



**DEVELOPMENT OF A
PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION MODEL
FOR THE
ATLANTIC HOME BUILDING & RENOVATION SECTOR
COUNCIL**

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1.0 Professionalization and PLAR in Nova Scotia

The Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council is developing a professionalization program for the industry in Nova Scotia. The industry has taken this initiative in response to a number of emerging human resource development challenges and opportunities described in the discussion paper for the PRO SPEC 2004 conference on this subject.

One high priority objective of the professionalization strategy is to address serious skills shortages arising from steady growth in the industry, demographic trends and recruitment issues. Another is to respond to the increased knowledge and skills required to take advantage of new technologies, building methods and materials. The industry is concerned that the training and apprenticeships systems are not generating enough graduates with specific home builder and renovator skill sets. There is a lack of affordable, accessible and effective programs to meet the ongoing learning and professional development needs of the current labour force.

While apprenticeship is accepted as the most useful model in training and recruiting new entrants into the residential construction industry, the current programs are not sufficiently tailored to the specific knowledge and skill requirements of the sector.

Finally, the underground economy represents the largest barrier to improved employment conditions and is estimated to generate 25% of GDP for the sector. Professionalization would contribute significantly to limiting the underground activity through licensing and improved public awareness.

A key component of the professionalization strategy is the development a new licensing and certification system to provide formal recognition of the competencies of both business operators or contractors and specialized trades. Entry to this new certification system will be relatively straightforward for new entrants. The integration of the existing workforce into the system, however, will present a major challenge. There are three alternative ways to address this challenge.

The first would be to “grandfather” everyone currently in the industry with a certain number of years of experience into this new framework and apply the new standards only to new entrants. This approach would formally recognize the depth and range of experiential learning, skills and competencies which most would agree the workforce already possesses (otherwise they would not have survived that long), but it will not specifically identify the skills and competency levels of those individuals or prepare and encourage them to move to the higher industry standards that are required. In other words, the individuals and the industry could rightly claim that the workforce is highly skilled and competent, but

would not be able to offer convincing proof that this was the case to the public or to other agencies.

A second option would be for industry to make provisions for all those who lack formal credentials to take the training programs needed to gain such accreditation. In many cases, however, this would be highly impractical for a number of reasons, including the high financial cost, the high rates of dropout and the disruptions for the family, workplace and community.

PLAR represents a third option, as an effective middle way. It enables individuals to identify and demonstrate the knowledge, skills and competencies they have gained both from formal and informal education and training and on-the-job experience, and to build upon those learning strengths by identifying and addressing skills and competency gaps in a much more targeted and efficient way. PLAR enhances and formally recognizes the skills employees already possess, and encourages and supports development of new skills and knowledge. And it enables employers to utilize and evaluate their training time and dollars much more efficiently and effectively.

2.0 A New Approach to Skills, Learning and Professional Development: PLAR Principles, Processes and Definitions

The basic principle of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is that what matters most is what you know and can do, rather than where or how you learned it. Most of us, however, think of learning in terms of the formal education and training we have received and the paper qualifications that go along with them. Certainly that is an important part of our learning, but we all know that we also learn many important things on-the-job or in our community or with our family and through all the other activities we do.

We don't pay much attention, however, to this 'experiential' learning – the knowledge and skills we have acquired outside the classroom. Furthermore, once we have learned something on-the-job or in our other activities, and feel confident and comfortable in applying that knowledge or skill, we forget about it and take it for granted. As a result most of us seriously underestimate the extent and depth of our knowledge and skills.

In an industry that is undertaking a professionalization strategy, and which has a long tradition of on-the-job learning, it is essential to pay attention to the experiential as well as the formal skills and learning of the existing workforce - to identify it, demonstrate it, record it and recognize it.

PLAR provides a well-tested, high-quality and credible process to do this. PLAR can be applied in various ways and combinations. It can be done in small chunks – through an individual's demonstration that he or she has a specific skill by actually doing it. It can also be done in a comprehensive and systematic way – through the development of a Skills and Learning Portfolio that identifies, documents and demonstrates a detailed account of the full range of what an individual knows and can do. In other words, over time, it helps an individual to play with the 'full deck' of their skills and learning 'cards'.

Enabling employees to better understand and 'recognize' their learning strengths and assets, through the application of PLAR principles and practices, builds confidence. It also helps them identify their skills gaps, and increases their motivation to tackle them and the likelihood of their success in doing so. For employers, it improves workforce morale, enhances staff deployment and targets training dollars more effectively. In terms of the industry as a whole, it provides credible evidence of a commitment to high quality and improved professional standards.

The key 'learning' terms used in this report – and what they mean – include the following:

- ▲ *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (PLAR) – sometimes also referred to simply as *Recognizing Prior Learning* (RPL) – refers to a principle that assumes that ‘experiential’ skills and learning is as important as ‘formal’ education and training. It also means a process that enables individuals to identify, record, demonstrate and combine both types of learning.
- ▲ *Competency* refers to an ability to perform specific tasks that require a combination of skills, knowledge and experience.
- ▲ *Assessment* refers to process of developing and reviewing evidence in order to evaluate whether a competency has been achieved. Usually thought of in terms of external evaluations, it can include ‘self-assessment’ as well.
- ▲ *Assessment Guide/Tool* refers to a particular method used for collecting, recording and tracking information and evidence of an individual’s competencies.
- ▲ *Skill and Learning Portfolio Development* refers to a systematic process through which individuals can build a well-documented and presented account of their comprehensive skills and learning assets.

3.0 Worker Profile

There are about 13,000 people employed in the residential construction industry. According to the 1996 census 48% of the workers have some college, technical or trades school, however only 5 to 7 % have received a certificate or diploma for this training and 35% have not completed high school. This figure is below the provincial average for high school completion.

According to the Human Resources Study for the Home Building and Renovation Sector, completed in 2000, on average workers in the residential construction industry work 33.7 weeks per year and earn an average income of \$27,000. Trades people in the industry are generally hired on a project basis and change employers often.

In the PLAR workshop at the Pro-Spec Conference in Halifax in March 2004, it was a concern of some employers that some employees who have been in the industry for a long time and are excellent at their jobs – but have few formal qualifications – would be made to feel inferior through the PLAR process. They were concerned that their lack of participation in the public school system would work against these employees during a PLAR process. It will be particularly important in this situation to demonstrate that the spirit and principles of PLAR reflects and values the industry culture of experiential learning and builds confidence and self-esteem.

4.0 Case Studies

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is used to evaluate and recognize competencies in the workplace in various parts of Canada and around the world. There are initiatives in Britain, South Africa, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Denmark, Ireland, Slovenia, and the Philippines.

Some of these countries are developing or have developed a national vocational training system that integrates the workplace with the training and education institutions. PLAR or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is being used to bring the existing workforce into the standards created by industry committees.

There are at least three distinct motivations and contexts for using PLAR in the workplace.

1. When governments, through a political decision, form a framework for vocational training that requires a PLAR program to bring existing workers up to the new certification standards;
2. When a company wants to standardize, recognize and upgrade the competencies of workers in a certain job; and/or
3. When an industry sector in partnership with government decides to standardize, recognize and upgrade the competencies needed to participate in a particular occupation.

The following case studies show the use of PLAR in these contexts.

4.1 Government: Construction Training Australia

Australia has developed a comprehensive training and qualification structure. The National Training Framework is industry-led and designed to:

- ▲ provide high-quality skill outcomes to maintain individuals' employability and increase their productivity ;
- ▲ provide for nationally recognized qualifications; and
- ▲ improve the competitiveness of businesses and of the nation.

Australian Quality Training Framework is a set of nationally agreed on standards ensuring the quality of vocational education and training countrywide.

The Training Packages are developed by national industry training advisory bodies (ITABs) and approved by the national body. They contain all the essential components of a skills development system:

- ▲ Competency Standards;
- ▲ Assessment Guidelines; and
- ▲ Training resources.

These Training Packages can be used by business to implement skills development and for workers to have their existing skills formally recognized. They may also obtain additional training to close skill gaps or enhance current and future employment opportunities. Qualifications can be obtained by work performance or in a training environment. This training can be provided on or off the job by workplace trainers, or by their Registered Training Organizations.

The PLAR Assessment Guidelines provide the ways through which the competencies of an employee/learner may be assessed against the competency standards. The Assessment Guidelines are designed to be flexible to accommodate both the institutional and workplace contexts. They work to ensure “validity, reliability and fairness”. Each industry can decide how their assessment system will operate.

This approach is based on the fundamental principle that “the major consideration in any assessment must be the attainment of the required standard of performance rather than how the competencies may have been acquired.”¹

The Guidelines also say “it is of paramount importance that assessment instruments are in accordance with the level of language and literacy required by the assessee to achieve competence in the workplace.”²

The program guide states “Assessors are the principal drivers in delivering a responsive, efficient and high quality assessment system.” They have the responsibility for:

- ▲ Determining the application of the assessment process

¹ Training Package for the General Construction Stream for the Building and Construction Industry. BCG98, page 3.

² General Construction Training Package, page 4.

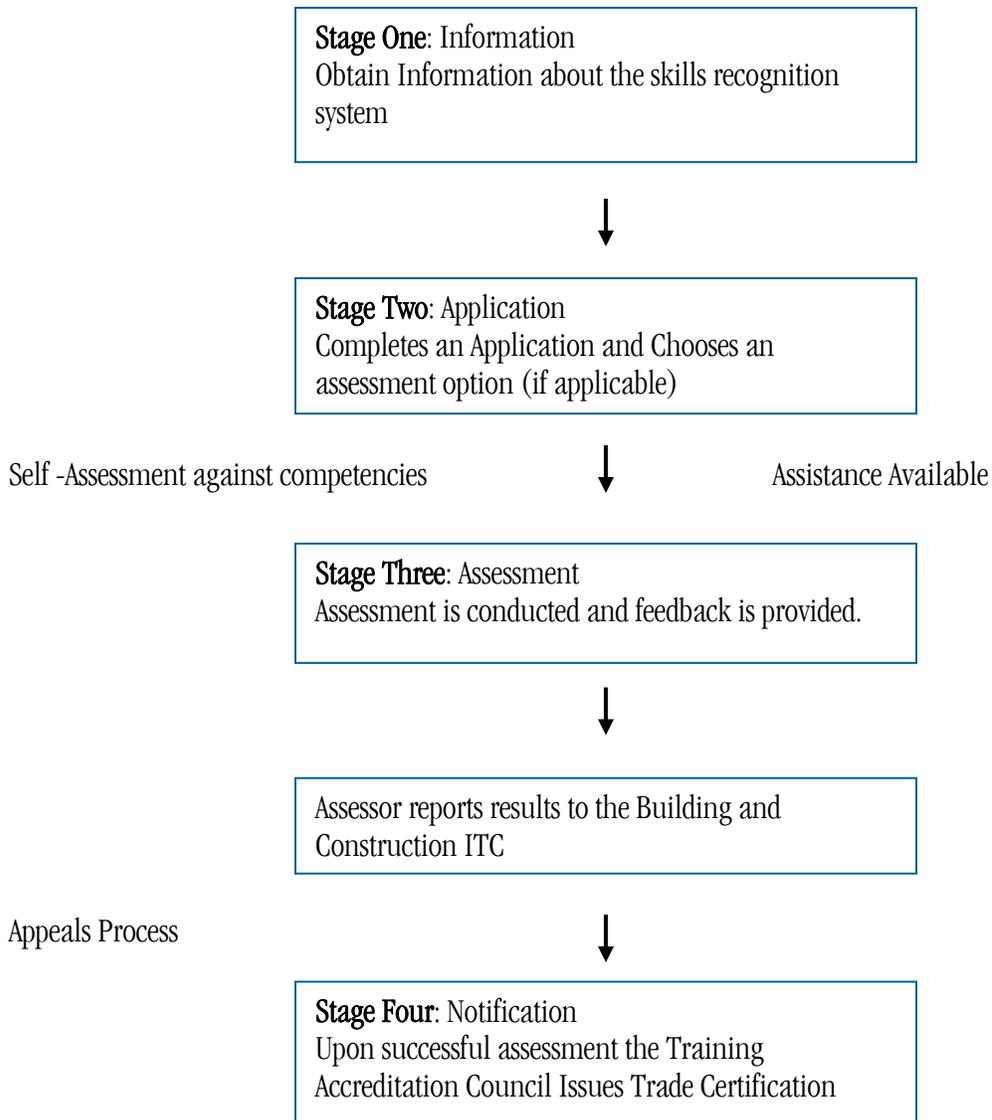
- ▲ Utilizing appropriate assessment strategies and instruments
- ▲ Conducting the assessment process
- ▲ Making accurate and informed judgments
- ▲ Recording and informing all relevant parties of the outcome of the assessment process³

Assessors must be competent in the process of assessment and in the building and construction field. They must also be technically competent and have attained at least the level of qualification that they are assessing. Having the assessment co-facilitated by an expert industry member and an expert assessor may fulfill the requirement for the assessor to have industry qualifications.

A training package is provided for assessors. It sets out the guidelines for designing the assessment instruments but does not include these instruments. This package covers a wide range of industry sectors and it is left up to the specific industry sector to design their own instruments.

The Building and Construction Industry Training Council provides the assessment system and services for their sector. The system is laid out as a four-stage process.

³ General Construction Training Package: Section 2 Assessor Qualifications and Training, page 6.



4.2 Industry: British Columbia Credit Unions

In the mid-1990s the BRITISH COLUMBIA Credit Unions implemented an employer-based PLAR process for service representatives. The process relied on three key principles:

- ▲ The standards or workplace expectations for fully competent performance must be clear and assessable;
- ▲ The service representative is responsible for identifying and documenting his/her satisfactory performance against each of the standards; and

- ▲ Supervisors play a key role in the learning and assessment process.

The process was implemented in three stages:

- ▲ Development;
- ▲ Implementation; and
- ▲ Evaluation.

Details follow on each of these.

Development

During the development stage, the representatives of several different credit unions participated in a series of focus groups to develop clear and assessable standards of practice for service representatives. These standards served as the workplace expectations for each employee. The standards described the primary functions assumed by service representatives, the activities required to fulfill each function and a series of indicators of good practice that served to answer the question, “How will we know when a service representative is performing well consistently?”

Also during this stage, credit union supervisors identified the nature of the interactions and/or evidence required for each of the standards. This gave service representatives and their supervisors a clear notion of exactly what would be required to receive credit and recognition for each of the standards.

Lastly during this stage, a logbook was created. The logbook was intended to serve as both a self-assessment and a learning and assessment tool.

Implementation

During the implementation stage, each participating credit union provided orientation to service representatives and distributed the logbooks. The project was described as an opportunity for all service representatives to learn and develop at work and to receive the recognition they deserved. Supervisors also received orientation and support.

Throughout the implementation stage, service representatives kept a record in their logbooks of their successful interactions and other activities against the standards. Every few weeks, employees met with their supervisors to review the logbook entries. When supervisors supported the service representative’s entries, he/she signed the logbook. As part of the assessment process, supervisors often asked a series of

questions to make sure the service representative could also respond to related contingencies before signing the logbook. In some cases, of course, the supervisor felt the service representative was not working to “standard.” This gave the supervisor an opportunity to provide additional support and/or advice. The service representative then had another period of time in which to demonstrate his/her competence against the standards.

It is important to add that service representatives could also present examples of successful performance from their volunteer and other personal learning activities too. These were validated through oral questioning by the supervisor.

Evaluation

During the final stage, evaluation, the credit unions investigated every aspect of the new program. There were three primary findings from the evaluations: in those credit unions that had participated in the pilot program, profits were up by more than 70%; turnover was significantly reduced; and morale much improved.

4.3 Partnership: Professional Fish Harvester Certification Board of Newfoundland and Labrador

The Professional Fish Harvester Certification Board of Newfoundland and Labrador was established in 1997 under provincial legislation. It was born of a consultation with fish harvesters from around the province who agreed that they wanted to institute mandatory certification.

There are three levels of certification (Apprentice, Level I, Level II) and harvesters are required to accumulate a specific number of full-time fishing years as well as education credits to move from one level to the next.

The First Stage of Professionalization

In 1997 all existing fish harvesters were assessed and “grandparented” to the appropriate certification level. The “grandparenting” criteria were based on historical attachment to the industry. This attachment to the industry was calculated on the basis of number of years in the industry. Fish harvesters also had to prove that they made the majority of their income during the fishing season from fishing. This was done in an effort to keep the fish harvesting trade exclusively for harvesters that were solely depended on fish harvesting for their income. Those who qualified through these two criteria

were grandparented to Level II and were not required to complete any further certification training. Others were grandparented to Level I, or Apprentice, depending on their attachment and were required to gain education credits in order to upgrade their certification level.

The Second Stage - PLAR

Subsequent to the “grandparenting” process it was recognized that many harvesters possessed a great deal of prior learned skills from years of informal learning. Returning to the classroom for these harvesters would be a duplication of learning and a waste of time and money. The Certification Board was also concerned that sending people to school who had the skills and knowledge they needed would make people resentful of the certification system.

To solve this problem they developed and implemented a PLAR model. They initially piloted the program and found it to be an extremely successful transition tool. “PLAR proved to be a very effective transition tool for bridging a 400 year tradition of learn-by-doing education and the new certification system” PLAR proposal 2000.

Over 4,000 harvesters required a number of land-based credits to upgrade to Level II. Only Level II harvesters are entitled to acquire a core fishing enterprise, which brings independence, security and increased annual income for the harvester. It was important to make the move from Level I to Level II as smooth as possible. The Certification Board did not want the process to be an insurmountable barrier for existing harvesters. Also they recognized that PLAR would ease the transition into formal fishery training. They saw PLAR as helping adult learners see the formal training environment as supportive and welcoming rather than daunting.

The Process

The Fish Harvesters Certification Board trained peer assessors to undertake the assessment. During the pilot there were 16 peer assessors. These assessors, all Level II Certified Professional Fish Harvesters, were given a two-week workshop and then a refresher for the subsequent round of assessments. The assessors and their work were audited by the Marine Institute to ensure they were following the guidelines and treating each applicant fairly and respectfully.

An information package was sent to all Level I and Level II harvester, explaining PLAR and the PLAR process. They also received an application form that listed their fishing experience. They also promoted the PLAR process through formal and informal media. Final participants were forwarded copies of the learning outcomes for each course.

Assessments were scheduled throughout the province. Individual course assessments took between one and two hours and participants could be assessed in six to eight courses in one day depending on the courses selected. The assessment process included both comprehensive oral explanation and hands on demonstrations. The assessor completed a detailed record of the standardized grading. These were returned to the PFHCB for review. Participants were contacted with the outcome and their certification level or next steps.

All through the process the assessors were encouraged to create a comfortable atmosphere for the participants and to ensure they had every opportunity to display their knowledge and skills.

During the second round of assessments the assessors also conducted a Training Needs Assessment to identify long term training needs and determine the degree of Essential Skills training necessary.

The assessment tool was created by the Marine Institute in conjunction with the PFHCB. A sample copy is attached to this report as Appendix B.

5.0 Lessons Learned

5.1 Overview

Each context for using PLAR has a similar desired outcome. That is to assist the employee to articulate and demonstrate their skills. This can be done to give a credential, identify deficits in a workforce and to address those deficits to increase productivity.

For the Home Building and Renovation industry in Nova Scotia the desired outcome is to bring the current workforce into a certification program. This will cut across many different occupations from contractors to individual trade specialization, to full trade carpenters.

Both the Professional Fish Harvesters in Newfoundland and Labrador, and the Australian Construction Council had the same path for the applicant; promotion, application, self and/or guided assessment, evaluation of the assessment, assessment results and next steps for the applicant.

The Australian model is applied to a variety of trades and trade specialties that will be similar to the Nova Scotia home building industry. It has the following Qualifications:

- ▲ Certificate I in Construction, Certificate II in General Construction, Certificate III in General Construction; and
- ▲ Certificate III in General Construction in these specific trade specialties; Wall and Floor tiling; Wall and Ceiling lining; Solid Plastering; Painting and Decorating; Structural Cladding; Bricklaying/Blocklaying; Carpentry framework/formwork/finishing; Roof tiling; Materials Handling; Demolition; Stonemasonry; and Concreting/Steelfixing.

The Fish Harvesters have three levels of certification and the individuals are tested on all the skill areas that are covered in the formal training curriculum. Their assessment processes are very relevant to the design of a system in Nova Scotia. They both focus on the industry expertise of the assessor and creating an environment where the individual is calm and clear enough to do the work they need to demonstrate their competencies. Both systems also ensure that there are provisions for the language and literacy capabilities of the assessee.

In each case the applicants are given the guidelines ahead of time so they know what to expect. The Australian model gives applicants a check- list of competencies to take home. The Newfoundland and Labrador model does all the assessment with the assessor but the list of topics and competencies to be

covered is available in advance.

In all three cases the applicants need to provide evidence or demonstrate that they have the necessary competencies. The fish harvesters are all required to do hands on demonstrations in particular skill areas. The Australian construction industry group also uses hands on demonstration as part of their evidence but it appears that these are not static and are decided by the assessor. The demonstration of competencies is an expensive procedure and in the Nova Scotia model should be limited where possible. The Australian model also uses written evidence in the form of written acknowledgment from employers and/or supervisors.

The British Columbia Credit Union model is different in that the assessment process happens in the workplace. The demonstration of competencies takes place as they are doing them, it is not a retrospective. The supervisors are the assessors. The employees, over time, fill in their logbook as they complete the required competencies. The supervisor then signs off on the individual competencies. Logbooks are a useful tool. They are used in the apprenticeship system in Ontario and in a variety of other areas. They could be used to great advantage in the AHB&RSC PLAR model.

5.2 Cost to participant

In each of the systems steps have been taken to ensure that fees do not create a barrier for the applicant. The fee for a fish harvester assessment is \$35.00. This is possible through funding given to the Certification Board by the federal and provincial governments to subsidize the program.

In Australia the cost to the person seeking assessment in building and construction training is \$350 Australian dollars plus the cost of materials and facility rental for practical demonstrations. The Construction Training Association subsidizes this fee.

In another Canadian example fees for PLAR in the Apprenticeship System in Alberta are \$100/period (Carpentry has 4 periods) in addition to any practical exams that may be needed. The Carpentry program fees for the practical exam range in cost from \$195 to \$205. This is almost equivalent to the cost of attending school during the Apprenticeship program in Nova Scotia.

In Nova Scotia the cost of tuition for the two-year or three-year carpentry Apprenticeship pre-employment program at the Nova Scotia Community College is \$2,300/year. During a regular Apprenticeship program the Apprentices will attend school through four levels. Each level requires completion of 5 courses and the cost per course is \$65. At the end of his/her Apprenticeship the student

will have paid \$325/year to a total of \$1,300 over the 4 years.

When setting the fees for the assessment, two considerations should be taken to account. The first is the cost of tuition set by the Community College. Assessment fees should not exceed the cost of acquiring the in-school Apprenticeship program course credits. The second consideration is the average annual income of the employees in this occupational group. The 1996 Census indicates that the average income of workers in this field was \$27,000/year. If there is a large cost to the workers, they will avoid the process. Obtaining good value for the dollar, and not placing an increased burden on the applicant, is important. This may necessitate identifying a means to subsidize the cost of the assessment system.

5.3 Assessment

Each of these models use, or recommend the use of, assessors who have a level of knowledge and experience in the industry at least equivalent to the level the person being assessed is seeking to attain. The fish harvesters have trained Level II Professional Fish Harvesters to use the assessment tool and lead applicants through the process. The Australian model recommends that there be assessors who have the equivalent knowledge of the level they are assessing, or that individuals with knowledge of the industry work in partnership with a Registered Training Organization to do the assessment. The British Columbia Credit Union uses the supervisor in the workplace as the assessor, thereby ensuring that the assessor has the necessary expertise in the field.

During the employer workshop at the PRO SPEC 2004 Conference in March 2004, this was suggested as something that was necessary for the home building industry in Nova Scotia. There is a level of technical expertise as well as, in some cases, regulatory requirements for Occupational Health and Safety that suggest the assessors should be from the industry or should partner with someone from the industry to ensure the assessor has the appropriate expertise to be able to reasonably assess the applicant.

The Australian and the British Columbia model both use self-assessment tools whereas the Newfoundland and Labrador fish harvester model relies on the assessor to direct the review of the competencies. The self-assessment and logbook style have value in the home building industry as they allow for individuals to have more responsibility for chronicling their competencies. Also, in each case, the assessor has a standardized method of evaluating the assessment.

5.4 Evidence

The type of evidence required for an assessment varies from model to model and will also vary from activity to activity. Generally evidence can be gained through four methods.

- ▲ Samples of work performed or skill tests;
- ▲ Observation in the workplace; and
- ▲ Evidence of prior performance – portfolio, projects, articles, reports, work history, supervisor endorsement.

The models from Australia and Newfoundland and Labrador use these in combination, to give the greatest ability to understand the work ability of the applicant.

5.5 Elements of a PLAR System

There are basic steps to developing a PLAR program. They are:

1. Clarify the Competencies: They should be outcome-based, observable, accessible and transparent to everyone using them.
2. Develop a Qualifications framework: The AHB&RSC has suggested that the certification system will have different competency levels including Master and Manager/Owner.
3. Develop an Assessment Guide: The tool for self-assessment must also include guidelines for what is appropriate evidence for proving competence. Know what is required for them to prove. Make it easy to use.
4. Design a support system for completing the guide.
5. Prepare training support material: Work with the training systems to develop the training programs.
6. Training of Assessors/Advisors/Supervisor: Develop a training program and decide what the qualifications of the assessors should be.
7. Evaluation of assessor and assessment process: Consider how the assessors and the system will be evaluated.

8. Evaluation of the program and follow-up to monitor people as they progress.

Other generally recognized elements of an assessment system are:

- ▲ Protection for the integrity of the standards and qualifications;
- ▲ Respectful of the individual and promotes dignity and confidence; and
- ▲ Learner-centered, promoting the principles of life-long learning and supporting the learner through the assessment.

6.0 A PLAR Program for the AHB&R Sector in Nova Scotia

6.1 Progress to Date

In their efforts to establish a professionalization system in Nova Scotia, the Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council has taken the initial steps to identify and articulate the skills and competencies that are relevant to the work and the various roles of those who do that work in industry. The basis for this work has been the National Occupational Classifications (NOCs) for the New Home Builder and Residential Renovator, and the Carpentry trade. The Council is now in the process of adapting the national Occupational Profiles to suit the industry. The proposed competency assessment system cover five levels from entry to master level employers and including owner-operator employers:

- ▲ Level I: Entrant /Helper
- ▲ Level II: Apprentice
- ▲ Level III: Journeyperson
- ▲ Level IV: Master Carpenter/Supervisor
- ▲ Level V: Manager/Owner-Operator

The appropriate competencies have been re-aligned into trade specialties, and additional competencies that more accurately reflect the homebuilder and renovator industry have been integrated into the framework. This work is ready for the next steps in the development of a PLAR program.

The professionalization strategy will be able to build the program of mandatory licensing and certification of home building and/or renovation contractors or business operators on a voluntary certification program already in place in Nova Scotia for this occupational group, which includes a substantial program of training and components of a PLAR process.

Consultation with Industry

During the PLAR Workshop at the PRO SPEC 2004 Conference, there was support for using PLAR as a key element in the professionalization initiative. The participants indicated that they wanted the PLAR program to be:

- ▲ Accessible;
- ▲ Affordable;

- ▲ Credible; and
- ▲ Attainable.

Some participants expressed concern that the program would intimidate their very capable but uncertified workers. It is clear from the review of other programs that this issue can be addressed through a number of strategies, including:

- ▲ Providing a range of options for completing the self-assessment tool;
- ▲ Writing the self-assessment guide in clear language;
- ▲ Making sure the competencies are easy to understand; and
- ▲ Including respect as one of the criteria for the assessors to display towards the assessee.

The participants said they wanted the program to be accessible: easy to use, provided in their own community, and affordable for the employee. They wanted the program to be affordable for the employees, employers and for the community agencies.

To be credible, the certification received through the PLAR process must be the equivalent of the certification obtained through other processes and be recognized by all partners as such. At the same time, however, the participants want the certification to be attainable. There will need to be a range of options available to help candidates fill any gaps in their skills and competencies, including access to appropriate training programs.

It was a concern that the people who are doing the assessments know the industry. Participants want to see appropriate training provided for all assessors. Standard criteria for the selection of assessors must be included in the set-up of the program.

One participant said he thought the Grade 12 requirement for apprenticeship has been a barrier for people who otherwise would be good candidates to work in the industry. He wanted to see the education and literacy requirements match what is actually used on the job.

Participants suggested that the next steps for the program were to provide industry with a PLAR model to review and approve, do a pilot project to evaluate the model, and then make the any necessary adjustments. It was recommended that a joint industry government steering committee be put in place to monitor this work.

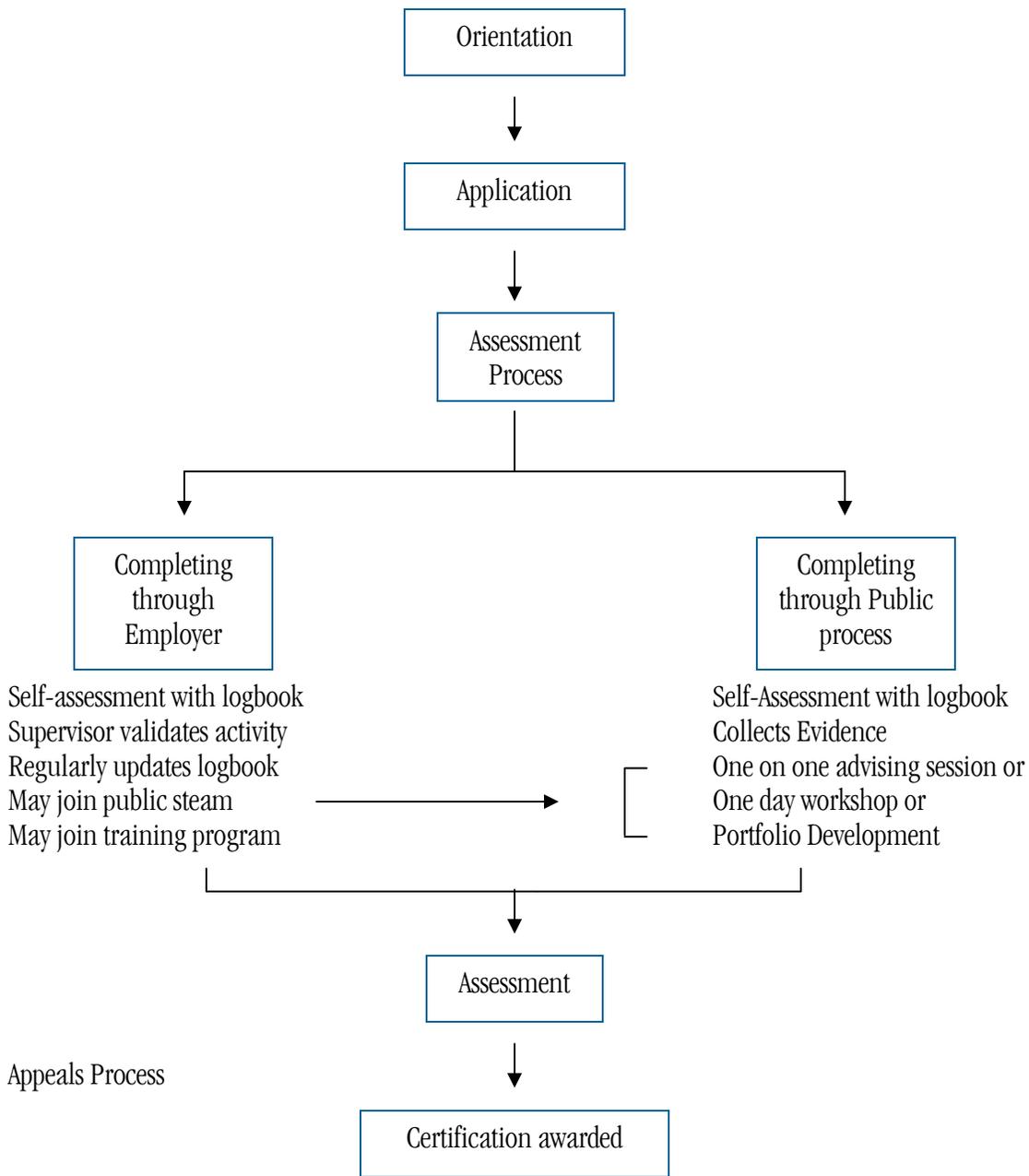
6.2 Proposed Draft Model

The model and options described below are intended to be the first step in a dynamic process. There are some unknowns that the partners involved in the process will need to agree on. The employers could be asked to play a major role in the process but this will be up to the members of the industry. For the purposes of developing a model there are assumptions made here that can be changed as the partners become familiar with the idea and assess how they are willing to participate.

The options will also be constrained by the cost of the process. The options will also be constrained by the cost of the process. There is no question that the professionalization strategy and the PLAR component of that strategy will require significant investments of time and money. The returns on those investments for the quality and credibility of the industry as a whole and for the employers and employees in it must be clear and valued. Keeping the costs at a reasonable level for employees and employers will be pivotal to the success of the process. It is likely that the higher the direct cost to the employee, the greater their resistance will be. Accordingly, efforts must be made to take advantage of 'public' PLAR resources as well as those that will need to be supported by the industry itself.

6.3 Steps for the Applicant

An effective PLAR model for the industry will have to provide a clear sequence of steps and options for individuals to pursue in gaining recognition and credentials for their on-the-job learning and formal education and training. It would likely include some or all of the following components.



Orientation

Applicants will need to be provided with appropriate information on the PLAR options, sequence and process from the certifying body or the employer. This would include information about the trade specialties, levels and certification contained in the program. It should also give applicants advice on the types and levels of certification they may wish to challenge for recognition and the PLAR process that will enable them to do so. Assistance in completing the application may also be provided.

The Application

The applicant first receives the assessment tool or guide and reviews the competencies and the instructions for documenting the competencies. This should include the range of options for validation including an employer check off list and declaration, work history, past courses attended and options for demonstration.

There are two options proposed for completing the assessment guide that may be used independently or in combination. These could be called, the Employer Option and the Public Process Option. The Employer Option would utilize the, in-house' resources and expertise of the firm to support, record, evaluate and validate and recommend levels of competence for certification. This would be appropriate where the applicant has had only one or two employers and where the majority of the competencies they are seeking to prove are used regularly at work. At the same time this option does not preclude an individual taking advantage of the public process PLAR identified below when appropriate.

There are a number of PLAR processes becoming available that employees – and potential employees – could use. Employment Assistance Agencies across the province, for example, are in the process of putting in place PLAR Practitioners who can provide advising services, transferable skills workshops and Skills and Learning Portfolio Development programs.

These would be suitable for individuals who have a great deal of experience in a variety of trade specialties but who may not use all their resulting competencies in their current employment. They might also be individuals who are not currently employed, especially during “down” periods of the year when they may have time available. They might choose to take part in one or two of the possible options for obtaining assistance in completing the guide:

- ▲ They could use the one-on-one meeting to review their self-assessment or to start the process of the self-assessment and receive help in organizing their evidence.
- ▲ They could take a one-day workshop to help them identify and articulate their competencies and collect the evidence.
- ▲ They might also take the Portfolio Development Program to help them make decisions regarding the Certifications they would like to challenge and their future learning development.

All these options will support them on a personal level as they undertake the process.

The Assessment Process

Support must be provided throughout the PLAR process to assist applicants to understand review and meet the requirements involved. The requirements for the various levels of certification, the types and range of evidence necessary to meet those requirements, and the tasks necessary to develop that evidence must be clear. The roles of others involved – such as, for example, asking an employer sign a declaration that they have used a competency on the job or, perhaps, setting up a demonstration to prove the competency of an applicant. Procedures to advise the applicant, to inform the applicant about the results of a skills and competency assessment, and to indicate what needs to be done next, must be put in place.

Certification

A credible and representative certification body will have to be established to grant certification on the basis of recommendations and evidence and generally oversee, review and improve the PLAR system as indicated below.

Appeals Process

An independent appeals process could be put in place in the event the applicant feels the assessment was unfair.

6.4 Steps for the Certifying Body

Among the responsibilities of an industry certification body, would be the following:

- ▲ Advertisement and Marketing;
- ▲ Data Management and Communications;
- ▲ Training and Management of Assessors and of Supervisors;
- ▲ Counseling and Personal Planning assistance;
- ▲ Application and Self-Assessment Guide;
- ▲ Assessment;
- ▲ Certification Awards; and
- ▲ Maintenance of an Independent Appeals Structure.

Advertisement and Marketing

The organization will develop materials to inform industry participants about the certification program and distribute those materials. This will include the Applications and Assessment Guides and the background material on how the process works and materials to market the employer option for completing the Assessment Guide. Employers will need to be encouraged to participate and take the training (or send their supervisors for training) to sign off on the employee's assessment guide.

Data Management and Communication

The information collected from the participants will need to be managed from a central source. The organization will set up a system to track the progress of the participants and ensure that the assessments are being carried out in a fair and consistent manner.

Training and Management of those responsible for Advising, Mentoring and Assessing Applicants

Knowledgeable and well-prepared PLAR advisors, mentors and assessors are critical to delivering a high quality assessment system. These individuals must be aware of the skills and competencies appropriate to various specialties and levels in the industry, must understand the developmental and assessment implications of PLAR, and be able to inform applicant of the options open to them in seeking support and certification both inside and external to the industry. Their roles must include the provision of career and learning planning as well as industry or specialty-specific certification processes and levels.

Orientation, workshops and ongoing guidance and support must be provided to those responsible for advising, mentoring, recording, evaluating and recommending applicants for professional industry certification. It is important to note that much of the expertise for these roles exists within the industry itself and can be developed and drawn upon from within it, rather than from outside institutions and agencies. As the Fish Harvester case study indicates the advantages of drawing upon 'peer' expertise and support for industry sources is significant in terms of the acceptance, credibility and quality of the PLAR process both within and outside the industry.

Application and Self-Assessment Guide

These documents and tools – and others that may be developed over time may be made available on line or through the sector or certifying body's office. They will require regular review and

updates. It would be advisable for the applicants to keep their own records of these documents and completed assessment, which can also be incorporated into a portfolio development format and serve as a permanent learning assessment for the individual.

Assessments

It will be important to schedule and administer the assessment processes as conveniently as possible for the applicants in locations around the province, rather than at one central location. Assessments should also be provided in a context of overall career development, rather than as isolated fragments. When applicant are unsuccessful in meeting a certification standard, further information and support indicating steps that will help next time should always be provided.

Appeals Process

In any process of assessment there will be times when an applicant believes they have been treated unfairly. An appeals process would give them the opportunity to present their case to an independent body. This can be arranged so that it is not used regularly but only used as a last resort.

7.0 Next Steps

The PRO SPEC 2004 Conference confirmed and strengthened the mandate to pursue the professionalization strategy of the Atlantic Home Builders and Renovation Sector Council. As indicated by the case studies included in this report, and other examples, a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition system is a crucial component of such a strategy, especially in a sector with such a strong tradition of on-the-job learning and hands-on development of expertise.

The Conference also provided explicit indications of interest and encouragement from across the industry to consider the nature and implications of a comprehensive and detailed industry-specific PLAR model. This report has provided a background context and an overall framework for such a model. The task now is to elaborate, field test and revise that model, in sufficient detail that the sector is able consider, adopt and operationalize a PLAR program. Accordingly, the next steps should include the following:

1. Establish an industry-based PLAR Advisory Group. The PLAR Advisory Group will be responsible for providing advice and suggestions to the PLA Centre staff and associates responsible for the further development, application and implementation of the PLAR model
2. Identify and field-test specific PLAR methods and tools in several selected trade specialties representing a cross section of industry firms (e.g.: home building/renovation; large/small; general/specialized). This initiative should involve the following activities:
 - ▲ Clarification of the competencies presented in clear language and accessible to the employee group;
 - ▲ Development of assessment and evaluation guides;
 - ▲ Development of a process to assist the participants to complete the guide, (including the training and support of a supervisor/mentor from the industry);
 - ▲ Assessment of the participants' submissions and provision for certification and/or further advice and development required to attain certification; and
 - ▲ Evaluate the process with the participants and the advisory group and make adjustments and revisions to the program.
3. Consult with representative range of employers/contractors to seek information on the following:
 - ▲ Views on the competency grid, assessment guides and the PLAR field test process regarding

- appropriateness, effectiveness, etc.;
- ▲ Levels of support and commitment they are willing to contribute to the program;
 - ▲ Concerns about the principles, practices and applications of the PLAR model; and
 - ▲ The most appropriate strategies to address these concerns.
4. Consult with government and training partners in order to:
 - ▲ Obtain their views on the assessment guide and the test process;
 - ▲ Determine what level of participation they are able to contribute and what funding can be arranged for this contribution; and
 - ▲ Assess the implications of this for program development.
 5. Develop proposals for a cost/benefit analysis of the PLAR model for the sector based on employer views and other appropriate sources.
 6. Make further revisions to the PLAR model.
 7. Develop and present PLAR Implementation Plan.

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