities selected provide access to fair and reliable assessment.

d The proposed assessment plan is discussed and agreed with the ***individual*** and others who may be affected.

e If there is disagreement with the proposed assessment plan, options open to the ***individual*** are explained clearly and constructively.

f The assessment plan specifies ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria*** to be achieved, opportunities for efficient evidence collection, assessment methods and the timing of assessments.

g Requirements to assure the authenticity, currency, reliability and sufficiency of evidence are identified.

h Plans are reviewed and updated at agreed-upon times to reflect the ***individual's*** development.

Activity (II) Judge evidence and provide feedback

a Advice and encouragement to collect evidence efficiently is appropriate to the ***individual's*** needs.

b Access to assessment is appropriate to the ***individual's*** needs.

c The evidence is valid and can be attributed to the ***individual.***

d Only the ***agreed-upon criteria and/or outcomes*** are used to judge the evidence.

e Evidence is judged accurately against all the relevant ***outcomes or agreed-upon criteria.***

f When evidence of prior learning is used, checks are made that the ***individual*** can currently achieve the relevant ***outcome or agreed-upon criteria***.

g Evidence is judged fairly and reliably.

h Difficulties in authenticating and judging evidence are referred promptly to the ***appropriate person(s).***

i When evidence is not to the agreed standard, the ***individual*** is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.

j Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the **individual's** needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.

Activity (III) Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback

a The decision is based on all of the relevant evidence available.

b Any inconsistencies in the evidence are clarified and resolved.

c When the combined evidence is sufficient to cover the ***outcomes or the agreed-upon criteria*, ** the ***individual*** is informed of his/her achievement.

d When evidence is insufficient, the ***individual*** is given a clear explanation and appropriate advice.

e Feedback following the decision is clear, constructive, meets the ***individual*'s** needs and is appropriate to his/her level of confidence.

f The ***individual*** is encouraged to seek clarification and advice.

g Evidence and assessment decisions are recorded to meet any ***PLAR audit requirements***.

h ***Any*** documentation is legible and accurate, stored securely and referred promptly to the next ***appropriate*** stage of the recording/certification process.

A POSSIBLE MECHANISM FOR VALIDATION OF ASSESSOR PRACTICE

Based on feedback from focus group participants a non-mandatory or voluntary mechanism for validation of PLAR practitioner competence is suggested. This is based on a model developed by Day and Zakos (1999a, b, and c) - see Figure Eleven.

Roles and Responsibilities of Approved PLAR Training Organizations (PLATOs) – adapted from Day and Zakos (1999 a, b, and c)

Approval

Organization makes Formal Application to External Body (EB)

External Adviser (EA) visits prospective PLATO

EA makes Approval visit to PLATO and makes recommendation to EB

Outcome

Approval granted

Approved status officially confirmed

Approval certificate sent

Approval withheld

Action plan developed

Possible second approval visit

Appeal against process or outcome

Monitoring

Each PLATO linked to EB

External Adviser
(appointed by EB)
- authenticates assessment practices and PLATO procedures
- ensures assessments are valid, reliable and meet national standards
- helps PLATO develop quality assessment systems consistent with EB policy
- monitors internal assessments
- monitors quality assurance systems
- promotes best practice
- provides feedback to PLATO/EB
- keeps records of visits/contacts with PLATO
- findings of visits/contacts with PLATO fed back to EB
- action plan agreed & reported to PLATO

Each PLATO has a coordinator who manages assessment process

Appeals & Complaints

Appeals may arise if:
- approval is withheld
- certification is withheld
- approval is withdrawn

Complaint Procedure
Complainant files information with EB including:
- organization
- approval/registration
- action taken to address the problem (if any)
- what is expected of EB

PLATO retains copy of letter
EB reports back to complainant

Inspection (If required)

Compliance questioned

Inspection visit by EB

Inspection report EB

Approval withheld

Approval continues

Appeal against process or outcome

Review

Review focuses on key aspects of PLATO approval guidelines

Range of methods deployed including: self-review and report, EA visits and reports, bench-marking exercises

Review every 3 to 5 years

Appeal against process or outcome

FIGURE ELEVEN

Detailed guidelines for the validation of PLAR training organizations have been developed by the researcher. These guidelines are based upon a non-mandatory or voluntary code of practice for PLAR which could be quality-assured by an external body. Participants in this study thought that this body could be CAPLA. Organizations wishing to be approved by the external body as a PLAR training organization would need to demonstrate that they have the following in place

- management systems and resources to support the PLAR assessment process;
- provision of appropriate learner support during the PLAR assessment process;
- systems for the monitoring and reviewing of PLAR assessment records and procedures; and
- appropriate strategies for the marketing of PLAR assessment services to individual learners.

These criteria are the basis on which the external body would evaluate an organization's voluntary application for approval as a PLAR training organization. They would also be used to ensure that the organization is able to continually deliver and assure the quality of PLAR assessment. The criteria will

- help to ensure consistency in approval and monitoring of all organizations who offer PLAR Practitioner training within Canada;
- act as indicators against which the performance of these organizations can be monitored and evaluated; and
- establish a framework for continuous quality improvement of the PLAR processes.

THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Qualitative studies by their very nature are less able to address issues relating to external validity i.e. generalizations cannot be made about the work of Practitioners who have not taken part in this study. Nevertheless the following steps have been taken to ensure that the benchmarking study had a high degree of internal validity.

- Use of a focus group to determine appropriate benchmarks for external comparison.
- Identification of a sampling framework through the application of a screening survey.
- Piloting of questionnaire items to test the face validity of the main benchmarking survey.
- Use of a SWOT analysis to determine test items for the focus group questionnaires.
- Use of focus groups to determine policy application of benchmarks for PLAR.

Each of these activities has used a "grounded" and developmental approach to ensure that the opinion of PLAR Practitioners, rather than policy makers or managers, has been sought.

It would appear that benchmarking (as defined in this study) is a process which is both sensitive and appropriate to consensus building and despite initial concerns regarding potential cultural and methodological differences, it has been possible to identify a valid PLAR process for Canadian Practitioners.

This is an important finding, for it seems that the benchmarking process could be used as a useful adjunct to other methods of job analysis e.g. DACUM, Functional Analysis and the Delphi Method. It is a process which is sensitive to the language and culture that determines Practitioner behaviour and therefore has a high degree of internal validity.

Finally, some steering committee members expressed concern about the size of the sample for the benchmarking survey. Although several attempts were made to increase the total number of participants, by extending the return date of the screening and benchmarking surveys, subsequent respondents did not meet the screening criteria. After considerable debate, the steering committee decided that an adequate sample had been achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE BENCHMARKING STUDY

Recommendations resulting from this study fall into two categories

- those of a general nature which relate to the overall development of PLAR within Canada; and
- those which are more directly related to the implementation of the newly-emerging benchmarks for Canadian PLAR Practitioners.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ***HRDC, in collaboration with the Provinces, other appropriate agencies and stakeholder groups, may wish to consider a more strategic approach toward research into PLAR to ensure that objectives for implementation are both timely and appropriate. This would reduce the potential for research fatigue among what appears to be a relatively small population for study.***

2. ***HRDC, in collaboration with the Provinces, other appropriate agencies and stakeholder groups, may wish to focus its attention on the design and implementation of a nation-wide environmental scan of PLAR services and the personnel involved in delivering those services.*** A major focus of the scan would be the identification of the number of PLAR Assessors there are in Canada, where they are situated both geographically and by sector, their age, gender, experience, credentials and how often they perform assessments. This process would not only enable an occupational profile to be constructed and provide baseline data for further PLA study but it would also help to provide as complete a

picture as possible of the variety of PLA practice that currently exists in all regions and sectors of the country. Such a profile would go a long way to minimizing duplication of service and make for a more efficient and effective network of PLA providers. The effectiveness of PLAR as a significant force for education and training reform and as a useful tool for adults to take charge of their learning needs would be maximized. This would help to ensure that transferability of PLAR credits would be a relatively smooth and widely accepted process from coast to coast in Canada.

3. ***HRDC, in collaboration with the Provinces, other appropriate agencies and stakeholder groups, may wish to consider the possibility of developing benchmarks for all PLAR roles including those who train practitioners and those who provide quality assurance of assessment e.g. the PLAR Co-ordinator.*** Benchmarking, as defined in this study, is a process that tends to build consensus and which can be used in combination with other methods of job analysis e.g. DACUM, Functional Analysis, and the Delphi Method. The process of Benchmarking has a high degree of internal validity and it is sensitive to the qualities, characteristics and processes that help to define PLAR Practitioner behaviour. This would help to clarify existing roles and responsibilities and enable organizations to develop an appropriate, efficient and cost-effective skill-mix for PLAR.

4. ***HRDC, in collaboration with the Provinces, other appropriate agencies and other stakeholder groups, may wish to consider the possibility of developing a more standardized approach toward assuring the quality of PLAR assessment.*** In particular, attention should be paid to the professional development of PLAR Co-ordinators, PLAR Assessors, PLAR Advisers and PLAR Facilitators to ensure that any formative and summative assessment decisions embrace both content and predictive validity. Focusing attention on these important issues of quality assurance in assessment can lead to the implementation of relatively large national initiatives through the development of Credit Accumulation and Transfer systems for specific occupational sectors such as those underway in the technology and tourism industries.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ***The newly-emerging benchmarks for PLAR assessment should be implemented within the context of existing codes of practice and the diversity of approaches to PLAR which characterize the Canadian landscape.*** Common standards for assessment must support and complement the inclusive, holistic approach to PLAR practice currently underway in Canada. Widely recognized and accepted benchmarks for assessment are essential if adult learners are to be able to easily move from sector to sector as their learning and life-needs change.

2. ***A self-assessment process for ongoing professional development of PLAR Practitioners should be an important component of the***

practitioner guide. Feedback from survey and focus group participants has confirmed the validity of benchmarks for PLAR practice in Canada (Chapters 4 & 5). They have also confirmed the emerging role of the PLAR Practitioner and they have offered suggestions on how a Canadian PLAR Practitioner guide might be developed. A clear recommendation from practitioners during the consultation process was the importance of developing a self-assessment process for PLAR Practitioners. A self-assessment tool will encourage reflective practice and a holistic approach toward assessment to help ensure that the diversity of PLAR practice currently underway in Canada is captured in the guide. A self-assessment tool will also enable adult learners to understand the benchmarks against which their learning will be assessed, thereby helping them to be clearer about the demands and requirements that will be made on them as part of the assessment process.

3. ***A non-mandatory mechanism for validation of PLA Practitioner competence is recommended for consideration by HRDC and CAPLA as part of the ongoing development of PLAR practice in Canada.*** Feedback from focus group participants consistently recommended that a voluntary process be established to confirm the competence of PLAR Practitioners.

4. ***The identified benchmarks should be published on the existing CAPLA/FNTI web site until appropriate funding can be found for a fully maintained site which is dedicated to the implementation and development of PLAR benchmarks and best practices.*** The benchmarks could be published as a functional map and should also include the knowledge which underlies Assessor and Adviser competence. Eventually the web site would also include a "best practice" component which enables adult learners to determine whether service providers are following established protocols in helping them meet their education/training needs. The benchmarks will form the cornerstone of this site and will be linked to NALL, CLFDB and HRDC PLAR web sites.

Malcolm Day/CAPLA
January, 2000

REFERENCES

Atkins, M. J., Beattie, J., and Dockrell, W.B. (1993). Assessment Issues in Higher Education. Sheffield, Department of Employment.

Aitkinson, R.L., Atkinson, R. C., Smith E., and Bem. D. (1993). Introduction to Psychology. Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch College Publications, London.

American Productivity Center (1997). Benchmarking: Pure and Simple. APQC, Texas.

Arabian, J. H. (1999). Speed Benchmarking [online]. Milton. Mass.: Comparative Management Associates. http://www.world.std.com/arabian/index.html [Accessed 17th February 1999].

Barnett, R (1994). The Limits of Competence. Buckingham, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Basch, C.E. (1987). "Focus group interview: an under-utilized research technique for improving theory and practice in health education." Health Education Quarterly. 14, 4, 411-448.

Baum, T. (1995). Human Resource Issues in International Tourism.

Balm, G. (1992). Benchmarking: A Practitioner's guide for becoming and staying best of best. Schaumberg, Quality and Productivity Management Center.

Bulmer , C. (1998). "Clinical decisions: defining meaning through focus groups." Nursing Standard. V.12, No.20.

Bedford, et. al. (1993). Assessing Competencies in Nursing and Midwifery Education. (ACE Report). English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting, London.

Bogdan, R.C., and Bilken, S.K. (1982). Qualitative Research for Education. London, Allyn and Bacon.

Brown, S., Race, P., and Smith, B. (1996). 500 Tips on Assesssment. Kogan Page, London.

Camp, R. (1989). Benchmarking, the search for industry best practices that lead to best performance. Quality Press/American Society for Quality Control, Milwaukee.

Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (1999). Proposal to Develop National Benchmarks for PLAR Assessment. A submission to HRDC.

Care Sector Consortium (1992) National Occupational Standards For Care. Care Sector Consortium, London.

Care Sector Consortium (1994). The Functional Map of Health and Social Care (Working Document). Care Sector Consortium, London.

Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers. (1991). Structure of Qualifications Working Model. Personal Social Services and Related Professional Training. London, CCETSW.

Challis, M. (1993). Introducing APEL Routledge, London.

Challis, M. Usherwood, T. and Joesbury, H. (1993). Assessing specified competencies in medical undergraduate training. Competence and Assessment. No. 22. p.6-9. Department of Employment, Sheffield.

Cohen, L, and Mannion, M. (1987). Research Methods in Education. Croom Helm, London.

College of Pharmacists of British Columbia. (1997). C.A.R.E. Program Continuing Assessment, Reflection and Enhancement. Vancouver, College of Pharmacists of British Columbia.

Czarnecki, M. (1992). Benchmarking strategies for health care management. The Benchmarking Network,.Aspen Publishers, Maryland.

Day M. (1991). 'Accreditation of Learning Experience.' Nursing. Vol.4, No.25, p.35-36.

Day, M. (1992). 'Quality Training for Health Care Assistants.' Nursing Standard. Vol.6, No. 24, p.32-34.

Day, M. (1993). 'NVQ Assessment for Care Assistants.' Nursing Standard.Vol.7, No.29, p.35-38.

Day, M. (1994a). The Implications of NVQs for Higher Education. NVQ/SVQ Focus and Care Standard. Vol. 1. No.11.

Day, M. (1994b). 'A Consortium approach towards the delivery of NVQs in care: a case study.' Care Standard. Vol.2, No.9, p. 24-34.

Day, M., O'Kell, S. and Storey, L (1995a). Utilising National Occupational Standards as a Complement to Nursing Curricula. Leeds, National Health Service Executive.

Day, M. (1995b). Vocational training: its role in nursing. Nursing Standard. Vol. 9. No. 51. p.34-36.

Day, M (1996a). The Role of the NVQ Assessor. Campion Press, Edinburgh.

Day, M (1996b). 'Efficiency, Effectiveness and Economy. Developing International Partnerships in Competence Based Assessment.' Care Standard. Vol.11, No.7, p.24 -28.

Day, M. (1998). Occupational standards and professional development . Nursing Standard. Vol.12, No.21, p.39-41.

Day, M (1999a). The Factors which may Enhance or Inhibit the Use of Occupational Standards as a Complement to the Continuing Education of Health Care Professionals. Postgraduate Research Thesis. University Sheffield, England.

Day, M. (1999b). An Evaluation of the CTHRB Validating Agent Pilot Project. Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. Ottawa, Ontario.

Day, M. (1999). What is Benchmarking? The Hub. Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment. No.11. pp.11-13.

Day, M. (1999). Developing Benchmarks for PLAR - An HRDC Funded Study: Developing Focus Group Activities. The Hub. Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment. No.11. p.13-18.

Day, M and Basford., L. (1995a). Fit for Care. Nursing Times. Vol. 91. No. 14.

Day, M. and Basford, L. (1995b). Assessment of Clinical Competence. Department Community and Primary Care. School Nursing and Midwifery. University Sheffield. ISBN 1 900225 00 X.

Day, M. and Basford, L. (1995c). Guidelines for Developing a Portfolio. Department Community and Primary Care. School Nursing and Midwifery. University Sheffield. ISBN 1 900225 05 0.

Day, M., O'Kell, S. and Storey, S. (1995). Utilising National Occupational Standards as a Complement to Nursing Curricula. NHS Executive, Leeds.

Day, M. and Zakos, P (1999a). Policy for the Approval of CTHRB Validating Agents. Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. Ottawa, Ontario.

Day, M. and Zakos, P (1999b). Assessment Guidelines for CTHRB Validating Agents. Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. Ottawa, Ontario.

Day, M. and Zakos, P (1999c). Guidelines for Assessors of Canadian Technology Standards. Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. Ottawa, Ontario.

Department for Education and Employment (1996). Higher Level Vocational Qualifications: a Government Position Paper. D*f*EE, London.

DeWolf, L. (1985). "Focus groups: assessing patient satisfaction and targeting new services." Hospital Topics. 63, 2, 24-26.

Elliot. J. (1991). Action Research for Educational Change. Milton Keynes, Philadelphia Open University Press.

English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. (1996). Regulations and Guidelines for the Approval of Institutions and Programmes. London, ENB.

English National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. (1997). Standards for approval of higher education institutions and programmes. London, ENB.

Edwards, C., and Keeley, O. (1997). 'Competency-based learning for the surgical assistant.' Nursing Standard. Vol.12, No.20, p.44-47.

Eraut, M. (1994). Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence. Falmer Press, London.

Eraut, M. and Cole, G. (1993). Assessing Competence in the Professions. Sheffield, Department of Employment.

Fairbrother, P., Day, M., Nixon, K. and Chivers, G. (1995). Integration with Higher Education the Development Needs of Nursing & Midwifery Teachers. Sheffield, University of Sheffield Division of Adult Continuing Education.

Fenwick, T. and Parsons, J. (1999). The Art of Evaluation: A Handbook for Educators and Trainers. Ontario, Thompson, Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., ISBN 1-55077-104-3

Fielding, N. (1993). Ethnography. In Step By Step. Sage, California.

Further Education Unit. (1989). Implications of Competence Based Curricula. London, FEU.

Further Education Unit. (1993). Flexible Colleges: Access to learning and Qualifications in Further Education. London, FEU.

Gonzci, A. et. al. (1994). Competency-Based Assessment in the Professions in Australia. Assessment in Education. Vol.1, No.1, p.27-43.

Gove, T. J. (1995). Matthew's Story: Report of the Gove Enquiry into Child Protection. British Columbia, Ministry of Social Services.

Greenacre, L. (1990). 'Competence and coherence: opportunities for Education and Industry in the Emerging National Vocational Qualifications framework,' in Bees, M., and Swords, M. (Eds.) National Vocational Qualifications and Further Education. London, Kogan Page and NCVQ.

Guba. E. and Lincoln, Y. (1985). Effective Evaluation: Improving the usefulness of Evaluation. Jossey Bass, San Francisco, California.

Hammersley, M., and Atkinson, P. (1983). Ethnography: Principals in Practice. London, Tavistock.

Hevey, D. (1994). 'Supporting NVQ implementation at the Open University.' The NVQ Monitor. Winter Edition. 1994. p.4-6.

Higher Education Quality Council. (1994). Choosing to Change: Extending Access, Choice and Mobility in Higher Education. London, HEQC.

Higher Education Quality Council and the National Health Service Executive. (1996). Improving the Effectiveness of Quality Assurance Systems in Non-Medical Health Care Education and Training. Leeds, HEQC/NHSE.

Hisrich. R. and Peters, M. (1982). "Focus groups: an innovative marketing research technique." Hospital And Health Service Administration. 5, 8-21.

Hodgkinson, L. (1996). Changing the Higher Education Curriculum: towards a systematic approach to skills development. Open University and Department for Education and Employment. Cambridge, Burlington Press.

Illot, M. and Allen, M. (1996). Identification of Core Competencies of Senior House Officers as Pre-requisites for Higher Specialty Training: Report for the NHSE Occupational Standards Project Workshop. NHS Executive and the University of Leeds. November 1996.

Jarrold, K. (1995). Building on the benefits of occupational standards and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the NHS. EL(95) 84. NHS Executive, Leeds.

Jessup, G. (1991). Outcomes: NVQs and the Emerging Model of Education and Training. Falmer Press, London.

Kitzinger. J. (1995). "Qualitative research: introducing focus groups." British Medical Journal. 311, 299-302.

Lawton, D. (1973). Social Change, Educational Theory and Curriculum Planning. Hodder and Stoughton, London.

Liebfried, K. and McNair, C. (1992). Benchmarking: A tool for continuous improvement. Harper Press, New York.

Management Charter Initiative (1993). First Line Management Standards. MCI, London.

Manitoba Family Services Child Day Care (Undated). Competency Based Assessment Program Information and Policies. Manitoba, Canada.

Massey, V. H. (1995). Nursing Research. Second Edition. Springhouse Notes, Pennsylvania.

Ministry of Education, Skills and Training (1996). A Strategic PLAR for the future of British Columbia's College, Institute and Agency System. British Columbia, Ministry of Education, Skills and Training.

Mitchell L. (1993) The contribution of S/NVQS. De Montfort University, Leicester.

McCall, G.J. and Simmoms, J. L. (1969). Issues in Participant Observation: A Text and Reader. Reading. Mass., Addison Wesley.

McCory, R. (1992). Understanding National Vocational Qualifications and Standards A Handbook. Parthenon, Lancashire.

NHS Executive (1994). Managing the new NHS: Functions and responsibilities in the New NHS. Department of Health, London.

Nyamathi. A. and Shuler, P. (1990). "Focus group interview: a research technique for informed nursing practice." Journal of Advanced Nursing. 15, 1, 1281-1288.

Otter, S. (1994). Higher level NVQs/SVQs - their Possible Implications for Higher Education. Unpublished Background Paper for the NVQ Higher Levels Conferences. Nottingham University and the Employment Department.

Patterson, J. G. (1996). Benchmarking Basics., Crisp Publications, California.

Patton, M. A. (1990). Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods. London, Sage.

Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia. (1995). The Scope of Nursing Practice. Vancouver, RNABC.

Robertson, D. (1991). 'Courses, Qualifications and the Empowerment of Learners,' in Finegold D. Higher Education: Expansion and Reform. London, Institute for Public Policy Research.

Rowntree, D. (1987). Assessing Students. How shall we know them? Kogan Page, London.

Shuttleworth, M. (1993) Articulating the Competence Movement and Professional Formation. De Montfort University, Leicester.

Simosko, S. (1995). Prior Learning Assessment and Educational Reform: A Vision for Now. British Columbia, Ministry of Education, Skills and Training Centre for Curriculum and Professional Development.

Sloan, G. (1998). "Focus group interviews: defining clinical supervision." Nursing Standard. 12, 42, 40-43

Spendolini, M. (1992). The benchmarking book. AMACOM Books/The American Management Association, New York.

Stewart D, and Shamdasani, P. (1990). Focus Groups Theory and Practice. Sage, Newbury Park California.

Strauss, L. and Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques. Sage, Newbury Park California.

Stycos, J. M. (1981). “A critique of focus group and survey research: the machismo case.” Studies in Family Planning. 12, 12, 450-456.

Stenhouse, L. (1975). An Introduction to Curriculum Research and Development. London, Heineman.

Stephenson, J. (1994). Capability and Competences: are they the same and does it matter?. Higher Education for Capability. Leeds Metropolitan University.

The Benchmarking Center Ltd. (1999). Benchmarking Information. [online]. Bucks. England:

Benchmarking Center Ltd. http://www.benchmarking.co.uk/members/bmark.htm [Accessed 3rd March 1999].

Training and Development Lead Body (1995). National Standards for Training and Development. Employment Department., Sheffield.

United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting. (1994). The Council’s Standards for Education and Practice Following Registration. Programmes of Education Learning to the Qualification of Specialist Practitioner. Registrar’s Letter 20/1994. CMc/MJW/PG/2/boc. UKCC, London.

Watson, G. (1992). The benchmarking workbook. Productivity Press, Cambridge, Mass.

White. B. (1996). The BC Tourism Learning System.

White B. (1996) The BC Tourism Learning System. Center fro Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, British Columbia.

Winter, R., and Maisch, M. (1996). Professional Competence and Higher Education: The ASSET Programme. Falmer Press, London.

APPENDIX ONE

THE EXTERNAL EVALUATOR'S REPORT

REPORT ON A REVIEW OF 'DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION - PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES'

Professor Geoff Chivers, Division of Adult Continuing Education, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

INTRODUCTION

Although I was requested to focus on particular aspects of this substantial report, I have in fact thoroughly reviewed all parts of the document.

I have a strong background in the field covered by the report, but have had to take the presentation of the Canadian specific information at face value, trusting that this will be familiar ground for the CAPLA Project Steering Committee members.

The overall structure and content of the report is admirable, following the form of the strong research dissertations with which I am familiar. The background to the subject is well presented and the research issues to be addressed clearly outlined. The author is shown to be a strong scholar in this field, with a wide international outlook and an outstanding awareness of relevant literature. Nevertheless, the Canadian context of the study is always evident.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The research issues and questions raised are doubtless best addressed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, as is the case for many learning-related research projects.

The research outlines the options available and justifies admirably the choice of research methods selected. As ever, the choices made, and the scale of activity determined are constrained by issues of time deadlines, staff resources, access to research subjects, etc. Nevertheless, it is clear that the overall structure of the research plan is eminently capable of answering the research questions, if the empirical work is well conducted.

The biggest single design concern is defining and obtaining a research sample which is best placed to respond to the detailed practical questions to be covered in the survey study. The screening survey was very well planned to achieve this end, and the first sample generated was certainly adequate to achieve valid and reliable results. Too often survey studies in complex fields pay insufficient attention to defining the appropriate characteristics of the sample members, throwing the validity of the results into doubt from the outset.

RESEARCH WORK CONDUCTED

The quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted thoroughly and convincingly. Questions were simply phrased so as to cover the ground without confusing the respondent. The researcher avoided the use of complex language and the obscure terminology which abounds in the field. As a result fully unambiguous results were obtained and reported.

The presence of a second, less PLAR involved sample did add complexity to the empirical work. However, the researcher draws his results primarily from the first sample with 'hands on' PLAR experience, with the second sample as a cross-checking reference sample. This proved to be a very effective approach, so that no results were discarded, and the initial conclusions drawn carried extra conviction.

The qualitative data produced very clear results in all cases, which were straightforward to explain. The qualitative survey data strongly matched to the qualitative data to give an overall picture which is clearly convincing.

The focus group approach was an especially attractive aspect of the study, as this enabled any subjectivity of the researcher to be cross-checked and further potentially overlooked issues and aspects to be surfaced. Ideally, further focus group work would have been welcome, but the extra costs and time requirements are clear here.

The researcher clearly acknowledges the limitations of the study and is properly careful in drawing conclusions not to attempt to overstretch the data.

The researcher is clearly very experienced in utilising the empirical research methods he adopts and produces strong research outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions presented are clear and address fully the original research questions. Despite the modest size of the research samples the conclusions are convincing. The researcher states the limitations of his study, and it is true that the conclusions can only relate to the particular, modest samples of practitioners involved in the study. However, the careful initial screening study is convincing that the samples obtained **are** well representative of experienced PLAR practitioners.

The list of key conclusions is modest and draw from the data which is corroborated from both qualitative and quantitative studies. In particular, limited qualitative data is **not** used alone in drawing key conclusions.

The short list of recommendations is drawn directly from the conclusions. These recommendations address the main concerns of CAPLA and other Canadian organisations concerned with PLAR. They seem very down to earth and achievable. I confirm that the research work conducted is entirely in line with these recommendations. It does seem that there would be strong support from practitioners and their organisations for the implementation of the recommendations listed.

This is not to underestimate the forces of conservatism and narrow interests which abound in the adult education and training field. However, there is a world movement in the direction of PLAR, and Canada will certainly remain well to the fore of this movement if the recommendations are taken forward.

This research report is certainly not the last word on PLAR development in Canada. Efforts to implement the report recommendations should be seen as a form of action research. Further funding for research to be undertaken in action research mode would be valuable.

APPENDIX TWO

THE SCREENING SURVEY

NATIONAL BENCHMARKS FOR PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT (PLAR)

Dear Colleague;

CAPLA is seeking your involvement in a study to develop benchmarks for PLAR. This study is funded by Human Resources Development Canada. The objectives are to:

- Gain consensus on the development of benchmarks for PLAR assessment across Canada;
- Produce a guide to support the implementation of national benchmarks for PLAR;
- Make recommendations for promotion of national benchmarks and distribution of the guide; and
- Investigate the feasibility of a system to confirm the competence of PLAR practitioners.

The CAPLA research team will use international benchmarks for PLAR as a marker of best practice (TDLB, 1995). These benchmarks will be tested for face validity using non-participant observation of assessor practice before they are used as questionnaire items in a postal survey of PLAR practitioners within Canada.

The postal survey will ask Canadian PLAR practitioners to compare their own practice against the TDLB benchmarks in order to identify areas of commonality. Areas of commonality will then be discussed in provincial and/or regional focus groups to cross-validate the outcomes of the postal survey.

Currently, the CAPLA research team are attempting to identify a sample for the study. This will be based on geographical location, funding source, policy and practice and the number of individuals who utilize PLAR services. The Association of Canadian Community Colleges is assisting with this.

CAPLA invites you to complete the attached questionnaire by **12th April 1999** *either by return e-mail, or using the pre-paid envelope provided.*

If you have any further queries about the project, please don't hesitate to contact Malcolm Day the project manager/researcher at **m.r.day@tesco.net or Tel: 613-848-8427.**

Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Paul Zakos
President of CAPLA

NATIONAL BENCHMARKS FOR PLAR ASSESSMENT – AN HRDC FUNDED STUDY

Please answer the following **as briefly as possible and return by 1st April 1999 in the pre-paid envelope provided or by return e-mail.** *Your answers are confidential and will only be used to construct a sample for our main survey.*

PART (A) PARTICIPATION IN THE BENCHMARKING STUDY

Would you be willing:

1. To participate in our main postal survey?
2. To participate in a *focus group* meeting?
3. To have a researcher observe your PLAR activities (subject to organizational agreement)?
4. If you have answered *"yes"* to any of the above items please enter the following details, so that we may contact you again:

Your Name: ________________________ Address: __________________________

City/Town:__________________________ Postal/Zip Code: _____________________

Work Telephone: ____________________ Work e-mail: _______________________

PART (B) ABOUT YOUR ORGANIZATION:

5. Please enter the name of your organization: __________________________________
6. In which Province is your organization located? _______________________________
7. Is your location in the North, South, East or West of the Province you have identified?

   ____

PART (C) YOUR PLAR ACTIVITIES:

Please enter the approx. number of PLAR individuals you see per year: _________________

8. Please indicate how PLAR services for your individuals are funded:

   ____

9. Do you use either CLFDB or CAEL guidelines as a reference for your own PLAR policy and practice? (see enclosed).

   ____

10. If so, please state which:

   ____

   ____

APPENDIX THREE

FOLLOW-UP OF NON-RESPONDENTS

Dear Colleague:

PLAR Benchmarking Study

You may remember that I recently sent you a questionnaire concerning the CAPLA/PLAR Benchmarking Study. Our records indicate that you have not responded to this.

There may be several possible reasons for this, e.g. you:

- didn't receive the original or follow-up questionnaires;
- may have been on holiday and were unable to respond by the given deadline i.e. 12th April;
- may have found the questionnaire and supporting information unclear or confusing; and
- felt that you were unable to make a personal contribution to the project.

I would be grateful if you could contact Malcolm Day our Project Manager to discuss your reasons for not responding. He can be contacted on (613) 396-2122 or m.r.day@tesco.net.

Malcolm will be contacting a random sample of all non-responders by telephone over the next few weeks.

Follow up of non-responders is a requirement of our research contract. Although the results of your discussions with Malcolm will be included in our final report to HRDC, they will be non-attributable.

This is an important piece of work for PLAR in Canada. Those who have responded would appreciate your input and support.

Many thanks for your assistance in this matter.

Yours sincerely;

Paul Zakos
President of CAPLA

P.S. I attach a further copy of the questionnaire, should you wish to respond.

APPENDIX FOUR

BENCHMARKING SURVEY

Dear Colleague:

RE: Developing Benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners – A study funded by Human Resources Development Canada.

Thank you for taking part in our preliminary survey. Your response indicates that you have agreed to participate in our **main postal survey**, which I now enclose for you to complete.

Before you complete this questionnaire, please read the following sections which will put this study in a context related to your work.

PLAR DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA

In a developing and diverse field like Prior Learning Assessment, Canadian PLAR Practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds and undertake a variety of roles and responsibilities. Some of these include advising, facilitating, coordinating, advocating and assessing.

This study focuses on the assessment aspect of what PLAR Assessors do. It uses an approach called ***"benchmarking"*** and draws upon an extensive body of practice developed in recent years in the United Kingdom.

The intention of this approach is not to constrain but to illuminate PLAR practice in Canada, by identifying the similarities, differences and variations of PLAR practitioners and PLAR assessment here, in contrast with established practice elsewhere.

THE PURPOSE OF BENCHMARKING

Benchmarking is not "cloning" i.e. blindly copying or adapting practices from elsewhere without due regard to culture, strategy, mission, etc.

Benchmarking is a process of identifying, understanding and adapting best practice, so that performance can be continuously improved and developed. It is beneficial as it:

- **Focuses on client needs** – *this is fundamental to adult learning and the PLAR process;*
- **Helps to set relevant, realistic and achievable goals** – *i.e. an open and transparent PLAR process for individuals and assessors; and*
- **Tests the quality of program delivery** – *individuals, employers and educational institutions must be able to see that the PLAR process is rigorous and credible.*

Newly-emerging benchmarks act as a frame of reference or a marker, to enable practitioners to continuously reflect upon (and develop) their own practice.

BENCHMARKS FOR PLAR PRACTITIONERS

The benchmarks outlined in this questionnaire have been taken from the Training and Development Lead Body (TDLB) in the United Kingdom. ***An explanation of the TDLB's work is given on. You should read this before you complete the enclosed questionnaire.***

COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire asks you to compare your own practice with TDLB benchmarks for PLAR Assessors. ***In doing this you are asked to indicate, yes or no, whether the TDLB benchmarks accurately describe your current practice - they may, or they may not, depending on the context and application of your work.***

If you are "Unsure", or your answer is "No", you are asked to explain why, so that the research team can build up an accurate picture of the assessment practices of PLAR practitioners within Canada.

You are also encouraged to make changes to the benchmarks outlined on pages 13 –16 by altering the wording to suit the context of your practice (please remember to return these pages with your completed questionnaire).

For ease of reference you will see that each TDLB function is linked to an activity and each activity has several performance indicators. You are asked to consider each of these when making your comments.

RETURNING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Your completed questionnaire should be returned by ***30th June, 1999*** to the address below. Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence; they will be non-attributable and only used for the purpose of this study.

PRIZE DRAW

On receipt of your completed questionnaire, CAPLA will place your name in a prize draw!

You will have a chance to win a free registration at our next annual conference, in May 2000. This will cover the cost of conference registration fees for one person.

FURTHER INFORMATION

If you require any further information or assistance please contact ***Malcolm Day, Project Manager/Researcher*** at:

CAPLA PLAR Benchmarking Project
First Nations Technical Institute,
Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario, KOK 1XO.

Tel: (613) 396-2122 ~ Fax: (613) 396-2761; e-mail: m.r.day@tesco.net

Many thanks for helping us with this important study.

Yours truly,
Paul Zakos, President, CAPLA

CANADIAN ASSOCIATION for PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS for PLAR ASSESSMENT - AN HRDC FUNDED STUDY

SECTION A: ABOUT YOURSELF

Q1. Please state your name:

____

Q2. Please state your job title: ______________________________

Q3. Please indicate the function of the organization you work in. (e.g. health care, accountancy, etc.)

____

Q4. Please indicate your field of work (e.g. nursing, information technology engineering, etc.).

____

SECTION B: THE KEY PURPOSE OF A PLAR ASSESSOR

Q5. Please indicate whether the following statement accurately describes your **current** practice:

The key purpose of a PLAR Assessor is to review progress and/or to assess achievement, so that individuals and organizations can achieve their education and training objectives.

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **No** please explain why:

____

____

____

____

____

____

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

SECTION C: THE FUNCTIONS OF A PLAR ASSESSOR

Page 12 indicates that the two main FUNCTIONS of a PLAR Assessor are to:

FUNCTION 1. PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT
FUNCTION 2. ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL.

Q.6. Please indicate whether the following **function** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 1. PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT (p.13)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **No** please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q7. Please indicate whether the following **function** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 2. ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL. (p. 14)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **NO**, please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

SECTION D: ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY A PLAR ASSESSOR

Page 12 indicates that the two main FUNCTIONS of a PLAR Assessor are to:

FUNCTION 1. PREPARE THE INDIVIDUAL FOR ASSESSMENT
FUNCTION 2. ASSESS THE INDIVIDUAL.

When undertaking these 2 functions the PLAR Assessor undertakes the following **ACTIVITIES**:

1. Prepare the Individual for Assessment

1. Help the Individual to identify relevant learning.
2. Agree to and review an action plan for demonstration of prior learning.
3. Help the Individual to prepare and present evidence for Assessment.

2. Assess the Individual

4. Agree to and review an assessment plan.
5. Judge evidence and provide feedback.
6. Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback.

Q8. Please indicate whether each of the following **activities** accurately describes your **current** practice.

FUNCTION 1 - Activity I. Help the Individual to identify relevant learning. (p.13)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **NO** please explain why:

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q9. Please indicate whether the following **activity** accurately describes your **current** practice.

FUNCTION 1 - Activity II. Agree to and review an action Plan for demonstration of prior learning. (p.13)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **NO**, please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q10. Please indicate whether the following **activity** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 1 - Activity III. Help the individual to prepare and present evidence for assessment.(p. 14).

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **No** please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q11. Please indicate whether the following **activity** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 2 - Activity I. Agree to and review an assessment plan. (p.14)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **NO**, please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q12. Please indicate whether the following **activity** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 2 - Activity II. Judge evidence and provide feedback. (p.15)

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is **NO**, please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

Q13. Please indicate whether the following **activity** accurately describes your **current** practice:

FUNCTION 2 - Activity III Make an assessment decision using differing sources of evidence and provide feedback. (p. 15-16).

YES	NO	NOT SURE	(please circle)

If you are unsure or your answer is NO, please explain why:

Please continue on the back of this page, if necessary.

SECTION E: ARE THERE ANY OTHER COMMENTS YOU WISH TO MAKE?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

Please Return Your Completed Questionnaire in the Envelope Provided

APPENDIX FIVE

FOCUS GROUP INVITATIONS

DEVELOPING BENCHMARKS FOR PLAR ASSESSMENT – A STUDY FUNDED BY HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT CANADA (HRDC)

Dear Colleague:

Re: Focus Group Meetings for the PLAR Benchmarking Study

You are invited to participate in this important study by taking part in a focus group meeting on__________ from _______________ to ___________________

at __________________.

Your contact for maps and directions is: _______________________________ .

He or she can be contacted at: ______________________________________

We are sorry but we only have a limited budget to support focus group activities. We are limited to 12 participants at each of the 5 venues, so places will be allocated on a first come first served basis. Please could you confirm your attendance with Malcolm Day within two weeks of receiving this letter.

LUNCH, EXPENSES AND A PRIZE DRAW!!!

Lunch will be provided. Please advise us of any special dietary requirements you may have when you confirm your attendance.

You will be able to claim for car mileage at 37 cents per kilometer. We are sorry but we are unable to refund the cost of air fares or the cost of accommodation.

A certificate of attendance will be provided. Also, your name will be placed in a prize draw. You have the chance of winning a $50 CAD book token!!!

PARTICIPATING IN THE FOCUS GROUP

You are asked to complete the attached questionnaire **before** you attend the focus group and **to bring this with you to the meeting.**

When you attend the meeting you will be assigned to a small working group of about four people. You will be asked to present your response to the questionnaire and to offer this up for discussion to members of your assigned group.

Your group will then be instructed to discuss the individual contributions made in order to achieve an overall consensus. A spokesperson from your group will present a summary of your group's work and the consensus outcomes you have agreed. This will be recorded on a flip chart.

At this point a tape recording will be made. This will ensure that the outcomes of the group discussion are recorded accurately without disclosing your individual contributions, or your identity.

Before you leave the meeting you will be asked to hand in your questionnaire; you are asked not to record your name on this so that confidentiality can be maintained.

FURTHER INFORMATION

An outline of the project and its aims and objectives is discussed in the enclosed article. If you require any further information or assistance please contact ***Malcolm Day*** at:

CAPLA PLAR Benchmarking Project
First Nations Technical Institute
Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario
KOK 1XO
Tel: (613) 396-2122 ~ Fax: (613) 396-2761

You have a real opportunity to influence the outcomes of this study. I do hope you are able to participate.

Yours truly

Paul Zakos,
President, CAPLA

PRE-FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete this before you attend the focus group meeting – don't forget to bring it with you!

Q1. How would you describe your role(s) in PLAR?

Do you advise PLAR individuals, do you assess individuals, or do you coordinate PLAR activities?

____

____

____

Q2. Generally speaking, do you carry out most of the functions and activities attached?

Please read the work of the TDLB (attached) and consider each of the functions and activities described.

____

____

____

____

Q3. Which of the attached functions and activities *do not* apply to your practice. Please explain why?

Does your role exclude you from carrying out a particular function or activity i.e. do you mostly advise rather than assess? Or do you mostly assess rather than advise?

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Continued…

Q4. Emerging benchmarks will be used to develop guidelines for PLAR practitioners. In what form are these best developed?

Which formats are most likely to be accessed and used by PLAR practitioners. What are the likely cost benefits of these?

Q5. In what form might benchmarks for PLAR practitioners be disseminated?

What form is most likely to be acceptable, least likely to be threatening and most likely to have an impact on educational institutions, professional associations, labour organizations, student bodies, employers, provincial and federal governments?

Continued…

Q6. How might PLAR benchmarks be used to develop those involved in PLAR?

The PLAR process must be clear and transparent so that adviser and assessor roles are made clear and are explicit to all clients and stakeholders. Role clarity enables program managers to devise an appropriate skill mix for assessment teams, faculty have a clearer understanding of role boundaries and the practice elements which are pertinent to these. Students can develop a clearer understanding of the assessment and appeals process, and program costs can be more clearly identified for resource managers and purchasers of PLAR services. How will the emerging benchmarks be used to develop and inform individuals who undertake PLAR roles?

Continued...

Q7. How might PLAR benchmarks be used as a credential for those involved in PLAR?

For example, in the UK PLAR Advisers and PLAR Assessors must demonstrate that they can meet the attached benchmarks before they can practice i.e. they must obtain a PLAR Adviser and/or Vocational Assessor Qualification.

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Q8. Who should be responsible for validating the practice of PLAR practitioners?

Society demands that PLAR assessment is rigorous, credible and open to external scrutiny. PLAR professionals can develop and maintain their own code of practice e.g. through a national PLAR practitioner forum such as CAPLA. Alternatively a code of practice could be laid down, either informally or formally, through government departments in the form of guidelines or legislation e.g. the existing CLFDB PLAR Guidelines or the performance standards for primary school teachers which have recently been introduced by the Provincial Government of Ontario.

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Many Thanks For Completing This Questionnaire.

Please hand it in before you leave the focus group meeting.

APPENDIX SIX

ABOUT CAPLA AND THE AUTHOR

CAPLA MISSION

CAPLA envisions a society in which all have the opportunity and the necessary resources to pursue learning which promotes personal and career goals and enhances the quality of community life. CAPLA works toward the development of educational and human resource development services that are more flexible and responsive to changing needs and circumstances of adults. CAPLA advocates for continuous learning opportunities and formal acknowledgment of previous learning experiences.

PURPOSE

To identify and apply a common set of internationally accepted principles and practices needed for effective work with adult learners especially as they relate to prior learning assessment. These principles must include:

1. Identification and application of best practices or first principles necessary for high quality, value-added work with adult learners in which the needs, culture, life circumstances and abilities of the learner are the focus.
2. Assessment practices that are academically sound learner-focused and recognized both nationally and internationally.
3. Advocacy for a broader array of services for adult learners which are more flexible and responsive to the individual needs and circumstances of the learner and which decrease the gap between work and learning.
4. Practitioner research which demonstrates the effectiveness of the prior learning assessment process and supports the need for greater flexibility in the provision of educational services to adults and underscores the incredible amount of high quality learning which they accomplish outside of formal settings.
5. Identification and application of national and international occupational and adult learning standards and practices needed for effective work with the national and international labour force.
6. Creation and dissemination of materials and resources for use with diverse groups of adult learners that reflect the needs of Canadian adults and help prepare them for employment opportunities in the global economy.

7. Demonstration of ongoing support and assistance for those charged with the responsibility of designing and implementing PLAR services.

8. Collaboration with other groups and organizations to pursue the vision.

9. Development and promotion of a set of national standards of accreditation and a system of accreditation for PLAR practitioners and assessors.

10. National leadership and collaboration in developing financial sustainability of prior learning assessment.

CAPLA Bylaws 1997

THE AUTHOR

Malcolm Day M.Phil. M.Ed., B.Ed., RGN, RNT, Dip.N. (Lond.), Cert. Ed., City and Guilds Vocational Assessor (D32 and D33) and Verifier (D34) is a Senior Nursing Lecturer in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sheffield in England. He is currently on secondment as Project Manager and Researcher to the PLAR Benchmarking Study.

In the UK, Malcolm advises on issues relating to staff development and teaching quality and is responsible for curriculum development in undergraduate and post-graduate nursing programs. He is Course Leader to the Curriculum Design Module of the Master of Arts in Education (Health Care). He is a lecturer in Nursing Education and in Nursing Research to the Bachelor in Medical Science Degree, and is a lecturer in Nursing Ethics to the Pre-Registration Advanced Diploma in Nursing.

Malcolm is currently an Executive Board Member of the European Union Occupational Health Nurse Educators Network. He was previously Vice President of the UK Health Care Tutor's Association. He has been a member of the UK Royal College of Nursing National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) steering committee, a member of the Sheffield Training and Enterprise Council Training Standards Action Team and a member of the Sheffield Training and Enterprise Council's NVQ Task Force. He was responsible for setting up the Sheffield and North Trent College and Employers NVQ Consortium. This work received a quality award from the UK Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers.

Malcolm has worked as an independent training and development consultant to the Bromhead Hospital Consortium in Lincolnshire, the Edgefield and Glendaph Nursing Homes Consortium in Herefordshire, the Goatacre Nursing Home Consortium in Wiltshire, and the Old Rectory Nursing Home Consortium in South Yorkshire. He assisted each of these organizations to become approved assessment centres for NVQs Care and TDLB assessor awards.

Malcolm's previous research experience has been in client-centred approaches towards curriculum evaluation, published in 1989. The development of competencies for Diabetes Nurse Specialists funded by the British Diabetic association and published in 1991. A training needs analysis for the Registered Nursing Homes Association, published in 1992. An evaluation of the needs of individuals undertaking NVQs in health care, published in 1993 and 1994. Also feasibility study into the value of NVQs for the university curriculum, which was funded by the University of Sheffield and published in 1993. Finally, an evaluation of the role and performance of the NVQ assessor which was published in 1994.

Malcolm is co-researcher and co-author of two National Health Service Management Executive projects. The first *"Utilizing national occupational standards as a complement to nursing curricula"* was published in 1995. The second *"The factors which may enhance or inhibit the use of occupational standards as a complement to the continuing education of health care professionals"* was published in 1998. Malcolm is also author of *"The Role of the NVQ Assessor: National Vocational Qualifications and the "D" Units."* This was published by Campion Press of Edinburgh in 1996.

In September 1996, Malcolm was awarded a British Council Professional Exchange Grant to undertake a study visit to British Columbia. During his visit he spoke to the Royal College of Pharmacy, the Canadian National Nursing Competency Project, Community Colleges, Universities, The Advanced Education Council, the Ministry of Education, Skills and Training, the Registered Nurses Association of British Columbia and the Licensed Practical Nurses of BC on issues relating to competence-based assessment. Malcolm returned to British Columbia in June and October 1997 to progress further work in this area. This activity was supported by the CLFDB, the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology in BC, and was sponsored by the British Council in Ottawa and the Licensed Practical Nurses of BC.

In May 1998 Malcolm started work with CAPLA on developing benchmarks for prior learning assessment. He also returned to Douglas College in Vancouver, where he provided consultancy and advice to the Faculty of Family, Child and Community Studies, and the Faculty of Nursing, on a multi-lateral task force for competency development within British Columbia.

Shortly after his second visit to Ontario and BC, Malcolm was appointed as Education Policy Researcher to the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board (CTHRB) *"Technofile"* and *"Validating Agent"* project. During this project Malcolm was responsible for designing and evaluating a PLAR and quality assurance strategy for assessment of technicians and technologists across Canada. This work was published, in three modules, by the CTHRB in the latter part of 1999.