



Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
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Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment Pan-Canadian RPL Quality Assurance Project:

Summary of Mapping Exercise with Key Questions for Stakeholder Engagement

This Summary has been prepared as a resource document to stimulate thinking and discussion about quality assurance in the recognition of prior learning across Canada. It does not reflect a comprehensive investigation into current research or the extensive body of RPL quality assurance literature available to us. It highlights some of the key issues that, as a community of RPL practitioners, stakeholders, and policy makers, we need to address.

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by
Susan Simosko

Introduction

In collaboration with stakeholders from across the country and with support from the Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC), the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) is leading a project to “create a pan-Canadian Quality Assurance framework/set of guidelines to guide and enhance the assessment of learners through the Recognition of Prior Learning across contexts.” The primary motivator behind this project is to promote labour market development throughout the nation. The expected project deliverable is a manual to support the implementation of the QA framework.

Over the past several years, many nations, organizations and sectors have sought to better assure the quality of RPL systems and services in order to enhance users confidence in RPL processes.

As Canada’s leading organization committed to and supporting good practice in RPL, CAPLA recognizes the need to learn from these other experiences and models. The goal is not to replicate what others have done, but to facilitate the exploration with Canadian stakeholders to determine what is most needed and relevant to Canada.

To that end, a limited literature search was undertaken. As an outcome of this, six examples of other frameworks or models were selected for careful analysis.¹ This paper provides a summary of those analyses and poses key questions for Canadian stakeholders to consider as we work towards a pan-Canadian framework.

About the mapping exercise

The Frameworks shown in Table 1 were selected based on their clarity, nature and potential relevance to the Canadian context. The purpose, structure and content of each were analyzed and compared—mapped—to the other five.

¹Several Canadian resources were included in the literature search. (See Appendix A.) Many of these are highly relevant to the current project and are available on the CAPLA website (www.capla.ca). However, in an effort to learn from models developed outside of Canada, all but one of the selected examples reflects international contexts.

Table 1 Frameworks Analyzed and Mapped

Name	Jurisdiction	Lead Organization	Publication Date
National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment	South Africa	The South African Qualifications Authority www.saqqa.org.za	2013
European Guidelines for Validating Non-Formal and Informal Learning	Europe	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training www.cedefop.europa.eu ²	2009
UK Quality Code for Higher Education ³ (Chapter B6, Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning)	The United Kingdom	The Quality Assurance Agency (UK) www.qaa.ac.uk	2013
Australian Qualifications Framework, Second Edition	Australia	Australian National Qualifications Framework Council www.aqf.edu.au/	2013
Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment	Canada	Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) www.cicic.ca	2012
Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation, and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning	Relevant to member states around the globe	United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) www.unesco.org/uil	2012

² The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)

³ It is important to note that, in contrast to the other examples, the UK model is an integral part of a Quality Code applied to *all* aspects of Higher Education. The Code is used by individual institutions and external quality assurance agencies to evaluate the quality of all services and to provide a focus for improvement. Chapter B6 focuses on assessment. Other chapters deal with different services including advising and the facilitation of learning.

Results

The results of the mapping exercise indicate a high level of commonality across all frameworks in structure and content areas. As a result, it was relatively straightforward to identify three broad headings and a number of subheadings that reflect the majority of models. These are shown in Table 2, below:

Table 2 Commonalities in International QA Guidelines for RPL

I. Background and Setting of the Framework
• Context
• Definition of RPL
• Purpose and desired outcomes/objectives
• Value/Benefits to:
- Learners
- Organizations
- Society
• Links to Education/Training/ Occupational Standards/Qualification Framework
II. RPL Models and Implementation
• Principles
• Relationships with national system of qualifications (where relevant)
• Management/administration of RPL Systems
• Sustainable and cost effective systems
• Policies that relate to national targets, resourcing, characteristics of delivery systems, etc.
III. RPL Processes
• Discussion of effective validation practice in different contexts from both organizational and individual perspectives
• Evaluation checklists for validation processes
• QA procedures/standards
• National/provincial coordination (e.g. train personnel, support and advocate, transferability of credit/recognition, etc.)
• Institutions involved in validation
• Assessment processes and technical requirements
• Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders
- Educational organizations
- Professional bodies/regulators
- Professional bodies/regulators
- Practitioners
- Candidates, e.g., job seekers, adult learners, clients, etc.
- Others, e.g., immigrant serving organization

While not every model reflects the identical outline or headings, the content of most fit into this general structure with varying levels of detail. For example, the South African Framework is a tidy 12 pages and includes a Table of Contents, a Forward by the CEO of the South African Qualifications Authority, and a list of acronyms—as well as the purposes, objectives, scope of RPL and its relevance in the context of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa. In contrast, the relevant pages from the UK Higher Education document are more than 25 and are set in a larger Chapter, which deals with all forms of assessment. The UK document uniquely includes key indicators related to assessment and advising as well as the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders such as educational organizations, professional bodies/regulators, practitioners and candidates.

Each of the six documents individually and collectively provides useful and insightful strategies regarding the establishment of RPL quality assurance systems.

Content Comparisons

While space limitations prevent a comparison of all content areas across all models, it is informative to highlight a few key areas. A summary of these follows. Interested readers, however, are urged to review each of the original documents.

I. Background and Setting of the Framework

Context

In South Africa, RPL is set in the national context “to enable potential candidates to attain recognition of the appropriate knowledge and skills required for personal development and the employment market.”⁴

The Australian RPL context is embedded in the Australian Qualifications Framework to “genuinely support students’ lifelong learning.”⁵

As might be expected, the CEDEFOP⁶ context states that “the European principles for validating non-formal and informal learning were designed to strengthen the comparability and transparency of validation approaches and methods across national boundaries. These objectives reflect the overall objective of giving value to a broader range of learning experiences and outcomes, supporting lifelong and lifewide learning.”⁷

⁴ National Policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning, page 4.

⁵ Australian Qualifications Pathways Policy, page 77.

⁶ The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)

⁷ European Guidelines, page 12.

Purpose and desired outcomes/objectives

In many respects, the UNESCO Guidelines highlight the purpose and desired outcomes reflected in the other models: “To recognize and value all types of learning and support member states to develop or improve structures and mechanisms to recognize all forms of learning”. Not surprisingly, this include “establishing equivalency frameworks.”⁸

Similarly, the CICIC Framework highlights the importance of providing opportunities to recognize the learning achievements wherever and whenever they are acquired. “Individuals who come to Canada need to show the value of their foreign education as a first step before they can enter into the workforce or study at a Canadian university or college...as a result, individuals will need to get his or her academic credentials assessed to get the recognition necessary to pursue his or her career and/or educational goals in Canada.”⁹

Value/benefits to learners, organizations, society and the nation

All models include a statement about the benefits of RPL to learners, in particular to:

- Increase mobility in education and the workplace
- Provide access to opportunities;
- Improve self-esteem
- Motivate individuals to continue to learn

The South African National Policy document sums up all of these reasons succinctly and links them to the benefits to the nation: “The objectives of the NQF (of which RPL is a key component) are designed to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.”¹⁰

Links to education, training, occupational standards and/or qualifications frameworks

South Africa, Australia, CEDEFOP and the QAA in higher education in the UK all link RPL to education, training, occupational standards and/or qualifications framework. The CEDEFOP Guidelines go so far as to say that to be of value, RPL (validation) is almost inconceivable without clearly defined and agreed reference points (national standards or learning outcomes). “While validating non-formal and informal learning is designed to be more sensitive to the circumstances of an individual learner, it is essential for the status and trust that the summative element of the

⁸ UNESCO Guidelines, page 1.

⁹ CICIC Pan-Canadian Standards in International Academic Credential Assessment—Phase II, Final Report, page 6.

¹⁰ National Policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning, page 7.

validation is based on the same standards as in the formal (education/training) system.”¹¹

II. RPL Models and Implementation

Principles

All models have statement of principles and/or key action areas. These are explicit and implicit. The UNESCO document¹² clearly reflects those cited in the other models:

RPL must be:

- Accessible
- Inclusive
- Respectful of diverse learning
- (Of) equal value to other education and training systems
- Flexible
- Supportive of partnerships among stakeholders and shared responsibility for RPL services
- Committed to quality assurance throughout the entire RPL system

Management/administration of RPL systems

CEDEFOP and South Africa pay special attention to the management and administration of RPL systems. CEDEFOP provides an excellent discussion and table to describe the roles and responsibilities of individuals, the voluntary sector, the business sector, the education and training sector, regional and national stakeholders, and at the European level in the delivery of RPL (pages 18/19). In a slightly different direction, the South African document advises that the “effective delivery of RPL” must build on “lessons learned to date in research and practice.”¹³ It goes on to urge “appropriate resourcing” in collaboration with stakeholders in the “labour market” and “national learning system.”¹⁴

Policies

Each document provides policy statements. Some are very specific, others more general. Below are examples from several the models:

- Quality assurance policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training systems (CEDEFOP)
- Quality assurance should include context, input, process and output dimensions while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes (CEDEFOP)

¹¹ CEDEFOP, page 17

¹² Pages 2/3

¹³ page 8

¹⁴ IBID.

- Recognition of prior learning or advanced standing for relevant and current informal or non-formal learning will be available for students and maybe used for entry requirements or credit towards an AQF qualification. (Australia)
- Credit can be given to students in the form of block, specified or unspecified credit (Australia)
- No distinction, other than that required for data analysis, must be made between records of learner credits and achievements for qualifications and/or part qualifications awarded as a result of RPL processes or those obtained via conventional mean. (South Africa)
- Resources and opportunities must be provided for equitable access to RPL programmes and services in a manner that is consistent with government’s commitment to redress imbalances that still exist today in our greatly unequal society and specifically the labour market. (South Africa)
- Indicator 2: Assessment policies, regulations and processes, including those for the recognition of prior learning are explicit, transparent and accessible to all intended audiences. (UK)
- Feedback on assessment is timely, constructive and developmental. (UK)

III. RPL Processes

QA procedures/standards

All organizations focus on quality assurance procedures and standards. CICIC offers a statement highly relevant to RPL services, whether delivered in an academic or other setting: “The main objective of the Quality Assurance Framework is continuing improvement of academic credential services. It requires standards of competencies of individual assessors, as well as standards...an organization should attain to sustain high-quality work in...assessment.”¹⁵ The CICIC Framework also highlights the importance of collaboration, the integrity of the process, the importance of feedback, and transparency in the quality assurance system. As summed up in the CICIC Framework, “Transparency of the entire quality assurance system gives full meaning to the concept of “*assurance*” in the eyes of clients, end users, and the general public.”¹⁶ It is worth noting that the CICIC Framework also includes two tools: one to guide an organization’s application and a second to enable an organization to complete a self-assessment and prepare a report with documentation showing how it meets CICIC’s explicit standards for the assessment of international academic credentials.¹⁷

In a similar way, the CEDEFOP Guidelines spell out the importance of quality assurance processes: “Quality Assurance processes across Europe set benchmarks

¹⁵ CICIC, page 5

¹⁶ CICIC, page 6

¹⁷ CICIC, page 18

for validation (RPL) procedures. The European principles for quality assurance in education and training can increase cross-national trust in these validation processes.”¹⁸ These Guidelines then articulate nine key principles, one of which states: quality assurance systems should include the following elements:

- Clear and measurable objectives and standards
- Guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement
- Appropriate resources
- Consistent evaluation methods, including self-assessment and external review
- Feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement
- Widely accessible evaluation results

In a summary statement, the CEDEFOP Guidelines emphasize that the Guidelines seek to show how the QA principles can establish consistency of application across the national contexts for validating non-formal and informal learning.¹⁹

National coordination

Not surprisingly, the South African, Australian, UK and the UNESCO documents stress the importance of national coordination. “The South African National Policy states that: National coordination of RPL involves a collaborative state- and stakeholder-driven approach to RPL through which the interests and needs of workers, as well as of industry, public and private providers, civil society, organized labour, the unemployed and the State are considered.” The areas cited for national coordination include: research, professionalism (continued training and development for RPL practitioners), strategic projects (in particular those that build capacity), support and advice (including toolkits, models, and guidelines), monitoring and evaluation (formative and summative) and advocacy and marketing.²⁰

As part of its national framework, the Australian document emphasizes the importance of RPL in the national Australian Qualifications Pathways Policy. It highlights the **scope** (policy applies to all education and training sectors that issue AQF qualifications); **user responsibilities** (employers, industry and professional bodies, and licensing and regulatory bodies who may use the policy to guide...the achievement of learning outcomes); and the need for **monitoring** by accrediting authorities.²¹

¹⁸ CEDEFOP, page 23

¹⁹ CEDEFOP, pages 23 – 24.

²⁰ South African National Guidelines, pages 8 – 9.

²¹ AQF Qualifications Pathways Policy, page 77.

The UK document recommends national coordination in multiple areas: training of personnel, support and advocating for learners, developing sound assessment systems, creating a fair and equitable system for credit recognition and transfer.

Most compelling of all the models, UNESCO identifies several key areas of action for individual nations:

1. Establishing RVA²² as a key component of a national lifelong learning strategy
2. Developing RVA systems that are accessible to all
3. Making RVA integral to education and training systems
4. Creating a coordinated national structure involving all stakeholders
5. Building the capacities of RVA personnel
6. Designing sustainable funding mechanisms

Assessment

Each of the organizations spells out in varying detail, key elements of assessment. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education work, and that the Chapter B6 deals with all aspects of assessment in Higher Education, it is dealt with in significant detail. Key Indicators describe expectations:

- Indicator 5: “Assessment and feedback practices are informed by reflection, consideration of professional practice, and subject specific and educational scholarship.” (Page 13)
- Indicator 8: The volume, timing and nature of assessment enable students to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes. (Page 17)
- Indicator 9: Feedback on assessment is timely, constructive and developmental. (Page 18)
- Indicator 10: Through inclusive design whenever possible, and through individual reasonable adjustments whenever required, assessment tasks provide every student with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their achievement. (Page 19)
- Indicator 11: Assessment is carried out securely. (Page 20)

CEDEFOP devotes an entire chapter to assessment. It specifies criteria needed to evaluate assessment tools and their relevance to learners’ assessment needs. It also highlights a range of assessment tools: debate, declarative methods, interview, observation, portfolio, simulation, tests and examinations among them. Some of the technical components of assessment such as validity, currency, sufficiency and authenticity, are also discussed. One of the most important points made in the assessment chapter is this: “From the beginning of the assessment stage,

²² RVA: Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (of learning)

candidates must understand the requirements and standards expected.” (Page 57)²³

Advising/guidance

In the same manner, the CEDEFOP Guidelines spells out the importance of counseling and guidance in the RPL process, emphasizing a few key points:

“Candidates need to know (about) the added value, what to expect, and what standards have to be met, and what form the evidence of learning outcomes needs to have.”²⁴ In addition, the Guidelines recommend that all learners need advice and guidance on the following:

- Timelines for validation²⁵
- Costs
- Procedures
- Forms for (acceptable) evidence
- Sufficiency of evidence
- Quality and standards
- Presentation of evidence
- Assessment and how best to approach the process
- Available support
- Appeal procedures

Timely access to information, advice and guidance is viewed as essential.”²⁶

Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders

South Africa, UNESCO and CEDEFOP each spell out the general roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the RPL process, for example:

- In South Africa, detailed responsibilities are described for educational institutions and skills development providers; recognized professional bodies; RPL practitioners; and RPL candidates.²⁷
- The UNESCO Guidelines stress that, “the quality of RPL hinges significantly on the capability of RVA administrators, assessors, facilitators, counsellors and other practitioners to set up and maintain inclusive RVA practices. The ongoing and continuous training of RVA personnel ensures reliability and trust in RVA....”

²³ CEDEFOP Guidelines, pages 58 – 65.

²⁴ CEDEFOP, page 53

²⁵ “Validation” is the term used in Europe for the Recognition of Prior Learning. In that context, validating diverse learning is viewed as an essential component of improving lifelong learning. It includes the same general RPL processes developed in North America such as orientation, advising, assessment, and “external audit” to ensure that quality standards are met.

²⁶ IBID.

²⁷ South African National Policy, pages 10 – 11.

- The European Guidelines spell out the responsibilities for educational organizations (pp 34 -39), professional bodies/regulators (pp 47 – 48), practitioners (pp 66-69) and candidates (pp 50 -54). They also set RPL in the context of “choices for individuals” and offer a detailed synopsis of those choices for individuals, underscoring that, “decision-making in these situations is often supported by (the) provision of information, advice and guidance.”

The Canadian Context

Since its introduction into Canada in the early 1980’s, the concepts, principles and tools of RPL have been explored and applied across the country hundreds, indeed, thousands of diverse contexts and situations. Education and training providers, employers, career counselors, immigrant serving organizations and so many others have enabled adult learners, job seekers, and others so seek and gain credit and recognition for their learning, regardless of how, when or where it was acquired.

Without doubt, Canada has developed a large cadre of skilled and talented RPL practitioners too, many of whom have been major contributors to the provincial, national and global evolution of the RPL movement. To support RPL processes, organizations have created policies, partnerships, standards, guidelines and networks to foster the continued development, advocacy and use of RPL in a growing number of contexts.

Not surprisingly, many of the common elements identified in international guidelines are also found in the Canadian literature. Principles and processes express the same desire to respect and value all types of learning, to ensure that processes are fair, accessible, inclusive and relevant, and to embed quality assurance mechanisms in all aspects of the RPL process. The Canadian work has also focused on the need to support the professional development of all those who advise, assess and facilitate learning and to encourage the on-going monitoring and evaluation of RPL systems—in other words, to ensure that RPL processes are quality assured throughout. Appendix A provides a short list of some of the Canadian work that has contributed to the national and global understanding of RPL and its importance to our national and provincial need to support not only work force development but to enhance our social cohesion and mobility as a nation.

While Canada has evolved in its commitment to RPL in principle, it still lacks a national and, in many cases, a provincial strategy with clear quality assurance standards to guide and enhance practice: hence, the need for the current project to develop a Pan-Canadian Framework relevant to the needs and interests of stakeholders across the country.

The results of the mapping exercise have stimulated a number of questions for Canadian stakeholders to consider and address. Their diverse answers will help us to create our

own national framework, guidelines and manual to ensure the future development of RPL across the country.

I. Background and Setting of the Framework

Context

- What is the Canadian context? Social, economic, educational, all three? National/provincial/sector or population driven?

Definition of RPL

- Can we develop a succinct one we all agree on?

Purpose and desired outcomes/objectives

- What are we hoping to achieve with this Framework? What is realistic? What change do we want to promote and support through this quality assurance Framework?

Value/Benefits to

Learners

Organizations

Society/the Nation

- Can we specify these succinctly and in such a way that is clearly inclusive, e.g., individuals from all walks of life, business, labour, professional bodies, First Nation groups, etc.
- Will we want to highlight the importance of: access, the enhancement of self-confidence, life/education/training planning/placement, credit/recognition/licensure, and so forth among many other benefits?

Links to Education/Training/Occupational Standards/Qualifications Frameworks

- Although we do not have a *national* qualifications framework like many other nations, what do we want to say about RPL's relevance to each of providers in the heading, nationally, provincially and/or locally?

II. RPL Models and Implementation

Principles

- What are the key principles most stakeholders would agree on?

Management/administration of RPL Systems

- There are many issues related to this. What can we say that would be relevant to all models?

Policies

- What are the essential ones most important to spell out?

III. RPL Processes

For each RPL process, what are the essential components/characteristics that define *quality processes*?

QA procedures/standards

- What QA procedures/standards do we want to describe and recommend?

National/provincial coordination

- Is national coordination possible in Canada? Would the coordination be independent of quality assurance practices applied to other aspects of providers' activities? If so, what would it look like and which organization(s) would/could take the lead?

Assessment

- Which tools, processes, and technical requirements need to be discussed?

Advising/guidance

- Given the variations in context and stakeholder groups, what can we say to meet the needs of most?

Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders

- Can we spell out the roles and responsibilities for each group as clearly as several of our global colleagues?

National coordinating body

Educational organizations

Professional bodies/regulators

Practitioners

Candidates

Summary

This paper provides an overview of the results of an analysis and detailed mapping exercise of six different models or frameworks of RPL in an effort to highlight quality assurance commonalities as well as differences. Interested readers will want to refer to the more detailed profiles included in Appendix A and consider the extensive work already completed here in Canada as illustrated in Appendix B. All of these resources may help us, as a broad spectrum of stakeholders, develop answers to the key questions we must pose for ourselves as we work towards a Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework for RPL in Canada.

APPENDIX A: Canadian Resources

The following chronological list highlights a few Canadian documents related to RPL practice and quality assurance. It is not intended to serve as a comprehensive list of all publications produced by RPL practitioners, researchers and/or policy makers. Rather, it provides a glimpse into the development of RPL thinking over the past 15 years.²⁸

- 14 National PLAR Standards – (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1997)
- *Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia* (10 Training Modules) – (Ministry of Advanced Education, 1997) Available at www.recognitionforlearning.ca
- *Developing Benchmarks for PLAR – Practitioner Perspectives: Guidelines for Canadian PLAR Practitioners* (Day & Zakos, 2000)
- *Halifax Declaration for Recognition of Prior Learning* (Kennedy, 2001)
- *Quality Audit Toolkit* (Barker, 2001) Available at www.recognitionforlearning.ca
- CAPLA's numerous professional development opportunities (1994 - present)
- Establishment of PLAR Practitioner competencies - Advisor, Assessor and Administrator/Facilitator (CAPLA, 2006)
- CAPLA Report: *Recognizing the Prior Learning (RPL) of Immigrants to Canada: Moving Towards Consistency and Excellence* (Riffell, 2006)
- *Quality Assurance in PLAR: A Guide for Institutions* (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007)
- *Quality Assurance in PLAR* (three volumes) (Van Kleef, Armichand, Ireland, Orynik, Potter, 2007) Available at www.recognitionforlearning.ca
- Multi-stakeholder engagement: sector councils, academic institutions, regulators at a variety of CAPLA events: *Standards and Guidelines for RPL Pre-Conference* (Banff, 2008)
- CAPLA's Standards Working Group (2008 – Present)
- CAPLA's RPL Standards Working Group report – *RPL Standards and Guidelines for Canada: Mapping the Road Ahead* (Waples, 2009)
- *QA framework – Guiding principles for credential assessors*. Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC, 2012)
- *Assessing the Skills and Knowledge of Internationally Trained Immigrants: A Manual for Regulators, Employers and other Stakeholders*. Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (Simosko, 2012)

²⁸ Members of the Pan-Canadian QA project may wish to add to this list before it is more widely distributed.