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RPL Standards and Guidelines for Canada:

Mapping the Road Ahead

A Call to Action!

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Introduction

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – assessment and recognition of skills and abilities – is a priority for workplaces, licensing and regulatory bodies, national sector councils, human resource departments, immigrant serving agencies, governments and educational systems.

Canada's recession has created a greater need for recognition of skills and learning for *all* who live and work in Canada. For example the Conference Board of Canada describes the need for "effective strategies for attracting, integrating and retaining immigrants in order to ensure sustainable competitiveness" (Conference Board of Canada, 2009). Royal Bank of Canada chief executive Gordon Nixon states "if immigrants could fully use their skills, personal income in the country could increase by $13-billion a year, and that money would have a multiplier effect in markets for housing and consumer spending, critical elements to kickstarting the economy"(Perkins, 2009). Workforce adjustments taking place across Canada are forcing many workers to find new applications for skills and knowledge. Employers are seeking more effective and efficient ways to develop employees to drive innovation and compete successfully in a global economy. Quality assurance in the practice of RPL and consistency of work by practitioners could support a speedier return to prosperity and increase individual job satisfaction.

"Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a holistic term and relates to all aspects of formal and informal recognition and assessment by combining PLAR processes and QR processes. In the case of foreign-trained individuals, RPL would also include recognition of international credentials" (Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment, 2007).

The practice of recognizing prior learning (RPL) has evolved and gained support over the past twenty five years in Canada. As increasing numbers of learners, practitioners, organizations and institutions become involved in recognizing learning, the issue of quality assurance has surfaced. The credibility and trust of systems used to identify, articulate and assess learning are being scrutinized. RPL assessments are evaluated against standards set by licensing and regulatory bodies, national sector councils, industry and workplaces; incorporated into workplace competencies and performance appraisals; linked to essential skills; and used to measure academic outcomes.

Two types of complementary standards are needed to ensure the credibility of RPL processes and practices. National standards and guidelines for the practice of RPL in Canada will enhance the integrity of systems and processes used to assess and recognize learning. Voluntary standards and certification will increase trust in and the competency of RPL Practitioners.

Quality in RPL and CAPLA's Role

Quality assurance involves issues of transparency, rigour and consistency of practice, along with validity and fair assessment of skills. To enhance the credibility of prior learning and assessment processes and to assist in facilitating the transferability and portability of credentials, stakeholders expect that quality standards and best practices will be upheld. RPL is used for a variety of purposes. Varying levels of significance and cost resulting from high stakes/low stakes assessment warrant different levels of quality assurance. An assessment is considered "high stakes" when the outcome for a successful candidate results in securing employment, attaining professional certification, accessing services of high value or presenting a significant risk to the public. The standards defined and upheld for both the RPL assessor and for the RPL assessment practices influence quality assurance and confidence in the assessment outcome.

The importance of quality assurance is widely embraced in the assessment of international credentials. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) funded a project released in December 2008, entitled *Pan-Canadian Quality Standards in International Evaluation*. Project partners included the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC), the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC).

More extensive quality assurance might be relevant in Canada in the context of Red Seal and other inter-provincial credential recognition agreements and where RPL is used to help foreign trained and qualified workers gain recognition by licensing and regulatory bodies in Canada such as the Health Professions Colleges.

CAPLA, the only national membership organization dedicated to the recognition of prior learning (RPL), has been operating since 1994. CAPLA's practitioner network including experts from across Canada and abroad has helped shape RPL in Canada. CAPLA's Strategic Plan describes a mission committed to "advancing the awareness, acceptance and quality practice of prior learning assessment and recognition in Canada and internationally". Strategic objective number three is "to foster and contribute to the creation and distribution of research and development of resources for the improvement of PLAR practice" (CAPLA, 2007).

CAPLA has hosted and contributed to numerous discussions and workshops on quality assurance in RPL practice. In March 2008, CAPLA's RPL Standards Working Group was formed in response to an increasing interest and need for further development of RPL standards in Canada. The development of two distinct quality assurance indicators – national standards and guidelines for the practice of RPL in Canada and voluntary standards and certification for individual RPL practitioners, have factored strongly in discussions.

The conditions of setting standards can only be satisfied if they are facilitated and managed by a group that is viewed as competent and trusted by the marketplace. CAPLA has the expertise and the pan-Canadian network to engage stakeholders in the further development of both national standards and guidelines for the practice of RPL as well as voluntary standards and certification for individual RPL practitioners in Canada.

Inventory of Selected Canadian Research, Events and Resources related to RPL Standards

Canadian research and development on RPL standards ensuring that individuals receive a fair assessment of skills and learning began more than ten years ago. An inventory of selected research, events and resources begins with the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) research and pan-Canadian stakeholder consultations in the creation of *14 National PLAR Standards* in 1997. Fourteen minimum standards described the framework for an effective PLAR system and became accepted principles for the establishment of good PLAR practice.

In 1998 the closing plenary session at the CAPLA/First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) Conference focused on *Developing National and Multinational Standards for the Assessment of Prior Learning*. Outcomes of the session supported the need for standards or guidelines and suggested that "PLA is spreading" and can no longer be ignored. The CAPLA Board had ongoing discussions with Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) about national standards during 1998.

Research conducted by CAPLA in 2000, focused on the development of benchmarks for PLAR practice and for the evolving roles of PLAR practitioners in Canada. This CAPLA research report described key functions of the PLAR practitioner role to "prepare the individual for assessment" and "assess the individual" and outlined performance indicators relating to each (Day, 2000). Stressing the need for "common language, principles and standards", Day & Zakos developed guidelines for PLAR practitioners. The report, *Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition – Practitioner Perspectives: Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner* encouraged practitioner engagement in the PLAR process and self assessment against the "newly-emerging benchmarks" (Day & Zakos, 2000).

In 2001, the 4th International PLAR/QR Forum, "Recognizing Learning – Building Canada's Future Prosperity – A Call to Action" was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The legacy of this forum was the Halifax Declaration for Recognition of Prior Learning (Kennedy, 2001) which affirmed three principles and four key actions for the recognition of prior learning. The second action stated "National Standards and criteria for practice must be developed and maintained in order to ensure high quality PLAR/QR services and programs and the widespread recognition of their outcomes".

A pre-conference event at the 2002 CAPLA/FNTI Conference focused on *Developing Common Standards for PLAR Practice and Training.* In 2003 the Fifth International Forum on PLAR/QR*, Recognizing Learning – Building Capacity in a Knowledge Economy*, was held in Winnipeg and CAPLA facilitated a discussion titled *National Standards, Training and Certification for PLAR*. The same year CAPLA submitted a funding proposal to HRSDC for the development of national standards (2003).

In 2005, as part of a project with CAPLA's Recognition for Learning (RFL) online community of practice, Mohawk College and the CAPLA RFL Advisory Committee led a project to identify PLAR Practitioner competencies. Data was gained through the *Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition – Practitioner Perspectives* (Day, 2000) report, PLAR Practitioner Competency Profile based on the *PLAR Practitioner DACUM* – an occupational analysis (Red River College, 2001) and an international literature search. Competencies developed for advisor, assessor and

facilitator/administrator roles are identified in the *PLAR Practitioner Competency Profile and Self-Assessment Tool* (Mohawk College & CAPLA, 2005) on the CAPLA RFL site.

CAPLA's report *Recognizing the Prior Learning (RPL) of Immigrants to Canada: Moving Towards Consistency and Excellence* (Riffell, 2006) identified seven principles with key indicators for RPL systems in working with immigrants. The 7 RPL principles include: transparency, values, pre advising/counseling, client responsive, quality assurance, evaluation/measurement and transferability.

In 2007, a CAPLA workshop titled *Feasibility of Developing a National Framework/Model to Assess Immigrant Learning* was facilitated by Susan Simosko. Thirty nine participants contributed to the session and endorsed the need for a national Framework/Model. Key stakeholders affirmed interest in developing, implementing and evaluating the national framework (Simosko, 2007).

At CAPLA's Fall Focus 2007 conference, Lenore Burton, Director General in the Learning Branch at HRSDC moderated a panel discussion reviewing the CLFDB's PLAR standards, the progress that has been made over the past 10 years and the application of the standards by organizations providing PLAR services. In another workshop Morris Fiddler presented Revising the 'Assessing Learning' Publication, published by the Council on Adult Experiential Learning (CAEL) – A Dialogue about Change. He described updates for the 1989 book on standards and principles for PLA (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker, 2006).

CAPLA's RPL Standards Working Group, formed in March 2008 and made up of individuals from all regions of Canada, confirmed Terms of Reference and declared its purpose "to facilitate and promote discussion regarding development, validation and implementation of standards and guidelines for the practice of RPL in Canada and voluntary standards and certification for individual RPL practitioners". In addition to leading discussions and engaging the broader RPL community in issues related to quality RPL practice and the connection to standards and guidelines, this group will assist CAPLA's Executive Director with the development of funding proposals for this initiative.

In 2007 a research project Quality Assurance in PLAR (3 volumes): Issues and Strategies for Post Secondary Institutions, A Guide for Institutions and Annotated Bibliography (Van Kleef et al., 2007) described strategies for enhancing quality assurance in RPL. One of the specific conclusions states, "The quality of prior learning assessment outcomes rests heavily on the qualifications of assessors – their ability to select or develop appropriate assessment tools and to make reasonable judgments on submitted evidence". Volume II, Quality Assurance in PLAR– A Guide for Institutions also references the importance of standards for PLAR practitioners and states, "Assessor qualifications are the essence of PLAR quality."

Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada (Morrissey & Myers 2008) highlights "international models for RPL and PLAR". It describes the European Union (EU) Commission's plan to harmonize member states' qualification systems in the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF). Recommendations in the report include actions to promote the "elaboration of a Canadian vision and policy strategy for PLAR". Actions included "review and further development of the principles for validating informal and experiential learning in Canada through an ongoing Canada-wide conversation with input from a wide range of stakeholders,

development of a model for validating informal and experiential learning as a parallel and legitimate route to employment, career advancement, enhanced community and family engagement as well as certification and credentialing and development of quality assurance practices for PLAR" (Morrissey & Myers, 2008).

Alberta Advanced Education and Technology released *Advancing PLAR in Alberta: An Action Plan* that states "PLAR can be beneficial to all Albertans but is particularly beneficial to people who have not previously identified themselves as learners; people with informal learning gained through life, work and training; immigrants; and individuals transferring among learning providers, across provincial boundaries or across professions" (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2008). Five outcomes and ten action strategies were identified to assist in achieving the action plan. The five outcomes include "increased information, awareness and support for PLAR; quality assurance for PLAR; increased capacity of the system to engage in PLAR practices; and connection of PLAR providers and services".

Saskatchewan's Recognizing Prior Learning Coordinating Group (RCG) commissioned a study to determine the need for RPL programs and services. The final report *Recognizing Prior Learning in Saskatchewan – Provincial Needs Assessment & Blueprint for Action* describes an "increasing level of attention being paid to appropriate ways to prepare and support practitioners". To incorporate core RPL principles and accommodate the "diverse backgrounds and qualifications of those now working in the field, it will remain a challenge to maintain accessibility and openness while at the same time encouraging high-quality level service and performance". Action strategies include website development, awareness building, capacity building, enhanced client centered learning tools and networking (Garven & Associates, 2008).

Key resources influencing the development of national standards and practices include the Canadian Labour Force Development Board's *14 National PLAR Standards* (CLFDB, 1997); Council for Adult and Experiential Learning's *Ten Quality Standards* (CAEL, 1989 & 2006); *National Benchmarks for PLAR Practitioners* (CAPLA, 2000); *PLA/PLAR Quality Audit* (FuturEd, 2001); *Recognizing the Prior Learning of Immigrants to Canada: Moving Towards Consistency and Excellence* (Riffell, 2006); *PLAR Practitioner Competency Profile and Self-Assessment Tool* (Mohawk College & CAPLA, 2005); *Assessing Learning, Standards, Principles and Procedures* (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker, 2006); *Quality Assurance in PLAR (3 volumes): Issues and Strategies for Post-secondary Institutions, A Guide for Institutions, and Annotated Biblio*graphy (Van Kleef et al., 2007); *Pan- Canadian Quality Standards in International Credential Evaluation* (Johnson, 2008); and the *PLAR Practitioner DACUMs* (Red River College, 2001 & 2007).

Selected International Research, Events and Resources

Numerous pan Canadian and international agreements have impacted the evolution of quality assurance in RPL. These include the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Report, Academic Mobility Agreements, Multilateral Qualification Recognition Agreements, Foreign Credential Recognition, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Lisbon Convention, Bologna Process, Bergen Declaration ,

North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), International Organization for Standardization ISO 17024 and National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA).

Historically, in other countries where RPL has been used for high stakes purposes or the acquisition of a credential awarded by an external body, it is not unusual to find that not only are standards defined for the assessor but also that the prospective assessor has to demonstrate his or her competence and, subsequently, be subject to quality assurance processes. Examples are the National and Scottish Vocational Qualifications in the United Kingdom and their equivalents in Australia, New Zealand and other countries. In the UK it was relatively easy to introduce this requirement in the early 1990s because most employment-related credentials are awarded nationally (but subject to local assessment) and a similar requirement was introduced for assessors of current learning, usually post-secondary lecturers and work-based or training company trainers.

Highlights of selected international research regarding the evolution of quality assurance and standards for RPL follow. These examples in addition to the work completed in Australia, New Zealand, Norway, France and South Africa show the growing emphasis on quality standards for the field of practice and practitioners.

The European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning were developed with input from 26 countries and stress the importance of integrating the validation into the national qualifications system. The validation of recently developed national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) aims to increase access, improve progression and facilitate transfer of qualifications (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 2009).

The first model of quality assurance for accreditation of prior learning (APL) in the Netherlands was introduced in 2004. In 2005 the Dutch Cabinet and Social Partners determined the need for a covenant for quality assurance and in 2006 *A Quality Code for APL* was introduced. All national stakeholders signed the covenant confirming agreement to promote APL and quality assurance (Kaemingk, 2008).

To ensure consistency in recognizing prior informal learning (RPL), the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) identified "core principles and key features of the RPL process". Quality practice is promoted through principles including learner focused, accessibility, flexibility, reliability, transparency and consistency, clarity of role definition, and quality (Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, 2005).

In Ireland the National Qualifications Authority published principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in further and higher education and training (2006). The Qualifications Authority facilitates the harmonization and coordination of RPL processes and the guidelines are meant to increase access, progression and transfer for learners (National Framework of Qualifications, 2006).

In the UK, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), commissioned a study of current Accreditation and or Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning practices. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) conducted a brief survey which uncovered several examples of good practice as well as inconsistencies in terminology, systems and processes. Findings were included in the

report *Accreditation and Recognition of Prior Experience and Learning* (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 2008).

National Qualifications Frameworks, and regional mega- frameworks such as the European Qualifications Framework, provide support and clarification for lifelong learning routes. RPL is included not only as an underlying principle to support ongoing learning, but also as an accepted route of recognition. Quality assurance is a key requirement in Qualifications Framework implementation and delivery. Within the RPL process of Qualifications Frameworks, the requirement for assessors to be trained in assessment and RPL principles and processes is critical. Some Frameworks such as Australia require proof of competency for RPL assessors.

In Canada, there is no policy 'home for RPL' as a part of a lifelong learning framework. Lessons learned from the experience and research of other countries that are far ahead in the development of Qualifications Frameworks and the integration of RPL principles and quality practices may assist in advancing Canadian work.

Recent Discussions and Research on RPL Standards in Canada

At the 2008 CAPLA conference-*RPL: Building on a Decade of Collaboration and Innovation*, CAPLA's RPL Standards Working Group planned and hosted a one day pre-conference workshop - *Voluntary Standards and Guidelines for RPL*. Phillip Mondor, Senior Vice President – Canadian Tourism Human Resource Council, and Deb Blower, RPL Facilitator – Red River College facilitated the session which focused on the exploration of voluntary standards and guidelines for the RPL practitioner and the field of practice.

The pre conference began with an inventory of research and resources focused on selected Canadian and international research, events, resources and quality assurance practices that have influenced the evolution and development of RPL standards and guidelines. The *Voluntary Standards and Guidelines for RPL* workshop included 3 international and 24 other participants from Canadian colleges, universities, sector councils, apprenticeship branches, recognizing learning associations and government agencies.

Research conducted by the Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC) in partnership with the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) was shared. TASC, working with CSA gathered a representative group of stakeholders and used a consensus process to develop "guidelines to support the delivery of national occupational standards, personnel certification programs, and accreditation programs for educational or training courses or programs" (TASC, 2008). The resulting document *Setting the Standard* includes voluntary guidelines intended to "inform systems that will improve the mobility of learners and skilled workers and ensure the continued competitiveness of Canada's labour market". *Setting the Standard* outlines principles for accreditation programs as well as national occupational standards which include: accessible, equitable and fair; coherence and rigour; confidentiality; consensus; current, relevant, and valid; harmonization; impartiality and independence; openness and transparency; sustainability; and voluntary.

An international guest, Erik Kaemingk, Director Kenniscentrum EVC the Knowledge Centre of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) described the evolution of quality assurance in the Netherlands. APL began in the 1990's and by 2004 the first model of quality assurance was introduced. In 2005 the Dutch Cabinet and Social Partners determined the need for a covenant for quality assurance and in 2006 *A Quality Code for APL* was introduced. All national stakeholders signed the covenant confirming agreement to promote APL and quality assurance.

Tasked with identifying a potential rationale for endorsing further development of pan Canadian **RPL quality standards** the participants noted that RPL standards would help to:

- inform practice and promote benefits of RPL
- validate RPL processes
- define outcomes and provide confidence and trust in the process
- ensure consistency, rigour, efficiency and transparency of practice
- benchmark best practices
- provide assurance that competitive and ethical quality requirements are met and ultimately that clients are well served
- enable mobility of workers and learners
- articulate and promote portability of assessments

Identifying a potential rationale for endorsing pan Canadian **RPL practitioner competencies/standards**, the group noted that RPL practitioner competencies would help to:

- validate the credibility of recognizing learning systems
- identify guidelines to inform practice involving training, monitoring and other strategies
- establish training frameworks
- facilitate continuous improvement within professional practice and endorsement of the profession
- enable recognition of professional competent RPL practitioners
- define assessment outcomes to ensure transparency and consistency of practice
- support harmonization
- define and endorse benchmarking and best practice guidelines
- assist in facilitating mobility of workers/learners and transferability of competencies

Key markets and stakeholders identified for both RPL quality standards and RPL practitioner competentices were industry, employers, educators, academic institutions, RPL practitioners (advisors, assessors, administrators), professional bodies, government, individuals, tradespersons, organizations, institutions, special interest groups (immigrant serving bodies), regulatory bodies, umbrella organizations, professional licensing bodies, trade and union advisory committees, as well as international individuals, institutions and governments.

Participants shared feedback on the proposed framework model – TASC's *Setting the Standards Report*. The report prescribes a consensus process involving a representative group of stakeholders and the

attainment of viable, comprehensive, coherent, measurable, competency-based occupational standards. The process requires national validation by industry/sector and other relevant stakeholders. Comments from the participants described the need to maintain a 'client-centric' approach, to seek partners wherever possible and to link to other related standards setting work (such as The Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada, ACESC). Identified needs included the involvement of stakeholders beyond CAPLA membership and the provision of opportunities to engage at different levels and with varied options. Case studies, stories and examples that illustrate practice can be effective learning tools. Prior to implementation, participants suggested testing the standards through the establishment of pilot projects. Maintaining the interest and engagement of stakeholders is critical and a challenge was set to keep the stakeholders involved. Measuring success is important and stakeholders will need to see evidence of the review and results of the evaluation process. Participants advocated finding ways to build public awareness and to engage government systems.

The *Voluntary Standards and Guidelines for RPL* workshop concluded with a discussion of potential challenges, limitations and risks. Contributions from participants, included:

- the ability to sustain a pan-Canadian standard (e.g. on-going funding, or some form of infrastructure)
- the assurance of succession planning and legacy continuity
- remaining cognizant of emergent issues including responsiveness to labour supply/shortages, and labour adjustment requirements
- ensuring an inclusive approach to differing priorities in the field of RPL
- the need to work closely with governments
- moving forward in a proactive mode
- securing resources and funding
- achieving stakeholder awareness and buy-in
- establishing a focus on priorities
- building a model that is accessible and straightforward

Results of the *Voluntary Standards and Guidelines for RPL* pre conference included the development of a legacy report, and the continuing conversation via CAPLA's Recognition for Learning (RFL) site resources and discussion forum.

Future RPL Standards Work in Canada – A Call to Action

Canada has strong PLAR/RPL Practitioner networks with crucial links to CAPLA, the voice of the Canadian RPL Practitioner since 1994. Provincial RPL networks are currently in place in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and are under development in other provinces. Quebec established 8 sub-committees to standardize RPL practice including a committee on quality assurance. These Practitioner networks, with integral connections to CAPLA will strengthen the development and validation of RPL standards and guidelines for Canada.

CAPLA initiated an International Prior Learning Assessment Network (IPLAN) to exchange ideas and resources on the recognition of prior learning. The topics of quality practice and practitioner standards are key discussion issues in this developing international network. An RPL Practitioner Network (RON),

has recently been initiated in Australia and a network is developing in Scotland. Both countries have existing quality assurance systems for RPL practice and would be key resources for Canadian work.

Building on more than a decade of recognized practice, CAPLA is well positioned to lead a multi-stakeholder collaborative process of developing viable, comprehensive, coherent, measurable standards for the field of practice and occupational standards for the RPL practitioner. Results from the RPL Standards Working Group's workshop – *Voluntary Standards and Guidelines for RPL* at the CAPLA 2008 Conference in Banff support the commitment to move this initiative forward.

CAPLA's RPL Standards Working Group recommends:

- Dissemination of *RPL Standards and Guidelines for Canada: Mapping the Road Ahead* report at the CAPLA Fall Focus 2009 conference and further discussion at the Conversation Café learning event
- Further discussion with the RPL Standards Working Group and implementation of an RPL Standards discussion forum on CAPLA's RFL site
- Presentation of *RPL Standards and Guidelines for Canada: Mapping the Road Ahead* report to CAPLA's Strategic Advisory Panel on RPL
- Development of an RPL Standards funding proposal (i.e. need, scope, work plan, budget, constraints, timeline)
- Consultation with CAPLA's International PLA Network (IPLAN) to investigate and clarify international initiatives
- Creation of RPL Standards Steering Committee to include representative groups of stakeholders
- Communication of ongoing RPL Standards initiatives

Research and current practice across Canada and internationally, document a compelling need for RPL standards for the field of practice as well as voluntary standards and certification for RPL practitioners to ensure the quality and credibility of RPL systems and practices.

Action is needed! CAPLA invites all stakeholders to become involved and to contribute to an RPL standards initiative to advance quality RPL practice in Canada.

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