Construction Sector Council
and
Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council

Pan-Canadian Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Project

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CSC and AHB&RSC
Pan-Canadian PLAR Project

1. Project Overview & Findings

1.1 Project Principals

This project is a joint initiative of the Atlantic Home Building & Renovation Sector Council (AHB&RSC) and the Canadian Construction Sector Council (CSC).

Established in 1991, the AHB&RSC operates as a human resource Sector Council for the residential construction industry in the Atlantic Provinces. A Board of Director administers the Sector Council with broad-based industry representation from individuals and organizations active in various aspects of new home building and residential renovation. The Council has been promoting awareness within the sector of the need for an ongoing commitment to skills development, have designed and delivered training programs to almost 8,000 industry practitioners, and have undertaken extensive human resources sector studies in the four Atlantic provinces.

The CSC is a national non-governmental organization established in 2001 whose mandate is to identify ways to meet the current and future human resource needs of the construction industry in Canada. It is dedicated to the development of a highly skilled workforce. The Board of Directors of the CSC is comprised of representatives from a wide variety of sectors within the construction industry. Each Board Member is nominated by the construction sector they represent. The Council's 40 members represent a partnership between labour, business and government with financial support from both industry and government.

The research and consultations for this project have been carried out by the Prior Learning Assessment Centre of Nova Scotia. The Centre is a national centre of excellence for the development of PLAR[1] and for provision of PLAR services to industry and the community.

1.2 Context of the Project

1.2.1 Human Resource Challenges

The residential construction industry in Canada faces daunting human resources challenges. The following are a few of the major issues that have been identified and quantified in numerous sector studies and industry consultations:

- An aging labour force;
- Declining numbers of young people entering the skilled trades;
- Reduced immigration flows for skilled and experienced trades workers;
- A more demanding regulatory environment requiring new knowledge and skills in the workforce;
- Continuing advances in construction methods, materials and tools requiring continuous upgrading of workplace knowledge and skills;
- Growing public concern about product quality and safety;
- Increasing demands from the insurance industry with regard to company coverage, workplace safety and product reliability;
- Industry concerns that the formal training and apprenticeship systems are not keeping up with the knowledge and skills requirements of the industry.

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[1] For a full explanation for the varieties of PLAR please see Section 3, pages 24-27

Faced with these complex challenges, industry groups across Canada have undertaken a wide variety of initiatives to improve the supply of skilled workers. In particular, the human resource sector councils at the national and regional levels have been very active in research, consultations and program development activities aimed at renewal of the labour force.

One major focus of industry groups has been training and certification. There is a general view that the training and apprenticeship systems are not producing enough new entrants, that the systems are inflexible and sometimes out-of-date in terms of current methods, materials and tools, and that there is insufficient industry input to the design and operations of programs.

Trade occupations have concerns about their aging workforces and the lack of new recruits, and there is growing competition to attract new entrants. Construction industry leaders recognize the need to make their occupations more accessible while at the same time raising standards and "professionalizing" their trades.

1.2.2   Modularized Training and Certification

Reflecting current building practices, there is a growing interest within the residential construction sector in a modularized approach to training and certification based upon the identification of trades "specializations". In the carpentry trade, to take a key example, this might involve restructuring the traditional journeyperson qualification that normally takes up to five years to complete through Apprenticeship. Recommendations are to sub-divide the carpentry trade into trade specializations, each of which would include a basic industry generic skills module. Industry and the training systems in British Columbia and Saskatchewan are moving in this direction, developing a certification approach for four residential carpentry trades specializations:
1. Framing;
2. Foundations,
3. Exterior finishing;
4. Interior finishing.

With this system, individuals are able to be certified as professionals in one of these specializations in a relatively short period of time and be available to industry as a skilled worker. The individual might then acquire the other certifications. Completing all four, would allow him or her to attain the Carpentry Inter-provincial Red Seal Certification. Some workers, however, might choose to stay in their specialization and never acquire other certifications, although they might pursue periodic skills upgrading within their specialization areas.

Industry interest in modularized training and certification represents a significant challenge to the existing training and apprenticeship systems, most of which are based on the full apprenticeship tradition. It is recognized, therefore, that it is critical for industry to work together with the training and apprenticeship systems to explore new options.

1.2.3   Compulsory versus Voluntary Trades Certification

A second area of change in the residential construction industry is consideration of compulsory certification for the carpentry trade. At present there is a mandatory certification requirement for the plumber and electrician trades in most jurisdictions across Canada. This does not apply to the carpentry trade. After the "leaky condos" issue in British Columbia and similar problems in other areas, there is growing public awareness of the importance of carpentry work from a public safety and consumer protection perspective. Municipal and provincial governments, insurance agencies, home warranty programs and consumer groups have pressed for higher standards in residential construction.

In some areas, and currently in Nova Scotia, industry groups have advocated for mandatory certification of carpenters and "licensing" of contractors in the residential construction/renovation

sector. The licensing standards could require contractors to employ certified carpenters on all building projects of a certain nature and scale.

In British Columbia and Ontario, builders are required to offer home warranties and the warranty standards include certain training requirements for contractors and the workforce. Similarly, insurance companies are considering higher standards for coverage on worksites and for new homes, and this may create added pressures on contractors to use qualified workers.

To the extent that industry moves towards mandatory certification, whether through the designated trade option, contractor licensing or the insurance and home warranty systems, this will create a huge pressure to qualify the many people in the existing workforce who do not have formal credentials. A high proportion of these workers are skilled tradespersons, either in trades specialty areas or in the full range of carpentry competencies.

1.2.4 Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

Previous consultations with industry make clear that acceptance of new certification methods and standards is contingent upon finding ways to certify those skilled workers who are already well established in the labour force but lack formal credentials. This needs to be done with a minimum of financial cost and disruption in the workplace. In this sense the success of an effort to "professionalize" the labour force in residential construction may depend upon the development of a prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) program that works in this industry context.

One limited form of PLAR is to "grandfather" individuals already in the industry into the new certification standards. With this approach the new rules and requirements do not apply to anyone who is established in the industry at the time when the new system comes into effect. This approach has been used with other industries in Canada undergoing professionalization, most notably the fishing industry. Leaders in that sector make clear that professionalization would never have been accepted without the grandfathering mechanism.

Leaders in the home building and renovation sector have indicated in many consultations that they do not favour a simple grandfathering approach because of the current lack of effective standards. They prefer to recognize the knowledge and skills of established professionals based on identified and documented competencies and experience in the industry.

There is agreement, however, that an effective and relevant PLAR program is necessary if the sector is to implement new certification standards and obtain compliance from those industry members who lack formal credentials.

1.2.5 Competency-Based Assessment

Industry leaders and other stakeholders in the residential construction sector recognize that the foundation for effective training and certification is an occupational analysis that accurately reflects current production methods and work processes in the sector. Given the nature of the sector and the regulatory environment, it must also include general knowledge and skills specific to residential construction, such as business management, workplace and customer communications, building science and "house as a system", building codes, fire prevention, moisture control, insulation systems, and workplace safety.

Use of the term "competency" is increasingly accepted as a means to describe the blend of knowledge, practical skill and experience needed to master a discrete workplace task or responsibility. "Competency-based assessment" is an alternative approach to certification that focuses on the actual ability to carry out workplace tasks and responsibilities rather than on the

traditional training for "credentials". It does not matter how the individual acquired the competency – the challenge is to determine whether s/he has it.

Competencies are assessed on the basis of pre-defined units of knowledge, skills and experience required for the successful and safe performance of discrete workplace tasks. Once these competencies are defined, and methods of assessing whether an individual has them or not are identified, it becomes possible to reorient certification procedures to actual work competencies, and to integrate prior learning assessment and recognition into ongoing human resource management practices in the workplace.

1.2.6   Concluding Comment

The context of this study is an industry that faces serious human resources challenges and is therefore looking for innovative approaches to training and certification. There is an interest in modularized training and certification for trades specializations, and there are expectations that for the carpentry trade specifically there will be increasing pressures for workers to be certified.

There are in Canada perhaps thousands of skilled and experienced workers in the construction industry who lack formal qualifications. It would be both unwise and unnecessarily expensive to try to have so many people undergo training to learn skills they may already have. It would be more efficient and rewarding to recognize their competencies and to focus training activities and investments on specific gaps. Many of these workers will have essential skills deficits that will have to be accommodated.

Employers generally agree on the need for upgrading the labour force in response to new knowledge and skill requirements, and a changing regulatory environment. Enhanced training and certification are critical to the professionalization of the sector as a basis for making it more attractive to young people seeking lifelong careers.

1.3   Goals of the Study

This report represents the second phase of an initiative to develop a sectoral PLAR model for the home building and renovation industry. It explores models that are in operation throughout Canada, to assess best practices and to review the effectiveness of industry partnerships.

Given the context described above, the goals of this study are:

▪ To identify and describe the state of development and practice of prior learning assessment and recognition in the residential construction industry in Canada, and in related sectors;

▪ To survey the views of industry leaders, training and apprenticeship managers, and PLAR practitioners, with regard to the current and potential benefits of PLAR in the sector - what works and what doesn't - and best practices in different jurisdictions across Canada; and

▪ To identify a PLAR model or models for the residential construction industry or, if it is found that such models are not in place, to propose an approach to develop such a model or models.

1.4   Survey Scope and Methodology

Key informant interviews were conducted with representatives of community colleges, home builders associations, provincial apprenticeship branches, a Ministry of Advanced Education and three national associations. Twenty interviews were fully completed; a number of others did not

complete the interview due to a lack of knowledge about PLAR programs, but they nonetheless provided relevant information about the industry sector.

The interview guide was developed and reviewed by the representatives of the Atlantic Home Building and Renovation Sector Council and the Canadian Home Builder's Association's National Education and Training Advisory Committee. Interviews were generally of duration of one hour, most of which were conducted by telephone. Three organizations responded to the questions in writing.

The targeted interviews included the following categories:
- 4 Provincial home builder industry organizations
- 1 National home builder association
- 1 National Construction Sector Council
- 1 National construction trades organization
- 3 Provincial Apprenticeship Branches
- 1 Provincial Department of Advanced Education and Training
- 4 Community Colleges
- 2 Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition organizations
- 1 National Association of Community Colleges
- 1 Career awareness organization for home builders and land developers.

Information on the provincial apprenticeship systems was clarified by consulting the relevant web sites. Information on PLAR initiatives was gathered through key research studies.

1.5   Summary of Findings

Most current PLAR activity for construction trades in Canada is being delivered through the apprenticeship systems in each province. Other stakeholders also have substantial interests and experience in the field. In this section we summarize current perspectives on PLAR among key stakeholder groups. Appreciation of these different perspectives will provide a basis for the development of new partnerships to expand PLAR services and to foster innovation in the design and operation of the delivery systems.

1.5.1   The Apprenticeship System

In most Canadian provinces, Apprenticeship Boards directly provide PLAR for apprenticable trades. British Columbia is an exception, as they have recently restructured industry training and redistributed responsibilities for apprenticeship across a variety of agencies. In British Columbia, a Community College may administer PLAR for their apprenticeship programs.

Administrators of apprenticeship indicate that PLAR fits well with their programs as their overall focus is on experiential learning. The use of assessment and recognition to give advanced standing in apprenticeship training has been in place for decades and is available to all new apprentices.

Apprenticeship branches[2] train their field officers to assess apprentices and have systems in place to administer the trades qualifier exams[3]. They can arrange for the testing to be given orally and allow individuals to bring readers for exams at most levels.

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[2] "Apprenticeship branch" is used throughout the report to signify the provincial agency or department responsible for apprenticeship training though, this is not always the name given to that department in every province.

In all jurisdictions, but to varying degrees, the Apprenticeship branch will recognize time spent on the job outside of the apprenticeship system, and they will assess and give credit for training and education programs that the individual has completed. These programs could be for the same occupation from another province, from a similar occupation in the same province, or from secondary school trades training programs. They are also currently developing a process to assess and recognize foreign credentials.

Some Apprenticeship branches provide very clear and comprehensive materials about PLAR on-line and through the branch offices. The materials explain the process and the required competencies, and provide down-loadable application forms.

Across Canada, apprenticeship systems foster labour mobility through the national Red Seal program. A Red Seal qualification is recognized in any province in Canada. Some trades are compulsory certified in some provinces and not in others, and this creates a barrier to mobility. It appears that, in most provinces, individuals who have proof of their hours on-the-job can challenge the certification exam.

The following are key issues related to the involvement of apprenticeship agencies in PLAR:

- There is little flexibility in the methods of delivering PLAR within the apprenticeship system as it currently operates. The final assessment point is always the trades qualifier exam. There are jurisdictions that have developed practical exams and competency-based assessment processes to give credit for the on-the-job and theoretical training. However, the exam is a major barrier in some cases. Employers have indicated that they have skilled employees who have not been able to pass the exam, even on multiple attempts. The employee will not take time off or are not willing to attend the technical up-grading or refresher courses. Employers are concerned that valuable workers will leave the job rather than face an exam or participate in formal training. This is a challenging situation because there are also proponents of the view that individuals who are unable to pass the trades qualifier exam should take technical training until they are equipped to do so. In a compulsory trade, this may mean that some workers will have to leave the trade.

- There is resistance in some jurisdictions to the development of trade specializations for the construction industry. Some of those who take this view believe that the current carpentry certification can accommodate the industry and the development of specializations waters down the existing credential. In some jurisdictions, the Apprenticeship system has worked specifically with the home building and renovation industry to modularize the training. With these approaches, the individual who completes all of the trade specialization modules can qualify for the Red Seal carpentry certification.

- Apprenticeship branches share an over all concern with industry stakeholders that, whatever the process, the PLAR program must meet the same quality standards as the Apprenticeship program overall. There is a lack of understanding about the availability of PLAR in some jurisdictions. Some Apprenticeship branch websites do not use the term PLAR, recognition of prior learning, or any other indicators that they may be open to the recognition of the prior learning of an individual seeking an apprenticeship.

- Many Apprenticeship programs rely on the notion of "time in the trade" as an indicator of an individual's learning. Employers are the providers of the on-the-job training. This method of training relies on employers to ensure that apprentices are exposed to all the aspects of the

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[3] "Trades qualifier" exams are the final determinant of accreditation for a person who has not participated in a formal apprenticeship-training program. The final exam for a person who has completed an apprenticeship is the Certificate of Qualification.

Apprenticeship curriculum. There is no guarantee that an Apprentice employee will experience all of the required areas over a given period of time.

- There is a concern that Apprenticeship assessors cannot be experts in every trade.

- Each province allocates different levels of funding to their Apprenticeship system and this results in an uneven application of the PLAR process across the country. Individuals may travel to provinces where the PLAR process is less stringent and then return to their home province to work.

- In the Saskatchewan pilot program for the Residential Framers PLAR, there was a low rate of success for people who challenged the trades qualifier exam. It is important for the partners to work together to consider the implications of this.

1.5.2   Industry Perspectives on PLAR

All of the partners view industry as an essential source of advice and information on the skills and competencies needed to be successful in the trades. In the regions examined in this study, there were different mechanisms for industry to advise colleges and the Apprenticeship system (e.g., provincial and local industry committees, industry training boards, industry advisory boards, etc.).

Employers make a significant contribution to the Apprenticeship system by providing the on-the-job portion of the training. They make a commitment to train their employees and if the employee is to achieve the certification, they need to be allowed to cover the competencies that are consistent with the Apprenticeship curriculum. There are some jurisdictions that use a logbook system and employers are required to validate the competencies an employee has attained on the job. In some regions, employers are also responsible for making the application to the Apprenticeship branch to provide advanced standing to the Apprentice. In all regions, employers can recommend that an Apprentice apply for advanced standing and approve the number of hours spent on-the-job for an Apprentice to complete the practical portion of the training. In this situation, the Apprenticeship system assumes that employers are the best assessors of an employee's skills and competencies. There is some discussion as to whether industry associations should act as assessors in the PLAR system.

Industry advisory boards and industry associations can provide the leadership for developing industry specific programs and making training more effective and relevant. They can identify and articulate competencies, and act as on-going participants to keep competencies relevant and current.

The building industry is subject to high and low volume periods, and industry associations can give other partners up-to date information on current labour market and business information. It is noted that fewer people attend training programs during periods of high activity in the industry. Employees are less willing to leave the job for up-grading or training programs when there is a lot of work, and employers are reluctant to see them leave the job at these times.

In occupations where there is no apprenticeship system, there is perhaps greater likelihood that industry groups will develop a relevant credentialing program and administer it on their own. In large sectors such as manufacturing and tourism, industry associations have worked with employers and employee organizations to create the economies of scale needed to operate effective PLAR programs. Individual companies that take on the development of PLAR are subject to the vagaries of business life and a PLAR process may stall during times of low prosperity. Industry associations have the ability to work with other partners to develop and deliver PLAR services on a more sustainable basis. Industry organizations may also exercise some influence on political decisions on regulatory policies.

Industry associations have a major role to play in the promotion of industry training and certification as well as PLAR programs. Having employer buy-in for certification programs and PLAR would strengthen the credentials and bring up the skill level of members of the industry. PLAR needs to be seen by employers as an effective and practical way to increase the number of skilled workers in the trade and not a watering down of occupational standards.

The following are seen as key issues regarding industry participation in PLAR:

- Industry advisory committees are not always effective in bringing the interests and knowledge of industry leaders to bear on training and certification systems. In both the college and the apprenticeship systems, the input from advisory committees can be overlooked. Sometimes the committees do not have the most appropriate individuals from the sector to advise on the development of appropriate training.

- Employers who enter into Apprenticeship agreements are not always willing to use logbooks and be diligent in filling them out.

- There is some concern that there may be abuses by employers regarding recommendations for advanced standing of apprentices.

- Some employers may not be willing to enter into Apprenticeship agreements with employees. This happens across the industry but may be more of an issue in non-compulsory trades.

- The building trades have attracted individuals who prefer the experiential learning environment, many of whom have avoided the formal learning structure. Employees may be reluctant to challenge the certification process and they may have essential skills challenges.

- Some employers and industry associations do not know and understand PLAR, and what the benefits are to the business owner and to the employee.

- There are concerns about the PLAR process allowing individuals into a trade who don't have the same skill levels as someone who has taken more conventional routes to attain certification.

- Employers need to be proactive and encourage their employees to use the available PLAR programs to gain certification.

- Existing PLAR for certification in the home building and renovation industry are in the development stage and there is no way to evaluate the programs at this time.

1.5.3   The Training Institution Perspective

The training providers agree PLAR can be helpful in many areas of human resource development, including efforts to address skills shortages and upgrading needs, and the integration of immigrants into the labour force through recognition of experiential learning and foreign credentials.

Community Colleges are most often the delivery agents for apprenticeship trades training. They follow the curriculum as set out by their apprenticeship board and do not always participate in curriculum development. Information from the interviews indicated that, with the exception of British Columbia, the Colleges do not deliver apprenticeship PLAR. They are responsible to provide qualified instructors and good training facilities.

The Community Colleges can provide pre-trades or pre-employment programs that cover some or the entire technical curriculum for a trade, and can include additional math up-grading and other essentials skills training. There are credit transfer agreements in place with Apprenticeship branches. Through the Agreements, the student can receive credit towards the Apprenticeship

technical training and, in some cases, time credit will be applied to the on-the-job portion of the training. Some community colleges also provide refresher courses for people about to write exams for the trades qualifier or Certificate of Qualification. These materials are designed and delivered by the Colleges.

Community Colleges have been accruing considerable expertise in the field of PLAR. Colleges that participated in this study have well-developed internal policies that encourage departments to integrate PLAR into their own programs. This encourages their own programs to be developed with clear, well-defined course outcomes that greatly facilitate PLAR assessments.

The Community Colleges have established a record of active partnerships with industry, planning for and developing strategies to address current and future training needs. There is a wide range of sectors and industries that Colleges have worked with to develop certification programs to address their human resource needs. Some Colleges have developed parallel PLAR processes to evaluate and integrate current workers in the field into the new certification or performance standards. They also have the capacity to design "gap" training for these programs to address the workers skills needs once they have been identified.

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) is a voluntary organization whose mandate is to represent Colleges and Institutes to government, business and industry in Canada and internationally. Another part of their mandate is to provide conferences and workshops, and to facilitate networking among members. The ACCC has established the Recognition of Prior Learning Affinity Group to provide a forum for sharing best practices and developing joint approaches to PLAR.

The following are seen as key issues regarding the involvement of the training institutions in PLAR:

- As training providers for the Apprenticeship system the Colleges have only limited input in most jurisdictions into curriculum development or the development and delivery of PLAR programs.

- Training providers will need expanded funding support if they are to provide more comprehensive PLAR services to industry. At this time some College instructors are asked to contribute time on top of their teaching schedule to do assessments and work with industry groups.

- There is a need for continuing development of PLAR tools.

- The effectiveness of the assessors needs to be reviewed regularly and they need to be provided with up-dates and training.

- Developing competency statements is a complicated task. There are few PLAR practitioners who can do this work well. There is a need for an accreditation system and an adequate training program for people who do this important work.

- PLAR can be a time-consuming undertaking for the learner, the training institution or the employers. Ways to improve efficiency need to be explored.

- Colleges need to train more faculty to work with industry in developing innovative PLAR methods and applications.

- Training providers need to do more community outreach to inform industry about PLAR and its applications.

1.6 Best Practices

PLAR is a relatively new and developing field and there is a need for experimentation and innovation. One informant suggested that adopting a set of standards too quickly could cut off more creative developments.

There are various methods of assessment for PLAR and there are many processes being used in industry sectors across the country. This report was not designed to review all of those, but does identify what industry associations, apprenticeship and training providers view as the most successful components of a PLAR process related to the construction trades.

The following are key findings with regard to best practices.

- The assessment of prior learning must be based on an accurate and up-to-date delineation of discrete occupational competencies if it is to capture the skills and the skill gaps of the individual.

- The competencies need to be developed in conjunction with National Occupational Analyses and with input from industry.

- Writing competency statements in plain language that captures the full range of the activity is the task of a qualified PLAR practioner. This is an essential component of the assessment tool and the better these are written the more effectively the assessment will work.

- PLAR programs need to be adult learner friendly. It can't be assumed that all adults have access to web sites. There should be a variety of methods for identifying skills, including print materials and a telephone line. In every case there should be personal contact to help individuals respond to the tool.

- Training should be in a modular format rather than sequential. This diminishes the need to repeat learning and allows the individual to train to specific skills gaps. This is also useful for an employer who may have to release an employee from work for a longer period. Training should be flexible so the individual can participate in off-hours or through distance education methods.

- The process needs to be transparent. Individuals need information about PLAR, how to access it, and how the process works.

- Individuals who have had the majority of their experience on the job may be able to do an activity, but they may not be able to write about it or do the math associated with the activity. The PLAR program needs to recognize that the focus is on the competency rather than the method by which it was acquired.

- Proof that an individual has achieved a competency may come in many forms:
  - interviews;
  - recognition of technical training credentials (e.g., courses provided by tools or materials manufacturers, etc.);
  - performance observation;
  - demonstration of skills;
  - development of skills and learning portfolios;
  - validation of workplace skills; and
  - challenge exams, etc.

- Developing a PLAR process is a long-term project and there may need to be a champion to drive the initiative forward. This could be the industry association or a training institution.

1.7　Conclusions

Regarding the current state of development of PLAR as it impacts on the residential construction industry in Canada, several general conclusions emerged from the study. They are listed below.

1.7.1　Apprenticeship and PLAR

The "major player" in the field of PLAR for the construction industry is the Apprenticeship system. While there are variations across the provinces, the general picture that emerges is that Apprenticeship agencies are committed to one form of PLAR in terms of opportunities for individuals with sufficient experience in the trade to challenge the certification exam.

Different Apprenticeship branches are able to provide varying levels of support for candidates to prepare for the challenge exam through up-grading courses, counseling and mentoring. In some jurisdictions, there is impressive support and responsiveness to applicants' needs, while in others such services are more limited. It is recognized that for many workers particularly those with essential skills deficits, the necessity to take the exam represents a significant barrier to certification. There is a certain degree of rigidity in the system in terms of the willingness to consider other options.

The priority concern, shared by industry, is that workers who do attempt to reach journeyperson status through the challenge exam should be measured by the same standards as Apprentices taking the conventional route to certification.

There is some resistance in the Apprenticeship system to the concepts of trade specializations and the modularization of training. There is a great deal of work yet to be done if industry is to achieve its objectives in this regard.

There is a clear need for more effective mechanisms for industry advice and consultation with regard to Apprenticeship. In particular, the residential construction industry needs to have more influence on curriculum in some jurisdictions to address the knowledge and skill needs specific to the sector.

The Apprenticeship system in Canada is entering a period of greater dynamism and development, with expanding federal government investment in systems renewal and innovation. This perhaps is an opportune moment for industry sector councils to make proposals for joint efforts to develop new approaches to apprenticeship training and, in that context, to PLAR.

1.7.2　The Training Institutions

There is an expanding commitment to PLAR and a growing body of experience with PLAR practices and delivery systems, among the community colleges. As well, there is openness to innovation in how prior learning is identified and assessed.

There is also willingness in some Colleges, within the limits of resources, to look at modularized training for trade specializations, and to curriculum adjustments to address residential construction issues.

Community Colleges deliver much of the Apprenticeship training across the country but they have only limited influence on curriculum design and standards.

Given these findings, it again appears to be an opportune time for the industry sectors councils to be proactive in working with the colleges to develop and test new training models with PLAR components.

1.7.3　Development of a Sectoral PLAR Model

This study did not find an operational PLAR system that would serve as a model for the residential construction sector. The programs now underway for home building occupations are

still at the experimental stage. There have been no evaluations of the strategies that were used and this will have to be done later in the program development.

There are some things we can learn from looking at models from similar sectors, from the experience of the Apprenticeship agencies, and from the recommendations from training providers who have designed and delivered PLAR for diverse industries and occupations in a range of settings. The following are key points:

▪ The PLAR system – standards and delivery mechanisms -- must be developed and validated in concert with the industry sector.

▪ The PLAR should be based on assessment of competencies to enable an accurate identification of the skills and skill gaps of the individual.

▪ The system must include clearly defined learning outcomes. For example, is the desired outcome that the individual can build a set of stairs that adhere to building code standards, or that the individual can do the mathematical calculations on paper for building the stairs?

▪ The assessment tool needs to identify clearly what is being assessed. This is needed for both the assessor as well as the person being assessed. The competency statements need to be clearly written to capture the full range of tasks and sub tasks. A good assessment tool will help maintain consistency in the assessment process.

▪ The competency requirements for the PLAR need to be easily available for individuals. The information should be accessible in a variety of formats, on-line, print brochures, over the telephone and through in person interviews.

▪ A variety of assessments methods should be used to validate competencies. Look for the most effective methods and combine them. These could include:
  - Evaluations of training programs from credit or non-credit learning providers (e.g. manufacturers or suppliers);
  - Performance evaluations (e.g. skills demonstrations, role plays, etc.);
  - Portfolio or personal documentation of workplace and experiential learning; and
  - Challenge exam/Standardized tests.
  The challenge with applying a variety of methods is that some are more expensive and time consuming than others. There may be a tendency for the organization doing the assessment to choose the methods that are less costly and not consider which are the most effective.

▪ There is a need to ensure competent assessment. The PLAR practitioner must be well acquainted with the occupational skills being assessed, and understand and be competent at both the advisory and assessment roles. It has been suggested that the industry associations should provide assessors. There are a number of PLAR examples where there are two assessors present for a part of the PLAR process, one skilled in PLAR assessment and one a subject expert. This may be needed in role-play situations, skills demonstrations or review of the documentation of experiential learning.

▪ There is a need to develop training modules that allow individuals to identify their skills gaps.

▪ Assessment methods should be monitored, evaluated and, if need be, revised regularly.

▪ There is a need for adequate resources to establish and maintain a PLAR program. Several of the interviewees noted that it takes a great deal of work, time and funding at the beginning to develop a PLAR program. An impact and cost analysis done ahead of time may avert some unexpected outcomes.

▪ In a study done by the National Pipe Trades Human Resources Committee on PLAR in Apprenticeship and Trade Certification, it was found that there was a higher failure rate among people challenging the pipe trades qualifier exam than for people who had come through the full Apprenticeship. They noted a number of possible reasons for this, one being

that individuals who had come through the Apprenticeship program and had attended the in-school portion may have been more comfortable with writing exams and taking tests. However, they also suggested that the exams themselves may be part of the problem in that they may not reflect actual tasks performed by trades people on the job. Test items may emphasis theoretical knowledge rather than practical knowledge, and the text of the exam may require a higher literacy level than the candidates possesses.

▪   If an exam is the final indicator of the readiness for the trade, then it is extremely important to review the exam regularly and ensure it is capturing the knowledge and skills actually needed for the trade. It might also be advisable to undertake a study to see if the exam format is the most valid method of testing specific trade knowledge.

There will be different challenges associated with the delivery of a PLAR program for a new credential as opposed to PLAR for an existing credential. For a new credential there may be large numbers of individuals wanting to be certified in a short period of time, in which case it will be more cost effective to have group information sessions or courses where 10 to 15 people can be given an outline of the PLAR process, what it involves, have assistance with the articulation and identification of skills and do the skills demonstration together. This provides a supportive atmosphere and a more developmental process for undertaking the credential.

Existing Apprenticeship PLAR that is based on time in the trade and the successful completion of the trades qualifier exam could be modified to be competency-based. This would produce a more accurate assessment of the individual's skills. Designing modular style training to address the skill gaps could save time and money for both the employer and the employee.

The study "A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning and Recognition" [4] pointed out in one of its key findings that "PLAR strengthened adult learners' confidence in their own capacities to learn and motivated adults to pursue further education." It seems clear that PLAR can contribute to a more efficient workforce by acknowledging and fostering the workers ability to learn.

1.8   Recommendations

As is evident above, this study has generated a great deal of detailed information about the practicalities of PLAR design and delivery, best practices and lessons learned from the limited amount of experience there has been in the field. It has not been possible, nor would it be wise at this stage, to set out a sectoral model for PLAR. While there are some important initiatives underway, no program has operated for sufficient time to provide convincing evidence of the effectiveness or practicability of PLAR in the sector.

At the outset above we described an evolving industry context in which, in the foreseeable future, thousands of experienced workers may need to be certified through PLAR in response to new training and certification standards that are either mandatory or highly advantageous for both employers and employees. To meet this challenge will require an infrastructure that does not now exist to provide assessment and recognition services to large numbers of people over a relatively short period. Nowhere in Canada is such a program model now in place, or contemplated, at this time.

Another core truth is that the responsibility for PLAR now rests, and will remain, at the provincial level through the apprenticeship and community college systems. The development of a comprehensive and effective PLAR model for the construction industry in Canada will therefore

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[4] "A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition", by the Cross Canada Partnership on PLAR 1999.

require, inevitably, a long march through the provinces. The strategic issue then is how to provide direction, impetus and coherence to such a potentially fragmented endeavour.

Our core recommendation is therefore that the Construction Sector Council use this report as a basis for convening a national workshop with training institutions, apprenticeship agencies and industry HR organizations to seek consensus on a strategy for the development of a consistent and effective approach to PLAR for the industry. That approach should be clearly linked to the modularization of training and apprenticeship and the recognition of trades specializations.

The residential construction industry is a huge and strategically important component of the Canadian economy. It has a large labour force, and it produces products that are essential to the quality of life and economic circumstances of virtually all Canadians. The human resources challenges facing the industry therefore hold implications for all Canadians. It is very much in the public interest that there be a viable and dynamic residential construction and renovation industry able to provide the safe, high quality and affordable housing required by the populace.

It makes sense therefore that a proposal from the construction industry for a collaborative national initiative to improve training and certification in the sector will be taken seriously. Given the great interest at present in renewal of apprenticeship, a pilot project, or series of pilots, to develop and test modularized certification and competency-based PLAR should be seen as a strategic priority for apprenticeship providers and human resources development departments.

2. Thinking about Skills and Learning

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a term that has become much more widely known and used over the past decade. There are many reasons for this. Perhaps the most basic is that PLAR's fundamental principle resonates strongly in terms of the economic, technological and social pressures we face.

That principle, plainly stated is:
> *What an individual knows and can do is more important than where or how that person learned those things.*

From that principle a number of other sub-principles flow. For example, it follows that if an individual can demonstrate and provide evidence of their skills and knowledge, that person should not have to do over again what they have already learned. It also follows that an individual should receive 'recognition' (e.g. credit, certification, promotion, etc) for that prior learning and be able to use it as base for further learning and development.

So why, now, should this very sensible idea and its implications be so powerful? There are several reasons. First of all, we live in times of profound and continuous change and transition. More than ever before, we know that our most important asset in coping successfully with the challenge of change and transition is our skills and knowledge (individually and collectively), along with our capacity to learn new things. Finally, it is also apparent that many of our traditional ways of thinking about, organizing and using our skills and knowledge are inadequate.

One major problem is that we have built an elaborate system of formal education, training and certification that, with all its strengths and benefits, is highly compartmentalized. The result is a 'snakes and ladders' learning system; if an individual is on one ladder that turns out to be the 'wrong' one (or if that ladder gets redesigned or collapses), that person has to go back to the bottom of a different learning ladder. Despite many calls to think and act 'horizontally' about learning, we continue to struggle with a system organized on 'vertical' lines.

Another effect of our formal education, training and certification arrangements is that we have come to define learning almost exclusively in terms of 'schooling' – that is of formal education and training programs, with instructors, students, exams and all that goes with it. So profound has this mindset become that when a large sample of Canadian adults were surveyed a few years ago and asked what they were learning, only those who were actually taking a formal course or program responded. When the questioners approached the subject more indirectly, however - asking what things these adults were 'doing' and then exploring the learning that was involved in those activities - an astonishing variety and scale of 'informal' or 'experiential' learning was revealed. [5]

What makes this situation even more striking is the fact that, when any group of adults is asked whether they learned the most important things they know and can do in school or outside school, the vast majority immediately respond, 'Outside!'. Indeed many formal education and training programs do contain vestiges of experiential learning and acknowledge its importance. Apprenticeship programs are the most obvious examples, but internships, co-op programs, work terms, study tours and field assignments all draw upon the same source.

In other words, at some 'gut' level we all know that our 'experiential' learning is real and important; we just don't pay much attention to it. With the exceptions noted above, we don't

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[5] Livingston study results

record or track it at the time and after we have learned something experientially, we just take it for granted. As a result, when we try to describe or acknowledge that learning, we fall back on very general categories such as 'years of experience' or 'jobs held' or lists of 'interests' or 'activities'. Over the past couple of decades however, PLAR practitioners have developed a number of well-tested and highly credible ways to enable people to identify, describe, document and demonstrate, in detailed and specific terms, the skills and knowledge they have achieved experientially, as well as those they have gained though formal education and training.

This has very significant implications especially in sectors where the labour force has continued to rely as much on skills and knowledge learned 'on-the-job' as on formal education, training and certification. New areas of technology, specialization, classification and performance standards, however, are putting great pressure on those sectors. It is clearly out of the question to send the existing workforce back to school or college. Waiting for the next generation to arrive with the 'proper' training and credentials, is not a viable option either. Nor is simply 'grandparenting' the current workforce into the new system; this would certainly recognize the prior skills and knowledge of the existing labour force, but does little to prepare and encourage employees to undertake the new learning and performance requirements the sector requires.

PLAR, in its various forms, offers practical and creative ways to build on the strengths of the formal education and training system, to link and bridge its various compartments and to connect 'experiential' and 'formal' learning in ways that meet the needs of our turbulent economic and social circumstances. This survey report indicates some of the ways that people are trying to apply and evaluate PLAR principles and practices in the home builders and renovation areas of the construction industry across the country.

3. Varieties of PLAR

It will quickly become apparent to the reader of this report that, while people involved in PLAR may all share the same basic principle, they use and apply the concept in a variety of ways. It is important, therefore to clarify some of these different forms and purposes of PLAR at the outset. There are, in fact, three main clusters of PLAR ideas and activities reflected in this report.

3.1 PLAR as the recognition, exchange and transferability of formal credentials (i.e. credits, certificates, diplomas, degrees, licenses, etc).[6]

A number of PLAR initiatives are focused upon the task of making different types of formal learning credentials more easily recognized and transportable. This is a huge and complex challenge. Not only do many institutions and programs regard their credentials as being the 'best', but there are a host of licensing bodies that use credentials to protect both the public's interests and their own. All this makes it extremely difficult for individuals moving from one place to another, one institution to another, one career path to another or one job to another, to have their previous credentials, certificates, degrees, diplomas or licenses assessed, recognized and accepted.

This is an especially 'hot button' issue in Canada in terms of the difficulties faced by immigrants seeking to have their foreign credentials evaluated and accepted, but the problem affects everyone else as well. As a result there are a range of efforts underway to address this situation. Some of these involve the establishment of 'clearing-house' bodies to provide evaluation and equivalency for formal certification and credentials granted by different institutions and jurisdictions. Education and training institutions themselves are increasingly involved in 'articulation agreements' which provide mutual recognition and transferability of programs[7]. In some trades areas pan-Canadian certification standards have been developed which can be used as a base to evaluate, recognize and incorporate provincial credentials. Large organizations, such as the Department of National Defence, and professional associations have negotiated arrangements with colleges and universities for recognition of their own in-house training and professional development programs.

There is no doubt that these initiatives to provide assessment and recognition for prior formal learning are complex and costly. They are also absolutely necessary to cope with our current and expected economic and social realities. These concerns and needs are reflected in the comments of many of the respondents to this survey.

3.2 PLAR as the development and utilization of competency-based frameworks, or grids, against which the skills and knowledge of individuals can be assessed, wherever or however those have been learned.

The other two clusters on the PLAR spectrum involve efforts to bridge the gap that exists between experiential and formal learning and to build on the benefits and potential of both. The

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[6] This area is also sometimes referred to as Qualifications Recognition (QR)

[7] Canadian Alliance of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO) "Articulation Agreements in Canada: User Guide."

first of these could be characterized as the 'competency-based' approach to PLAR. This approach focuses upon analyzing the skills, competencies and knowledge required to perform satisfactorily in a particular field or occupation or job. A great deal of work has been done in recent years to establish competency grids and frameworks in a variety of fields. This work is usually the result of collaboration and consultation among industry representatives, education and training providers, licensing bodies and PLAR practitioners.

Once such a competency grid or matrix is in place, individuals, regardless of the type of learning they have had (i.e. 'formal' and/or 'experiential') should be able to have their skills and knowledge evaluated against that framework. A number of the PLAR initiatives reported in this survey are of this type.

The PLAR process itself usually involves a number of steps designed to assist individuals to determine those areas where they can demonstrate competencies; it also identifies those areas where skill 'gaps' exist. On this basis then, individuals' competencies can be recognized and credentialed and targeted training interventions can be designed to fill the gaps.

This survey report identifies a number of significant challenges involved in this PLAR approach. First of all, significant up-front investments of time, energy and money are required to develop and maintain the competency frameworks. There are often differences of opinion amongst the collaborators as to what the realities and characteristics of the sector, trade or job really are and, indeed those realities and requirements are changing with increasing rapidity due to new technologies and other factors. Another problem is that many education and training programs are still organized and presented in bloc rather than in modular form. This makes it difficult for individuals to get the specific 'gap' training they need, without repeating what they already know and can do.

There are also a number of significant barriers to participation in these PLAR processes that must be addressed. Often highly skilled individuals whose learning has been mostly 'on-the-job' have had little success or recognition in formal education and training. As a result they often lack confidence in themselves as 'learners' and are easily intimidated by exams, writing assignments and the like. Accordingly PLAR processes include measures to help individuals cope with these barriers. PLAR practitioners will often act as 'advisors' as well as 'assessors' (in some cases, experienced senior workers in the field have been trained to act as advisors and guides). Orientation and preparation sessions and exercises designed to provide writing practice are often provided.

Attention is also paid to the forms of evaluation that are used. On-the-job 'log books' to record skills and competencies, sometimes signed off by supervisors or senior trades people, can be used along with interviews, practical demonstration exercises and multiple-choice questionnaires. In some cases where the crucial evaluation is still a written exam, this remains a powerful disincentive to participation and is the subject of ongoing negotiation amongst the collaborating bodies.

Finally, external employment and labour force conditions are a significant factor in rates of participation in PLAR programs. If the sector is booming and entry is still relatively open, it is difficult to persuade participants to make the time, effort and financial investment necessary to engage in a PLAR program. Over time, industry efforts to upgrade and 'professionalize' their sector, increasing public protection regulation and increasing competition from new entrants with the specialized training and certification required will increase the pressure to take the PLAR option, but the challenge is long-term.

3.3 PLAR as the establishment and maintenance of a systematic, comprehensive and permanent record of an individual's learning assets though a Skills and Learning Portfolio Development program

Like the first two PLAR clusters outlines above, the PLAR portfolio development approach shares the same commitment to the principle of recognizing prior learning regardless of where or how it occurred. It also supports and uses the same competency-based framework as the second cluster. Where it differs is in its emphasis on the value of a systematic and comprehensive developmental approach that more fully prepares individuals to cope effectively and efficiently with the ongoing changes affecting their workplaces and lives.

These portfolio development approaches to PLAR usually take the form of a small group of 8 to 12 participants working, over a 10-week period, through a 30-hour program with the facilitation support of trained and certified practitioner. A series of exercises assist the participants to identify, reflect upon and describe the full range of their skills and learning, experiential and formal. Attention is paid to providing various forms of documentation and evidence – including but not limited to formal credentials – that attest to those skills and learning. Emphasis is also placed on the 'transferability' of many skills, an aspect of their learning that participants tend to seriously underestimate.

Participants, in fact, invariably 'discover' that they know and can do much more than they initially realized. By mapping their learning assets they also identify their learning 'gaps', but with a much greater sense of confidence in themselves as capable learners. In addition, they exhibit an increased motivation to take the steps necessary to fill those gaps. Participants also become much clearer about their short and long-term goals and objectives. It is here that the competency grids specific to meeting those objectives become especially relevant and useful. Improved resumes and job-hunting techniques are also dealt with.

At the end of the program, participants have a portfolio (usually in the form of a three-ring binder but increasingly in CD and DVD formats) that contains a comprehensive array of their skills and learning. Most participants regard their portfolio as a 'work-in-progress' that they will continue to update, revise and adapt over time. The process of working through this PLAR process with others who are struggling with the same circumstances also seems to increase the value and impact of the process. Many participants, who initially lack confidence in their ability to write or to think analytically, seem to benefit significantly.

4. Review of the Findings

The project reviewed the perspectives of three major players on PLAR: the home builders industry; Apprenticeship branches; and training providers

4.1 Home Builders Industry Perspective

4.1.1 Current Industry Initiatives and Views

All the individuals interviewed knew of PLAR being used in some sectors, in particular within the apprenticeship system and many examples were cited. According to the industry interviewees, there were a number of potential benefits and challenges involved.

On the positive side the industry people could see the development of common standards and language between industry sectors, educational institutions and apprenticeship programs resulting from the development and recognition of competencies.

In terms of challenges, the perceived attitude of the colleges and apprenticeship branches that 'we are the experts' and that industry groups should only play the relatively minor role of reviewing already developed curricula and programs, was seen as a barrier to PLAR approaches for upgrading and certification recognition.

Of the four Home Builder Associations interviewed, two have been involved with the development of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition programs to complement their new trade-specific carpentry programs. These programs have been developed in response to the needs of the home building industry. Three of the four associations interviewed regard the current carpentry apprenticeship as unable to address the skills realities needed in their industry, where workers specialize in specific areas of work. Manufacturers also play a role in the specialization of the industry as they create products that have special installation techniques and specific tools. They often offer training courses for new product installation

Neither of the existing home builder programs has come far enough along to evaluate what might be the key factors that determine the success of the PLAR program and their participants.

There was one consistent comment: that basing the PLAR as well as the training program on competencies is a key to success in the occupation. All the interviewees from the homebuilder's associations also agree that having industry initiate and direct the work is essential. They also see that industry needs to support the program when it is in place

The industry interviewees also expressed a general concern about literacy among workers in this sector. Many people currently in these occupations left the formal learning structure at an early age for various reasons, now, when faced with the prospect of further schooling and written exams as the only way to obtain a certification, workers will be fearful and uncomfortable and may seek to avoid the accreditation process entirely. Other forms of PLAR than a written exam may be more attractive and accessible to existing workers.

The industry associations surveyed agreed that they needed to play a lead role in the development of sectoral programs. They believe that this would ensure that the needs of the industry's human resources are being met with programs that have the appropriate competencies and PLAR assessment models that meet the skills and standards needs of the industry.

The industry has a responsibility to envision the PLAR programs to meet these needs; the training and apprentice system have the responsibility to actualize that vision. Among the key resources the industry can provide are:

- input into skills analysis and the occupational profile for the trades;

- promotion and the development of the industry buy-in for the program to ensure companies and their employees see the value and the benefit of the program, are "on-side" supportive, and participate in the certification program;

- access to the work-site for job placement during the in-school training; and

- provision of appropriate pay-rates to recognize the quality of work done and provide incentive to employees to invest the time and energy required to upgrade their skills and develop rewarding career paths in the industry.

British Columbia

The Canadian Home Builders Association of British Columbia (British Columbia-CHBA) with the assistance of the Industry Training Agency (ITA) has divided the carpentry occupation into four trade specialties, interior finishing, exterior finishing, forming and framing. If an individual completes all four specialties they will be prepared to write the Red Seal Carpentry exam. The Residential Framing Technician program is the first of the four programs to be piloted. The majority of the participants in their 26-week pre-employment program were youth at risk. The program is competency based and includes a job placement. The association has designed a pilot Prior Learning Assessment (PLAR) program so individuals already working in the industry can receive the certification.

The pilot PLAR process for the Residential Framing Technician certification was designed by the University College of the Fraser Valley. They offered the PLAR two different times in the fall of 2004 but have not yet found enough participants to justify running the program.

There is an application process to provide information to the participants on what to expect from the two-day PLAR and what is necessary for them to have to achieve the accreditation. They will be required to put together a portfolio and will be given guidelines for what can be accepted as evidence for achieving a particular competency e.g. photos of their work, testimonials from supervisors etc

The two-day PLAR program is a combination of skills demonstrations, the portfolio/employer recognition of skills and an exam. There are three practical components each three hours long. This hands-on portion provides an opportunity for the participants to demonstrate they can complete a competency in the allotted time. Areas covered include:
- Laying out walls using a blueprint
- Marking off studs and floor joists
- Building four stairs to a landing
- Laying out trusses and rafters

There is also an exam that consists of 80 multiple-choice questions. Candidates must pass each component with 75%, but there are different criteria for different parts of the program. For example when working with tolerances the candidate must have 100% accuracy. An individual can re-take any part of the process that they did not pass, but there will be an additional fee.

One informant commented that the easy part of developing a new certification program is the conceptual thinking and that "the difficulty is in the details". It was easier to think through the

process carefully when it was implemented in small pieces. The development of the Residential Construction Framing Technician program took more money than was originally thought

According to the British Columbia Home Builder Association (HBA) spokespersons, good marketing for the PLAR is essential. The program has been successful in reaching the contractors but not as successful in reaching the framing sub-contractors. The British Columbia respondent also said that when people are busy it is difficult to get them to do training. There is also no compelling incentive to do the PLAR at the moment though they said this might change when there is a stream of fresh graduates from the Residential Construction Framing Technician Program.

The British Columbia industry interviewees also identified the need to include soft skills in the in-school training. Their graduates, who were primarily at-risk youth, needed to develop personal skills and job readiness as well as technical competencies.

One interviewee said that the easy part of developing a new certification program is the conceptual thinking and that "the difficulty is in the details". It was easier to think through the process carefully when it was implemented in small pieces. She also found that the development of the Residential Construction Framing Technician program took more money than they originally thought

Alberta

The Professional Home Builders Institute of Alberta provides training associated with the New Home Warranty program. This includes four certified programs; Professional Sales Certificate, Sales Executive, Site Manager and Master Home Builder. Most programs are for junior management and applied construction occupations. At this time they do not use PLAR. They are looking into an exemption policy, but they do not have time to review transcripts and do the assessment that would allow individuals to be exempt from courses. There is one case where they may grant an exemption and that is for a graduate of the Architectural Technician Program who has 3 to 5 years experience. With this program the individual can be exempt from the Blueprint Reading module of the program.

Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan Home Builders" Association is undertaking a process similar to British Columbia, dividing the carpentry program into four trade specialties and developing a career path for individuals. The first trade specialty to be addressed is the interior framer trade. This work is still in the developmental phase and there are issues not yet worked out, such as how individuals can prove their time and how much time on the job will be needed.

In the case of the Saskatchewan Home Builders' Association, the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship Branch designed and offered a pilot PLAR process for people who are currently employed as framers and may already have the skills to qualify for the interior framers certification without taking the training program. In developing the program the Association and the Branch analyzed the National Occupation Analysis, broke it into competencies and grouped those competencies into blocks. An exam based on this break down was used as the assessment tool.

The PLAR was piloted in the spring of 2004. The sponsors had expected 10 participants for the program and had 80 apply, an indication of the interest in the certification and potential demand for optional routes to certification. The association held a meeting prior to the exam where candidates were given the guidelines outlining what work experience they were expected to have. They were also given a short refresher course.

Unfortunately, the Association had not seen the exam the Apprenticeship Branch had prepared and were thus unable to gear the refresher course to the exam. There was a low success rate. In the interview with the Saskatchewan Home Builder representative and the representative from the Saskatchewan Apprenticeship Branch, the only reason suggested for this failure rate was the fact that the metric measurement system was used throughout the exam.

This may not be the only reason, however, and the Saskatchewan interviewee's agreed that it is important to consider other possible barriers as well. Among other things they suggested that perhaps other versions of PLAR than the exam might be tested. Or perhaps the way the questions were presented was a problem for the candidates some of whom may have literacy challenges.

The Saskatchewan industry interviewee commented that it was difficult working with the apprenticeship branch. The staff of the apprenticeship branch are seen by industry people as not having an understanding of the residential construction trade and remain focused on the traditional Carpentry program as the one true way to become qualified. He said that, in fact, many people who have taken the Carpentry program do not have the specific skills needed for residential construction and yet come to residential job sites expecting a journeyman wage.

The interviewee believes that the industry is at a critical time in the development of appropriate programs as the country is entering a period when the competition for workers will be fierce. To attract the needed work force the Home Building Industry needs to be a good place to work with recognized training programs and clear career paths and ways to advance in the industry.

Manitoba

The Manitoba Home Builders Association representative was not prepared to answer the questionnaire, as the interviewee felt she had a limited knowledge of PLAR and was, therefore, reluctant to comment on its potential and implications. She was interested in the PLAR concept, however, and believed it to be useful.

Nova Scotia

The Atlantic Home Building and Renovation Sector Council is developing a sector based Licensing and Certification program for the industry in Nova Scotia, in response to a number of factors. These include the demographics of the labour force in the sector, emerging skills shortages in several areas, upgrading in relation to new technologies within a context of continued growth. These factors in turn highlight the increasing training and development needs of the sector. PLAR is seen as a potential bridge to bring experienced trades people in the sector into full participation and certification. The Council also plans to apply PLAR to their existing industry-driven Atlantic-based Management- Regulatory-Technical Training Program.

The Nova Scotia informant felt there is a need to have information on how PLAR is working from other regions and sectors. The home building industry can then build on that work. This would eliminate the "learning over" of the challenges experienced in other sectors. At the same time, new approaches/models need to be considered, "I do believe that any approach needs to have integrity and be credible to the stakeholders and, obviously, be consistent with the standards and principles of PLAR. I think there is a need for innovative thinking that starts with the specific objectives of the program and ensures a capacity to accurately identify and assess the appropriate skills and competencies"

4.1.2 Role of the Apprenticeship Branch (Home Builders Perspective)

The industry interviewee's also had a range of views and suggestions on the role of the apprenticeship branches. These included the following responsibilities:

- Responding to industry needs and demonstrating a commitment to the PLAR process with staff and financial support for pilot sectoral programs. Such commitment and support is currently available in the Atlantic Provinces to unions through joint registration agreements. This needs to be expanded so organizations other than unions can participate.

- Keeping records and tracking the apprentices through the program as well as tracking industry journeypersons after completion to keep records of upgrading and additional trade certifications attained.

- Providing assessors for PLAR programs.

- Providing certification for successful candidates.

- Providing funds and support for the industry associations to develop the necessary competency criteria.

Industry representatives also identified a number of areas for improvement. Their general view seemed to be that the apprenticeship providers are resistant to change and that their role could be enhanced by:

- Allowing increased industry sector involvement in the development and revision of Apprenticeship programs through provincial Acts and Trade regulations.

- Developing new models for Provincial Apprenticeship Boards and Trade Advisory Committees to provide effective, rather than token sectoral involvement, by accountable and repetitive appointments.

4.1.3 Role of the Training Providers (Home Builders Perspective)

The industry interviewees indicated a range of activities that training providers should undertake:

- Provide assistance with program development.

- Cooperate and provide assistance to align college curricula and outcomes with the PLAR principles and practices.

- Cooperate and provide mutual recognition and articulation with apprenticeship, high school and post secondary institutions.

They also agreed that the training providers contribute a number of key resources, including:

- Provision of qualified instructors who have appropriate certification and technical skills.

- Provision of good facilities.

- Provision of administrative support for application processes, registration, record keeping, etc.

Changes to expand or improve the role of the training providers were suggested

The interviewee from the Atlantic Home Building and Renovation Sector Council suggests documenting best practices in PLAR so training providers can see the benefits of examples that work. Colleges may need to be reassured that PLAR can work and not be "either an academic or

financial drain on their Colleges". She cited examples of resistance from College registrars from around the world during an online PLAR course she took. These included:

- Not recognizing prior learning as equal to College-based courses,
- Not documenting this learning on transcripts,
- Teachers' not being required to identify measurable outcomes for their own courses so prior learning could be assessed,
- Teachers resisting the requirement for involvement in assessments and support for the program, and
- Not allocating financial support

She also went on to say that when industry sectors develop their own programs it is necessary that they be credible with regard to the competency requirements of the occupation and that any PLAR maintains the same competency requirements. This will assure the Colleges involved in delivering the training, and their students, that standards are being applied consistently.

4.1.4 Systems for certifying PLAR and maintaining public records (Home Builders Perspective)

Many of the industry interviewees mentioned the idea of "Smart Cards" that would maintain an individual record of all the courses, training or completed competencies and would track the individual's own career path. This includes a student number that would follow the person from elementary school through a lifetime of learning both formal and informal.

Generally interviewees believed that the apprenticeship branch was the appropriate institution to keep records of where the workers were in their learning and also where the journeypersons where with up grades etc. In British Columbia, the CHBA-British Columbia relies on the Industry Training Centre to maintain such records. The association is also planning to set up its own database, however, to keep track of all the candidates in their training programs and PLAR programs.

4.2 The Apprenticeship Branch/Government Perspective

4.2.1 PLAR in the Home Builders Sector (Apprenticeship Perspective)

All the Apprenticeship Branches surveyed reported that they use PLAR in their systems. They believe that they have a long-standing history with recognizing prior learning; it is the terminology that is new. The Apprenticeship system is conducive to the use of PLAR because the majority of the learning takes place on the job, through practical experience. Many people learn some or all of a trade without entering into a formal apprenticeship agreement. According to some recent statistics over 20% of journey persons who obtained their Red Seal (Inter-provincial) certification did it without completing an apprenticeship program.[8]

In most cases, the apprenticeship PLAR process can give credit to the individual for some or all of the on-the job learning as well as some or all of the in-school levels and recognizes some prior formal training. Individuals are required to provide proof of their trade related employment and it is the employers who are required to ensure that the person has had the necessary experience to achieve certification during their time on the job.

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[8] Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition: Apprenticeship Certification in the Pipe Trades. Final Report: Executive Summary. Page ii

Apprenticeship candidates may also be given exemptions from some modules of in-school training. They may be required to write an exam in order to obtain these exemptions. In addition, if there has been formal training outside of the province, most apprenticeship branches will evaluate that training and give some form of credit. In all cases, however, individuals are required to take and pass the trade qualifier exam. At the same time, they may also be able to challenge an exam/or gain the necessary mark to obtain a Red Seal endorsement that allows them to work in other provinces as a certified journey person.

The methods and amount of recognition given to recognize prior learning in apprenticeship trades vary from province to province. In most cases the apprenticeship branch does the assessment. The exception is British Columbia, which has changed how its industry training/apprenticeship works. For example, the new Residential Construction Framing Technician certification, which includes a PLAR process, has been designed and is being administered by the University College of Fraser Valley (UCFV). For other trades the Industry Training Centre provides the assessment.

British Columbia

British Columbia has recently (January 2004) created a new system for recognizing apprenticeship and industry training. The Industry Training Authority (ITA) is a provincial government agency responsible for policy and funding. They are governed by a nine member Board of Directors who come from a broad range of industry sectors. The ITA was set up to create an industry training system that is more flexible and responsive to industry training needs. This organization is driven by a policy that values modular training systems and competency based evaluation.

The Industry Training Agency has made 3 million dollars in funding available for pilot projects focused on the competency-based model. There are two criteria's that the ITA Committee look for in approving any certification:
The first is a tie-in mechanism to ladder to a Red Seal certification and the second is a PLAR mechanism.

The service delivery has been contracted out to the Industry Training Centre (ITC), which is governed by the ITA and operated by Service B.C. The centre provides services to apprentices such as registration, coordination of exams and issuing certificates.

In the wider field of trades certification the ITC continues to offer PLAR to people who are interested in challenging the Red Seal exam and have proof of their hours. They are also offering exams that will allow people to enter an apprenticeship at various levels of the trades. They are working on a model that will better accommodate people with trades' certification/credentials from other countries into the British Columbia system (i.e.: Recognition of International Credentials).

At the same time, a comprehensive review of all trades programs is underway to see which should be kept, changed, or expanded. The objective is to design a new system geared to look at the way industry is actually working and align the training and certification systems to match those industry realities. The key informant noted that while traditional apprenticeship may work in rural areas, it is increasingly dysfunctional in areas of high population density and high construction demands.

The initiative between the ITC, the CHBA-British Columbia and the University College of the Fraser Valley will consist of four modules of trade specific training. If all of these modules are completed an individual will be able to qualify to write the Red Seal Carpentry exam. The partners see this as a good example of the industry specific training they are trying to establish across

British Columbia. As noted above, the first of the four modules to be piloted is for the Residential Construction Framing Technician designation. They have piloted the in-school training program and have developed a PLAR process to certify existing workers. In the British Columbia PLAR participants will be required to do a skills demonstration, not simply to prove they can do the task but to demonstrate they can do it under the same time pressures as exist on the job-site.

There is a building boom in British Columbia and it is the view of the interviewee that when work is abundant, and the credential is not essential to find a job, individuals would rather work than take a course or challenge the credential. The group believes that when there are more graduates from the in-school Residential Construction Framing Technician Program, the interest in obtaining the certification through PLAR will rise.

The Construction Formwork Technician Program, sponsored by the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association will be piloted in January 2005. The PLAR component is not yet designed but they will be using the Residential Construction Framing Technician PLAR program as a template. There are plans underway for a bridging program with the Interior Framer Technician program so participants in each of these programs would not have to do all the on-the-job training or all of the formal training required in each trade to obtain both credentials. Instead the participants will receive credit for the core competencies from either discipline.

In addition, the Reinforcing Steel Installer Certification (rebar) has been proposed by the Ironworkers trade. Like the pilot program described above this initiative is in the pilot stage and like them will have a PLAR component

The interviewee also cited the Crane Operators Certification and PLAR component developed by the National Commission for the Certification of Crane Operators in the USA, as a good example of an effective PLAR and certification system. It has been adopted in a few states in the wake of some very serious accidents and to ensure a "fair and equitable competency based certification". The program includes a practical evaluation process as well as a written exam. The practical demonstration includes a number of exercises that the individual must pass. Each practical demonstration is preceded by:
- Pre-test Briefing;
- Pre-test Familiarization Period; and
- Pre-task Familiarization Period.

Each task is time limited and a candidate will lose points for each minute over the task time. The pass standard is set to emphasize the necessity for completing a task safely on the job. They use independent assessors that have been certified through the NCCCO training system, to review the competency of the individual.[9] The program includes an appeals process that will review the revoking of a certification and to assess challenges to the process.[10]

Alberta

In Alberta, the interviewer said, people take advantage of PLAR more often in the compulsory trades. There is less need and therefore less demand for an individual to challenge a Trades Qualification in a voluntary trade. A person can apply for a PLAR in any trade with the recommendation of their employer.

The Alberta apprenticeship system is industry driven. The Apprenticeship Branch administers the program based on what has been determined by industry. Industry decides on the core

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[9] Information on the Crane Operators Certification was compiled from the interviewee as well as from the website of the National Commission for the Certification of Crane Operators in the USA www.nccco.org

competencies, gives advice on the training curriculum and sets the final qualifying exam. There are two levels of industry committees, Local and Provincial. Both employers and employees participate on Local Committees that are responsible for reviewing tasks and ensuring they are relevant to the work. The Provincial Committee reviews the exams and ensures they cover the core competencies the individual will need on the job.

The branch is open to creating new trades and an industry group can make an application for trade status. When the request is made the Executive Director of Apprenticeship will conduct an impact analysis and a cost analysis and give feedback to the Provincial Industry Committee. The application then moves on to the Industry Training Board for approval and then it will be recommended to the Minister. If approved, the industry associations will provide funding for program development. If the request is made for a "compulsory trade", that process is more complex and the funding will come from the provincial government.

PLAR is provided to an individual in recognition of both prior formal training and work experience. It is the employer who recommends that credit be given for the prior experiential learning of the apprentice. A written PLAR exam may be taken to determine where in the apprenticeship system a candidate should fit. There may also be a practical evaluation process. These range in cost $100 - $250. The employer can recommend credit be given for all but one year of an apprenticeship. One objective of the PLAR program is to "enable more people to change careers and begin an apprenticeship at almost any age"[11]

Alberta has developed their system of training using individual learning modules. This makes it possible for people to fill their skills gaps more easily and flexibly.

The primary PLAR assessment tool is in the form of a written exam. If a person can pass the Trades Qualification exam, as well as meet the requirements for time on the job, then the credential is granted.

The Alberta PLAR program was initially designed to fill skilled labour shortages and to recognize the skills of new immigrants. The Branch's website www.tradesecrets.com is designed to enable individuals to determine for themselves what they need in order to be successful.

In the case of a person who has been trained in another country the Apprenticeship Branch provides additional support services. For example, it will hire an interpreter to speak to a candidate's previous employer from overseas to verify that they have the time in their trade they have claimed. The Branch will also review the occupational characteristics of a particular trade in that country to determine if it is similar to the definition of the trade in Canada. For example in Indonesia an Electrician is called an Electrical Engineer; clearly those two occupations have different connotations in each country. This information provides the Branch with a basis on which to determine if the individual has competencies equivalent to the trade requirements in Alberta.

Every new entrant to a trade must be capable of attaining the level of Math, Science and English from the high school level that is recommended for the trade or occupation. If the candidate does not have the recommended high school credits a PLAR process is used to determine if the candidate has this level of competency. The Alberta Apprenticeship Branch interviewee said that there was a high dropout rate from the apprenticeship during the formal training by individuals who did not have the recommended high school credits.
The apprenticeship branch has various PLAR tools that will assess an individual's skills based on the trade level (first year, second year, third year etc.) they are applying for and cover mechanical skills, problem solving skills and English skills.

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[11] www.tradesecrets.ca, Alberta Apprenticeship web-site

The PLAR used at the new entrant level does not allow for readers or interpreters. For all other levels this assistance is allowed. This is done for safety reasons. If they can't read basic instructions or make basic decisions they are a higher risk on the job site. Also, if they can't pass the entrants exam then they can't pass the technical training portion of the program.

The accessibility and comprehensiveness of the web site provides useful information to individuals and enables them to undertake a self-assessment before they approach the apprenticeship consultant. They can also view the procedure and the process and download the application forms.

The interviewee commented that the trades qualification[12] system might work "too well" in some of in the non-compulsory trades. It is now common practice to work in the trade and then challenge the qualification program. This is cheaper than going through the technical training first. There are also an increasing number of people working illegally in the mandatory trades and then seeking to write the exam.

Fees for PLAR in Alberta have been frozen but will be reviewed in the near future. At the moment, in the view of the interviewee, people can apply to write the challenge exam too many times. Altogether, not only is a person allowed to write again if they fail on the first attempt, but can do so twice more without being required to complete some level of formal training. This has generated complaints from some industry representatives. Some believe that individuals who have failed the exam twice should be required to undertake additional technical training before trying again. On the other hand, others feel that some people are good at the job but less so at writing tests. The Apprenticeship Branch and industry are also concerned that reducing access to the exam might discourage people from staying in the trade, especially in areas facing skills and labour shortages.

Saskatchewan

The Saskatchewan Home Builders Association has been working with the Apprenticeship Branch on designating four industry specific trades. Similar to the British Columbia example, the first PLAR pilot was undertaken this year for the Interior Framers Trade. The Apprenticeship Branch undertook the design and delivery of the PLAR process.

The participants were given guidelines ahead of time so they were aware of the work experience they were expected to have and what proof of time and competence was required.

The participants documented the tasks they performed on the job and these were signed off by their employer. The trades' assessor with the Apprenticeship Branch did a formal evaluation for each participant. The PLAR requires the successful completion of the trade qualifier exam. Credit is given for time on the job and/or competencies but the exam is the final determinant of competence in the trade.

The interviewees believed that giving the applicant good information at the beginning of the process was important to the success of the individual. They need to know what competencies they need to have to achieve accreditation and how the PLAR process works.

Each system uses the compilation of evidence in a portfolio to prove the achievement of the competencies e.g. photos, testimonials from employers, certificates from schools or manufacture's training programs

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[12] A "trade qualifier" is an individual who challenges a certification exam for an Interprovincial or Red Seal trade without completing the full apprenticeship. They may complete some formal training outside the jurisdiction or may only have extensive experience with no formal training.

The interviewees believed that good marketing is essential for the credential as well as for the PLAR. PLAR is a new concept and contractors, sub-contractors and employees need to understand the concept and not to be threatened by it or to think it is a substandard certification, or a way around real certification. The interviewees believed that creating buy-in from the employers will improve the level of skill in the industry.

Manitoba

In the set of interviews the interviewee recommended was not from the Manitoba Apprenticeship Branch but from the Department of Advanced Education and Training. Advanced Education and Training in Manitoba is responsible for overall coordination of PLAR in all branches of the Department. It has completed a number of industry based PLAR projects. The interviewee had the majority of her experience with the manufacturing sector.

The Apprenticeship Branch performs their traditional role of granting credit for previous experience and training. They are restricted, however, by the legislation that requires everyone to write and pass an exam. This is to say that other forms of PLAR are not available or must always be accompanied by a written exam.

"Trades people with enough work experience in a designated trade (a predetermined number of years and proven hands-on experience), and who want to become fully-qualified journeypersons, can apply to write a certification exam without having to fulfill practical and technical training components. Individuals can also apply for assessment of work experience, level placement testing and review/validation of other jurisdictional credentials."[13]

The apprenticeship website www.edu.gov.mb.ca describes the PLAR process

The interviewee said, however, that the Apprenticeship Branch cannot do true PLAR unless the legislation is changed. The legislation in Manitoba requires a person to complete the prescribed number of hours on the job plus the trade qualification exam. The theory is that the trade's qualification exam will capture a candidate's knowledge of the trade. The interviewee suggests that the test may emphasize the theory and not cover the hands on competencies. They do recognize experiential learning as time in the trade and give cross trade credit, but the end is always the same Trades Qualification exam.

The interviewee had also worked with a number of other sectors that were using PLAR as a component of their human resource development these include manufacturing, health care, tourism, and foreign qualification recognition.

In her view, the purpose and potential of PLAR is to give workers a way to move within a company, from one company to another or from one occupation to another without having to repeat learning that they have already acquired.

Among the challenges involved in implementing PLAR is the long-term investment companies must make to develop an integrated and sustainable program. Companies face rapid change, and innovative approaches like PLAR can be vulnerable to leadership, staff and policy turnover.

The Manitoba interviewee identified a number of factors that appear to be key to successful implementation. These include:

▪ Enlisting a champion;

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[13] www.edu.gov.mb.ca

- Getting a long-term commitment;
- Building strong partnerships;
- Developing and using expertise in developing occupational and organizational competencies;
- Creating systematic and appropriate solutions;
- Making the PLAR system transparent and sustainable; and
- Establishing and maintaining a database for tracking and evaluation.

A major challenge is to build and maintain the momentum during the development period. It may take two years and other things may change during that time. Key personnel may leave or the project may lose the champion.

Find a Competency Statements professional. A project needs to have someone who has the skills to develop and understand the process of creating competency statements. Competencies are complicated and unwieldy. Most PLAR practitioners are not sophisticated enough to create statements that are representative of the sub-tasks.

Because many of the projects that the interviewee has worked on have been with specific companies, the documentation may not be generally available. It is important, however, to find ways to document results and, over time, to develop standards that are widely accessible. The Manitoba Department of Advanced Education and Training's PLAR website www.wplar.ca, for example, includes the document, "PLAR as a Workforce Development Tool: Linking the Partners," a report that outlines the process the department follows.

The PLAR department of the Manitoba Ministry of Education and Training has worked with a number of industry sectors. Among the pilots being sponsored is a training program for Heavy Equipment Operators in a Northern Community.

There is a project proposed for a specific northern community to clean up land and reforest an area around a mine that is no longer viable. The community wants the local people to benefit from the jobs created by this project so they are arranging for a Heavy Equipment Operators Certification program to be given in the community. The community council believes there are enough people in the community with some large equipment operating skills that would allow these people to transfer those skills to other large machines. Two possible complimentary occupations are skidder operators from the forestry industry and snow plow drivers.

The certification gained by the participants will allow them to find employment opportunities long after the mine clean-up is completed. They are designing a PLAR process to give advanced standing to people with similar skills in the Heavy Equipment Operators Program.

The project steering committee includes experts and outside consultants. They have defined the technical skills/competencies for operating six different pieces of heavy equipment. At the present time the missing element is defining the necessary essential skills.

The next steps for this particular project are to:
- Identify the essential skills a candidate needs to be successful in the occupation;
- Develop benchmark statements to measure gaps against the requirements;
- Develop a focused training plan; and
- Look to the community to provide the training that they can and bring in other partners where necessary.

The interviewee believed that it is too early in the process to evaluate the key success factors. One area that would seem to be crucial is the ability to analyze the community capacity, and create and build or import the necessary infrastructure. Varying literacy levels may also be a significant factor affecting the outcomes.

Similarly, a planning process that is inclusive and efficient will make the project move more smoothly. Using a variety of professionals including employment advisors, teachers and PLAR professionals will increase the likelihood of success.

Nova Scotia Apprenticeship Skills and Training

The interviewee from Nova Scotia said that Nova Scotia Apprenticeship has a full-scale PLAR process to recognize work-based experiential learning. A credit transfer agreement has been put in place with the Nova Scotia Community College that recognizes the learning and the hours on the job. The thirteen field offices of the apprenticeship department have staff that are trained to assess the status of the client, and to make recommendations for more training or for undertaking the trades qualifier exam on the basis of the experiential learning the candidate already has achieved.

The apprentice is required to provide documentation of their time in the trades, as well as have completed the logbook of competencies. Those competencies can only be signed off by a supervisor who holds a Certificate of Qualification.

If the person has not taken any theoretical training they will be required to spend more time on the job in order to qualify to write the trades qualifier exam. For example, if there were a requirement for 8,000 hours on the job, that individual would have to complete 12,000 to be eligible to write the exam.

There is a practical examination required for compulsory[14] certified trades. The tasks and sub-tasks have been assigned different weights, and on some of the tasks a candidate must score 100% while other tasks have a less stringent pass/fail. The candidate will perform such a demonstration in a workplace setting and have his/her skills evaluated by an examiner and an industry person.

The respondent from the N.S. Apprenticeship Branch believes that it is important to have field officers available to guide the applicant through the PLAR process and determine where they fit and what the next steps should be. Candidates who have apparent essential skills challenges are referred to the appropriate agency. The field officers are trained to do this counseling, and it is integrated into their work.

The logbook is another user-friendly tool that helps individuals identify their competencies and their gaps.

The major challenge the branch identifies is maintaining quality standards and ensuring that they are applied consistently.

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[14] Some trades are regulated under provincial legislation as "mandatory certified" or "compulsory certified". The individual who works in these occupations must be registered as an apprentice, and hold a temporary permit or a Certificate of Qualification.

4.2.2   Role of the Training Providers (Apprenticeship Perspective)

From the apprenticeship system perspective, with a couple of exceptions, the training institutions simply provide the agreed upon training programs. The first exception is in the delivery of pre-apprenticeship programs. These programs provide a pre-screening and preparatory phase for new entrants to the trades. The course outlines for these programs are assessed by the Apprenticeship Branch to ensure the candidates are receiving the same material as the apprenticeship training. The second is in the province of British Columbia where the college has been a bigger partner in the design and delivery of new trades training and PLAR programs.

In Alberta the colleges provide study materials and guides to help prepare candidates for the apprenticeship PLAR entrance exam, but some apprenticeship interviewees felt that the training providers should have a greater commitment for granting recognition for prior learning.

The provincial apprenticeship branch in the department of Advanced Education and Training should provide funding to help develop industry-based PLAR. Colleges need to provide a pre-exam preparation for apprenticeship trades qualification exams so that individuals can get their essential skills up to speed and learn/re-learn how to write an exam. Colleges can also provide assessment at the intake point for essential and trade skills. All post secondary institutions should have PLAR advisors and allow people to challenge their programs

Adult Learning Centres should be using PLAR to help individuals challenge for credit in courses they need, including trades related programs.

The Department of Advanced Education should also provide financial aid and expertise to companies and industry associations. Many PLAR models already exist and can be adapted to different situations. The department should also encourage feasibility analyses to determine what is required to sustain a PLAR initiative in the long term.

The training providers need funding support from government to provide these services and to provide better information to industry. Industry needs to be more informed on how PLAR can help solve human resource needs, including improved recruitment practices, performance management and compensation.

PLAR development must involve both management and labour. Labour organizations have concerns about job classifications and multi-skilling that need to be addressed.

4.2.3   Role of the Home Builders Industry (Apprenticeship Perspective)

The apprenticeship providers see the role of the industry associations as providing access to industry knowledge and information on the competencies required in the trade. Industry, they believe, provides leadership and the apprenticeship system provides the structure for the trades training process. Industry associations can also market trades information and can distribute PLAR evaluation documents so employers and employees are aware of the competencies employees need to demonstrate in order to achieve accreditation.

The Manitoba informant noted that industry-based associations provide the economy of scale necessary to implement sector-based PLAR processes. They can focus more effectively than an individual company, who may start and stop a program as the financial and business situation fluctuates. Industry sectors can develop the competencies and PLAR mechanisms to do the long-term development and keep the competencies up to date.

The industry is a source of expertise for the identification and articulation of competencies and of up-to-date information on current labour market and business circumstances. Industry is an invaluable partner in developing and maintaining an effective PLAR system.

At the same time, industry needs to be better informed on what PLAR is and how it applies in their industry. This can be a complicated process, as they will need to understand the development process, undertake feasibility studies and consider the options for PLAR applications.

4.3   The Training Providers Perspective

4.3.1   PLAR – General Views

There were key informant interviews with four Community Colleges. All of the colleges interviewed have developed PLAR policy and have staff assigned to ensure that the systems are being implemented, and that each department is moving towards achieving the goals of the strategic plan.

Some of the provinces, e.g. Manitoba and Saskatchewan, have a strategy for PLAR in the workplace that the colleges are working toward.

The colleges surveyed use PLAR in a variety of situations. Including:

- Giving credit for existing programs;

- Recognition of courses from other programs;

- Customizing a certificate program to answer the needs of industry;

- Developing specific training for industry and PLAR programs to support them;

- Development of tools to assist with the articulation and identification of skills of the employees;

- Development of Assessment tools;

- The N.S. Community College has an interior college program that fosters the use of Portfolio Development during the student's years at College with the goal of having this continue as a lifelong activity;

- PLAR for Authentic Skills assessment and competency and to recognize previous training; and

- Developing Assessment tools, processes and implementation processes for the programs and for the candidates.

The key informants interviewed were charged with a variety of responsibilities within their institutions including:

- Making policy and reviewing the institution's policy on PLAR;

- Running interior college initiatives like the Portfolio Learning Initiative;

- Providing internal resources for departments entering into PLAR with industry groups;

- Administering PLAR to give credit to students for existing programs;

- Developing and facilitating Strategic Outcomes for the college staff and faculty with their own PLAR;

- Providing training in PLAR for faculty; and
- Developing PLAR practitioner training.

Colleges have also been working on PLAR initiatives in such industry sectors as:

- Science, health, community services, tourism and business;
- Manufacturing, construction and mechanical trades; and
- Software development.

These fields include specific occupations such as:

- Medical transcriptionist;
- Midwives;
- Continuing Care Practitioners and other nursing occupations;
- Heavy Equipment Operators;
- Warehouse workers;
- Occupational Health and Safety Officers;
- Aerospace Industry – Aircraft Maintenance Engineers;
- Steel manufacturing occupations;
- Early Childhood Education; and
- Automotive Service Technician.

The colleges all have established processes for developing and applying PLAR. These reflect a number of common principles, as follows:

- The requirements of the learners must be transparent.
- The outcomes must be clearly identified.
- Learners and assessors must know what is being assessed.
- There should be a variety of assessment practices for learners to prove their learning.
- The assessors should be trained in good PLAR practices.
- The benchmarks for advisors and assessors developed by CAPLA should be used.
- Assessments must be based on validity, authenticity, sufficiency of documentation and flexibility.

Other determinants of success:

- Before starting a PLAR process have the individual do a self-audit against outcomes.
- Provide lots of information up front to help candidates make good decisions. Have a variety of ways to get this information e.g. on-line, with a career counselor, or through and industry association.
- Do an authentic assessment, not just a theory test.
- Provide opportunities to give other types of proof - interviews, validation of workplace skills, demonstration of skills. Depending on the outcome you are trying to assess, look for the most effective methods and combine them.

- All material needs to be written in plain language.
- The competencies need to be transparent.
- The process needs to be clear… what is it? What does it involve?
- Ensure assessment measures learning that is required.
- The training needs to be modular so candidates can train to the gaps discovered in the PLAR process.

The interviewees also mentioned a number of other issues and considerations that need to be taken into account when designing and applying PLAR processes. These included:

- PLAR is time consuming for the learner, the institution and the company that may be providing it. Learners found the process more time consuming than anticipated. Ways to improve the efficiency for learners and assessors need to continue to be explored.
- PLAR tools need to continue to develop.
- The effectiveness of the assessors must be reviewed and improved.
- For all cross sectoral occupations there needs to be flexibility to use a variety of types of assessment tools to assess the readiness in the field.

Key informants from the learning institutions saw a number of benefits and positive outcomes resulting from PLAR applications including the following:

- Adult learners who have experienced the PLAR process stay on the job longer and have a higher confidence in their own learning capacity in training programs.
- PLAR provides an accurate map of an adult's learning assets and gaps – this enables the individual and the HR or training provider to target training interventions more effectively to address the gaps and avoid duplication.
- PLAR can provide access to credentials to on-the-job personnel who want and need them, and helps to build the company capacity and credibility.

They also pointed to a number of leading innovative practices that support quality assurance. The PLAR process at Red River College in Manitoba was one example. The process was described as follows:

1. PLAR general information in print is available and widely distributed.
2. The college holds general information sessions and provides candidates with initial advising. Guidelines are provided to help an individual decide if they would be a good candidate and to build an individual profile of their work experience, career objectives, etc.
3. Guidance is also available through telephone inquiries.
4. The next step is to arrange for the individual to meet with an advisor and review the self-assessment booklet to flesh out the learning. Guidance is also provided about application procedures, and details about what evidence needs to be collected and submitted.
5. Provide training to fill the gaps in their learning. In some situations gap training can be provided while doing the PLAR.
6. College programs are modular, which makes it possible to train to the gaps (rather than forcing the learner to take a large bloc with a great deal of duplication).

The training institution key informants believe that PLAR can be helpful in many areas of human resource development. These include addressing skills shortages and upgrading needs, recognizing immigrant experiential learning as well as foreign credentials, and preparing for succession transitions. They also believe the learning institutions have to do a better job of informing industry about PLAR and its application.

Colleges themselves face challenges in training faculty to work with industry in developing innovative PLAR methods and applications.

The view of the interviewees on the role of the training providers includes:

- Development of curricula using criteria recommended by the industry association.

- Development of assessor guides.

- Training and provision of assessors.

- Identification, in consultation with industry, of the standards and criteria required.

- Provisions of assessments for formal and experiential learning that have taken place, and identification of the skill/competence gaps.

- Development and provision of training to fill gaps.

- Provision of PLAR assessment of programs offered by industry in the workplace in order to award appropriate college credit.

The key resources that Colleges can contribute include:

- Expertise in PLAR methodologies and tools to assist with the articulation and identification of skills

- Stable and credible certification/credentials

- Customized certificate programs to answer the needs of industry.

- Established record of active partnerships with industry to plan for future needs and develop strategies, training, and education to address these needs. (e.g. programs developed with tourism industry in Manitoba, etc)

- Programs that have clear, well-defined course outcomes so people can make judgments about what learning they need

- Marketing and information to industry associations to develop a clear understanding about what PLAR is, what it can do for them and how the system works.

- Systems for evaluating and tracking learners and program delivery.

- Improvements to the role of the Training Providers – The Training Provider Perspective.

Learning institutions need to help increase industry awareness of the benefits of PLAR. In most places forums for this partnership do not exist. Bringing industry partners together through orientation sessions that highlight how PLAR applications can help existing workforce – as well as new entrants – to meet new performance standards. The learning institutions can also help industry to identify the skills knowledge and abilities they will need for future markets.

Learning institutions also need to develop buy-in from grass roots, faculty and apprenticeship branch personnel. Increased funding is required to cover additional duties of college PLAR providers and to ensure the design and delivery of high-quality and effective PLAR services and programs.

Learning institutions and other PLAR providers need to continue to work on National PLAR Standards (CAPLS). National Standards for training and certification in PLAR systems is a quality piece that is missing.

Need better tracking and follow-up evaluation studies of learners who have completed PLAR programs. Were they better prepared for the occupation? Did they receive recognition and career development success (promotion, etc) in their company? What were the direct and indirect outcomes of PLAR on them, on their employers?

It was generally seen as important to take a collaborative approach where industry leaders come together with other stakeholders, both at the provincial and at the national level to support this work.

There needs to be more work done is this area and at the same time there is a need to have more funding diverted to sector-related PLAR so that colleges and individual workers in the industry do not bear the brunt of the cost.

4.3.2 PLAR in the Home Builders Sector (Training Providers Perspective)

British Columbia
Most of the PLAR for trades-related programs the study looked at are administered through the provincial Apprenticeship Branch. As we have seen earlier in this report, this is not the case in British Columbia, where the University College of the Fraser Valley was contracted to design and administer the PLAR for the new Residential Interior Framing Technician certification. They have worked closely with the Canadian Home Builders" Association of British Columbia. The British Columbia HBA is dividing the Carpentry trade into four sub-trades: Interior Framing, Exterior Envelope, Roofing and Finishing. Each of these certifications will have a PLAR component and a candidate who completes all the certifications can receive a Red Seal in Carpentry.

The first PLAR for the Interior Framing Technician Program was to take place at the beginning of November 2004. Insufficient enrolment, however, made this impossible, and the same turned out to be the case for a second planned start-up date.

Both the college and the industry interviewees agreed that there were a couple reasons for this slower than expected take-up. One factor is that British Columbia is currently experiencing a construction boom. Work is plentiful and British Columbia contractors are not requiring that their employees have the certification.

As more graduates from the formal college Framer Technician program enter the industry, however, it seems likely that more employers and employees will want to upgrade the skills and certification of those working in that area. Increased competition will encourage more individuals to pursue the UCFV program.

That PLAR program has been designed as an intensive two-day program that combines identification of practical skills, written work and employer recognition of skills. It will involve three components and an exam, as follows:

1. Practical – 3 hrs
   - Layout walls from blueprints
   - Mark off studs and floor joists

2. Practical – 3 hrs
   - Stairs
   - Build four stairs to a landing

3. Practical – 3hrs
   - Layout trusses and rafters

4. Exam – 3 hrs
   - 80 questions multiple choice

The classes will be restricted to no more than 12 people and will cost $540.
Each component requires a mark of 75% or higher to pass. Though for different parts of the program there are different criteria. For example, the candidate must attain 100% on the section on tolerances. The candidate can re-challenge any part they did not pass; an additional fee will be charged for this. Completion of this module will give them the first year of the Red Seal Carpentry program.

When asked about the determinants of success and user friendliness for the program they were unwilling to say anything until they have run the program.

They did have some "unanticipated outcomes". The key informant mentioned that it was one thing to do the activity on the job but another to do it with a pencil and paper. The candidate can build stairs, but can he do the calculations on paper? The PLAR needs to ensure that the final answer is the goal, not how it is achieved.

Candidates need to know the requirements well in advance of taking the PLAR. The candidates on the job site may not use some of the skills and theory covered in the program; for example they may rely on their supervisor to read blueprints and understand the Building Code and so may have limited experience in these areas. There is also the concern that the individual may not have experience in all the areas, they may have built stairs, but never needed to build roof trusses so they therefore will not have all the skills to get them through. In this case appropriate modular training needs to be available so an individual can target training to their gaps and does not have to repeat learning.

The program material is available on line and the PLAR material will be available after they have done the first class. www.chba-bc.org

The interviewee believed this program is a good tool to achieve the needs of the industry for certified workers. The 2010 Olympics have generated a need for skilled workers and because of the building boom few people will go through the apprenticeship system. Why go to school when you can work and make money? Through PLAR they can be given credit for what they have learned on the job and fill any skills gaps with modular programs. The interviewee suggested that if people on the job now kept a logbook it would be easier when they decided to get a certification. Everyone needs to know the requirements for the certification ahead of time.

Saskatchewan
The Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) is starting a PLAR for their pre-employment carpentry program. The colleges are only the delivery agents for the apprenticeship training and cannot do PLAR with those programs. The Saskatchewan Apprenticeship Branch does offer PLAR to individuals who are seeking advanced standing in the apprenticeship. The criteria for the PLAR are to have completed the required time in the trade plus some additional time (it varies from trade to trade but is about 1/3 more), validating those hours and successfully completing the applicable level exam. SAIST has come up with an innovative way to give people credit for their skills and learning in the carpentry occupation.

SIAST has approval from the apprenticeship branch to give pre-employment programs for the trades. These pre-employment programs provide the student with the in-school portion of the apprenticeship before they are employed and signed as apprentices. On successful completion of

the program the student will then complete their hours on the job and write the Certificate of Qualification exam. This year the SIAST is offering PLAR to receive advanced standing in the pre-employment program. Individuals will be able to prove their competence through a combination of testing and projects and be able to move into a higher level if they can prove they are capable. The student will still have to complete the regulation number of hours on the job, but will not have to complete additional hours.

This program is in the planning stage with delivery scheduled for March 2005.

4.3.3   Role of the Home Builders Industry (Training Providers Perspective)

The training providers all saw the industry associations as the primary source for advice on the skills and competencies needed in an occupation. In areas where homebuilding sub-trades programs are being developed, they see industry as the driving force to make training more relevant and effective.

Industry also provides leadership for the development of PLAR processes that recognize and respect each worker's current skills and enables them to upgrade those skills without putting an unwarranted burden on them to attend school or incur unnecessary costs.

Industry associations have the ability to work with other partners to develop the PLAR mechanisms and maintain the development over the long term. Their advice on the skills and competencies was not seen as a one-time intervention simply to develop the occupational analysis, but as an ongoing participation in efforts to ensure that those competencies are kept relevant and current.

It was also mentioned that individual employers are subject to the vagaries of the market. The gains made in establishing and utilizing PLAR within a single enterprise may be lost if that company encounters mergers, takeovers or business failures. Here too an industry wide association can be helpful in providing continuity and support for employees facing such transition situations.

Industry partners are also seen as the primary marketer for credentials and for PLAR applications. Employers need to understand the value of the PLAR process themselves to be able to promote it within their organization. They also   need to encourage the employees to attain appropriate upgrading and credentials. This process of educating the employers will take time. Industry associations have the resources and contacts necessary to maintain this type of marketing and education over a number of years. They also provide a wonderful forum for the exchange of 'success stories' and 'innovative practice'.

The industry association's need more information as to what PLAR is, its value, and how it applies to their industry. This was seen as a challenge. Potential PLAR champions in the industry need to be identified, cultivated and provided with the information and support they will need in order to provide leadership within the sector. They need to understand the principles of PLAR and consider how it might best apply to their industry. PLAR practitioners, training institutions and apprenticeship branches all need to become involved in this effort.

The transferability (or lack of transferability) of a credential is always a major concern and it was suggested that the industry associations could form a lobby group to get federal funding and have national coordination. This could be in the form of a joint-apprenticeship, community college and national and provincial industry associations. This group could ensure that the benchmarks for the PLAR were the same or similar task force across the country and reassure employers that the credential is not being "watered down" by the PLAR process.

The employers need to be on side and encourage their workers to use PLAR to meet performance standards and to gain certification. There needs to be good marketing to employers for the use and validity of working with a PLAR process. Colleges need to make the case and provide examples that demonstrate that a certification achieved with PLAR is equal to a certification gained through school. In the trades area, the PLAR candidates must be able to achieve a Red Seal designation.

4.3.4   Role of the Apprenticeship Branch (Training Providers Perspective)

The learning institutions regard the apprenticeship branches as the providers of the framework for trades and occupations certification. They believe that the apprenticeship branches should provide funding and work with the industry associations to develop occupational criteria and standards. They also feel that keeping track of the apprentices as they move through the system and pursue their journeymen careers, and providing a record and information system should be a responsibility of the apprenticeship branches.

It was suggested that the apprenticeship branches need to develop policies that reflect broader PLAR principles. At present, most apprenticeship branches restrict the criteria for PLAR to only two factors; 1) the recognition of time in the trade and, 2) successful completion of a written trade qualification exam. Two of the college interviewees suggested that a broader competency-based assessment approach would provide evidence of authentic experiential skills and learning that a conventional written examination may miss. They believe that an expanded PLAR approach would make better use of some of the apprenticeship funds now used for training.

It was also suggested that ways need to be found to encourage the colleges to work with apprenticeship branches to develop additional options for the assessment of prior learning.

In all areas, having the adequate resources to establish and maintain PLAR processes is a challenge. Significant up-front investment is necessary to make PLAR work well. More work needs to be done to demonstrate the cost effective benefits of PLAR.

At the moment, college instructors are asked to contribute their time on top of their teaching schedules and other responsibilities to do assessments, or to work with industry associations. It was suggested that industry associations and apprenticeship could share some of these costs.

4.3.5   Systems for Certifying and Maintaining Public Record of Worker Competencies. (Training Provider's Perspective)

Some colleges see themselves as one part of the system for certifying and the apprenticeship branch as the other. These two organizations, however, do not, in most cases, have access to each other's records. Professional associations also keep records if they certify their own members. The Saskatchewan Nurses Association (SNA), for example, has an arrangement in which Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST) provides PLAR assessments for their members, and the records are kept by the SNA. .

In British Columbia, the system has changed and the college interviewee did not think that the records for time on the job were being kept by a provincial organization. He suggested that keeping track of their member's employees could be a function of the industry association.

The responsibility and enforcement of the compulsory trades in British Columbia has been passed to the Safety Standards Act Council. This group is an independent not-for-profit corporation charged with ensuring compliance with the Safety Standards Act[15]. Responsibility for

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[15] Information from the B.C. Safety Authority web site www.safetyauthority.ca

the training is through the Industry Training Centre a service bureau working under the direction of the Industry Training Authority.[16] It is not clear if this organization keeps records of the time on the job for apprentices, as their new structure has the apprentices responsible for scheduling their own time and place for their in-school training. The Training Centre does not assign them to a time and class.

There were a number of examples where the industry associations were maintaining records of industry certifications. Including:
- A safe website developed by the steel sector. The can be opened with a passport
- Manitoba Tourism Education Council, keeps records of certification
- Campus Canada, has a system to maintain records for learners

The Technology Sector Council (CTHRB) has an on-line system that workers can log-on to document their credentials and experience, and employers can view. According to one Manitoba interviewee, privacy and access to information issues must be considered in the context of record keeping, tracking and evaluation. Because of this the individual employee is the best maintainer and user of the records. This responsibility is an integral part of essential skills and competency development and PLAR. Companies, of course, can maintain a certain level of record keeping and tracking, but here too that information becomes company owned, not publicly accessible. Similarly, training institutions will keep records of certificates and diplomas, though privacy issues apply here as well.

E-based portfolios and records can enhance transferability and recognition. Here again, the individual must take responsibility for keeping up-to-date skills and competencies records, and for providing them in appropriate circumstances. PLAR in fact builds employee confidence, awareness and a willingness to articulate and communicate their own learning assets.

There is a need to promote recognition of prior learning as a positive thing, and to encourage workers to be the keeper of their own records.

4.4   National Trades Association: United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters

The interviewee from this organization is the advisor to provincial coordinators for program consistency. The National Pipe Trades Human Resource Committee commissioned a study to look at the use of PLAR in the pipefitting, plumbing, steamfitting, refrigeration and air conditioning and gasfitter trades through the apprenticeship system in Canada. Prism Economics conducted the study.

The provincial apprenticeship branches or agencies involved with trade certification were partners in the study. The committee was interested in the role of PLAR and how successful these approaches were in terms of recognizing foreign credentials without eroding the trade standards. The question they were looking to answer with the research was "Did the PLAR system meet and match the standards of the regular apprenticeship system?"

The study found that the PLAR system is not consistent throughout Canada, with some systems being thorough and some being spotty. The systems the committee regarded as 'spotty' do not thoroughly evaluate all aspects of the education and training. These "spotty" systems are seen as a product of the resources available in a region. PLAR is time consuming and expensive.

The study concluded that the Alberta system was the most rigorous. That system tries to stay current and evaluate its work on an ongoing basis. PLAR is based on time in the trade and the

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[16] Information from the B.C. Industry Training Authority web-site www.itabc.ca

level of education and skills. The Alberta system is realistic and provided on a fee for service basis. It was designed in consultation with industry trades-people and employers.

This system demands more from the applicant. Because of this, it was noted that individuals will often go to another province where it is easier to obtain the certification and will then return to the province to work in the trade. The committee was concerned by this practice; qualified journeypersons need to maintain a high standard for the employers. The committee also emphasized the importance of following up and verifying applicants' claims of the work experience and educations they have achieved.

Collective agreements say that the union will provide qualified individuals to work on a job site. It is difficult to bring people who have prior experience through the system, without having them start over. In the case of someone with a foreign credential the individual may have worked in that sector in another country but the sector may have a different trade definition, and when the individual challenges the apprenticeship exam they will fail.

The committee believes that PLAR systems that use the National Occupation Classifications and a 70% pass/fail mark for the written exam to determine whether an applicant has the right level of skills is the most acceptable.

There needs to be a consistent policy from province to province about how credit for PLAR is assessed and assigned. At this time in this trade sector, the system is over the map. There needs to be one policy applied consistently.

4.4.1 Role of the Apprenticeship Providers (UAPP Human Resources Committee Perspective)

The apprenticeship provider's role is to do the research to establish the appropriate competencies and skills needed for the trade, to set guidelines and conduct the assessment.

Apprenticeship needs to have the funding necessary to develop the appropriate PLAR tools to work with. The provincial branches need to work together to establish consistency with PLAR assessment from province to province. A person who has received their Trades Qualification through PLAR in one province should meet the same standards as in other provinces.

4.4.2 Role of the Industry Associations (UAPP Human Resources Committee Perspective)

The industry associations need to give individuals the opportunity to prove and demonstrate the skills they have in a workplace setting. Industry should also participate in the development of the tools and help with the evaluation process.

4.4.3 Systems for Certifying (UAPP Human Resource Committee Perspective)

The provincial government is the most appropriate body to establish and maintain a certifying system. He continued by saying "There are some problems with this or any system – in terms of the restrictions/protections provided by privacy legislation".

The industry associations or union organizations also keep track of the training information. The "Smart Card" system holds the best potential. The individuals training records are kept by the individual, so it becomes their responsibility. Concerns about credibility regarding who enters the information and verifies it must be dealt with. There are methods to create a secure format for this, and this is probably the tool of choice for the future.

4.5 The Canadian Home Builders" Association

4.5.1 Approach to PLAR

The interviewee from the Canadian Home Builders" Association (CHBA) said that he did not have any direct role with the development and delivery of PLAR programs, but he is very interested in how it is affecting the workplace. He is watching closely how the Saskatchewan and British Columbia systems are working, as examples for home builders across the country.

It is very important to have a trade designation that addresses the skills of the home builders. He also said that the renovation and maintenance occupation in this designation must be addressed, as it is often requires a higher skill level.

When he compared the commercial construction trades to residential, the interviewee observed that there were 12 or 13 trades in the National Master IV Classification compared to 45 occupations in residential construction. He also noted that individuals may be highly skilled in a specific area of work, having specific tools to do the work, and yet not have the schooling that could address gaps that they might have. Manufacturers have training programs for specific products, and the toolmakers that have tools for specific installations have training programs.

The interviewee saw the Tourism Industry Certification as a good example of a PLAR program that works. He was also aware of a Mechanical Trades Residential Program for First Nations people in the Yukon that was an innovative program with a PLAR component. The CTHRB has worked to bring the two streams of technician and technologist programs into one database to foster the career path of the workers and give credit for the prior learning.

A major concern of industry programs is for portable credentials that are recognized by public institutions over time.

4.5.2 Role of the Training Providers (CHBA Perspective)

Unions train workers in the carpentry field and this training needs to be recognized by the Colleges as equivalent to the college carpentry certification. The training providers are also the source for verifying a credential, so they need to keep up to date on the changes and advances in the industry sector so that they can properly evaluate programs as well as the skills of the students.

Training programs need to be provided in a modular format so individuals can receive credit for what they know and have an easier time filling in their gaps of knowledge. They should also work to provide innovative solutions for making the training more accessible. The interviewee cited a program for welders that is in DVD format with animation that simulates the cutting of the metal. This is in a modular format. Individuals can learn on their own and get credit for the module. A Level I carpentry program can have 20-25 modules.

4.5.3 Role of Apprenticeship Branch (CHBA Perspective)

The Apprenticeship Branches are the best resource for the public recognition of skills in the trades. They need to work with industry to identify the skills needed for a trade, and provide the framework to have that set of skills tested and certified.

4.5.4   Systems for Certifying (CHBA Perspective)

In most provinces, the Apprenticeship Branch will keep track of an individual until they receive their Certificate of Qualification. After that, there is no standing record of the individual in the system.

Certifications that are not covered by the Inter-provincial Apprenticeship Occupational Certification could result in a situation on a job site where there may be 10 individuals with 10 certifications, all of whom wrote different exams and have different skills set to work in the same trade.

4.6   Construction Sector Council

4.6.1   Approach to PLAR

The interviewee from the Construction Sector Council referred to the work done by the Pipe Trades Human Resource Council on PLAR. They were looking for information on how PLAR works in Apprenticeship and how they could put together a PLAR process that would be done in their trade in a consistent manner across the country. They decided not to pursue it when they realized what was involved.

There was also some resistance to PLAR within the Council. It was thought that they might lose some control of who got in to the industry and also lose some flexibility. They were interested in ensuring that individuals were personally suited to the trade, and there was really no way of relating how past experience in the trade related to the soft skills of the individual.

The interviewee saw best practices in PLAR as including language that is user friendly, and guides that are easy to use and easy to understand. There is also a need for an education process to precede implementation.

It was seen as important that industry have a comfort level working with the colleges. Too often, colleges believe they are the experts and, in reality, industry is the partner with the expertise. PLAR is perceived by industry to be a cumbersome process. There is a need for industry to be educated on how PLAR can be used to broaden the pool of potential workers and assist with the potential worker shortages. Industry needs to understand that there are valid ways to assess knowledge, recognize experience and give credit for that knowledge and these skills.

The interviewee said that there needs to be a consistent approach for entry into the trades. At the moment, in provinces throughout Canada (and within provinces) individuals are assessed in totally different ways. There is also an inconsistent approach to training. This affects worker mobility.

4.6.2   Role of the Training Providers (CSC Perspective)

The interviewee saw the role of the training providers as designing and developing the PLAR program. They would also assist with the assessment and the appeals process. They could also be the appropriate group to educate industry, as well as the individual if industry is not ready to take on this responsibility.

4.6.3   Role of the Apprenticeship Providers (CSC Perspective)

The Apprenticeship providers were seen as the body to set the entry requirements and keep track of the apprentices. They may have some problems with how far they can go with PLAR because

of the legislated requirements. As well as the training providers, the Apprenticeship Providers should be promoting PLAR to people interested in careers in apprenticeship trades.

4.6.4   Role of the Industry Association (CSC Perspective)

The employers may not want a role in the promotion and education of PLAR. So many have been resistant to the use of the logbook system and just don't keep it up. It is proving to be an unreliable way to ensure people are receiving the skills they need on the job. The Apprenticeship Branch needs to provide more guidance to employers to help develop the skill sets on the job.

The interviewee believes that the Apprenticeship Branch is the appropriate venue for certification and keeping a public record. She also mentioned using a skills data card. In this system, the individual would be responsible for keeping the information up-to-date on certifications achieved.

No one has done this completely effectively. Learning Institutions keep records of the learning that goes on in their own institution, but do not share this information with other institutions. Some licensing bodies keep track, such as the Welding – CW Bureau, but this is limited as well. The most effective approach is to have the individual keep a portfolio and track their own learning.

PLAR in the construction industry is a challenge. There are so many ways of getting formal and informal training. Home Building may be the perfect place to use PLAR because of the lack of recognized formal training and reliance on apprenticeship.

4.7   PLAR Organizations

4.7.1   Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA)

4.7.1.1   Approach to PLAR

CAPLA is a national organization, representing a broad cross-section of those active in the 'recognizing learning field' across the country. CAPLA acts as an   advocate for the development and delivery of PLAR products services, research and policy studies.

The organization hosts a yearly national conference and a bi-annual international conference. This gives practitioners, government agencies, education and training institutions and industry groups an opportunity to see what is happening in this field across the country and around the world.

CAPLA works to strengthen the commitment to PLAR from provinces, communities and colleges. It works closely with other organizations such as The Alliance of Sector Councils (TASC), the Canadian Association of Education and Training Organizations (CAETO) and the Association of Community Colleges of Canada (ACCC). CAPLA is familiar with the requirements of a variety of sectors and a number of industry sector councils that have undertaken PLAR activities. It is also familiar with large employers considering or using PLAR to give support and recognition to their workers for their skills, and to help meet the human resources requirements of the recruitment, retention and succession planning challenges that all large organizations – public and private are facing.

Recently, CAPLA launched www.recognitionforlearning.ca "that will serve those who need PLAR services as well as those who develop, provide, regulate and research them" including providing

specific PLAR tools and services.[17] For example, a person looking to gain an accreditation for pipefitting can go on-line and find out who is doing PLAR for that occupation and where.

PLAR is a mechanism to help people identify their skills, not a way to create a barrier. There are some efforts that come under the guise of protecting health and safety which have the effect of keeping people out of a sector. This is a cautionary note as PLAR was created to facilitate movement between occupations, movement within an organization, and movement between learning institutions. The pendulum has swung to the side of protectionism. The college system doesn't give away credits and there is a chance that they create a system that people cannot attain. There needs to be a way to make it work with an adult learner friendly system and evaluate what is really important.

The interviewee related a story about designing a challenge exam for Organizational Behavior 101. 68% of the faculty could not pass the test. To create a challenge exam that is simply a final exam of the course is counter productive. There need to be intelligent ways to assess what an individual has learned on-the-job or from other courses.

4.7.1.2   PLAR Applications in Industry Sectors

The list of sector PLAR initiatives that CAPLA is aware of is included in the Reference Appendix.

4.7.1.3   Determinants of Success (CAPLA Perspective)

The interviewee suggested that the PLAR programs need to be adult learner friendly. One should not assume that all adult learners have access to a web site or can use computer. There should be other methods of identifying skills, using print materials or a phone line. In every case there should be personal contact to help people respond to the tool. The respondent sited a case where she was taking a program on-line and found the process frustrating and intimidating, and she imagines how a person who has not taken any training recently or someone with literacy challenges would feel in the same situation.

Generally, the process of having competencies evaluated is intimidating. The environment in which the PLAR happens will determine the success of the candidate.

In ensuring that the PLAR process is user friendly, the interviewee suggested that training should be in a modular format rather than sequential. This makes it easier for the learner to access training for the specific skills gaps that have been identified. There should be other accommodations so that the individual can do the gap training programs at night or at a distance.

She also suggested that assessment tools need to be accessible, but if people don't know they exist they are not helpful at all. There needs to be a good marketing and communication strategy for the program to be successful.

4.7.1.4   Role of the Training Providers (CAPLA Perspective)

The interviewee's experience is with national level programs. Her comments, therefore, were concerned with some of the broad roles and responsibilities that seem appropriate to training providers.

It is the responsibility of the training provider to establish (in consultation with industry and other experts) the competencies that are relevant and appropriate to a particular occupation or industry sector. The training provider must then develop a system, which will help individuals identify their

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[17] Information from www.recognitionforlearning.ca

skills strengths and gaps within the context of that competency grid. Recognition and credit may also be provided to certify the skills and knowledge the individual has demonstrated. Finally, the training provider develops training modules designed to address the skills and knowledge gaps that the competency evaluation indicated. Further recognition and credentialing may occur as a result of successful completion of the module(s).

The training providers should create the benchmarks for the assessors. They should train the assessors to assess against the competencies and use a variety of assessment techniques: demonstration, pencil and paper, and other tools that are adult learner friendly, keeping in mind that many adults are test adverse.

4.7.1.5   Role of Apprenticeship (CAPLA Perspective)

The interviewee believes that apprenticeship training needs to be competency-based, and not just rely on the accumulation of hours on the job and the successful completion of a written test to obtain a certification.

4.7.1.6   Role of Industry Organizations (CAPLA Perspective)

The Sector Council initiative is growing and the number of national sector councils will double in the near future. The interviewee sees this as a positive development, because these bodies have the capacity to develop prototypes of PLAR programs for use at the local level, and to promote the use of similar systems across the country. This is a time and money saver, as well as a way to create a unified system across the country.

4.7.1.7   Systems for Certifying (CAPLA Perspective)

The interviewee noted systems that are currently in use:

- The CTHRC (Technology Sector Council) keeps a record of the technologist's certifications.
- The environment sector has the employees keep their own records.
- Campus Canada has an e portfolio and learning record system.

4.7.2   PLA Centre, Halifax

4.7.2.1   Approach to PLAR

The PLA Centre is an independent, non-profit, collaborative and community-based body devoted to helping individuals and groups understand the full range of their skills and knowledge, wherever or however that learning occurred**.** The current conventional definition of 'learning = schooling' ignores the vast pool of learning and skills that people have acquired 'experientially' – on-the-job, in their communities and families, and through their voluntary and recreational activities.

The Centre provides a range of PLAR services and programs. The most innovative and productive PLAR initiative has been in the adaptation and application of its Skills and Learning Portfolio Development programs to a diverse range of adults facing transition challenges in a wide variety of settings. The program enables a small group (8-12) of adults, with a skilled facilitator, to work over a 10-week period to systematically and comprehensively identify, articulate and present all the skills and learning they have acquired, through on-the-job and other experience as well as through any formal education and training they have received. Participants also examine their goals and objectives and develop actions plans and résumé's tailored to them.

The Centre has worked with a variety of sponsors, partners and clients including such large employers as Aliant Inc. and the Department of National Defense. It is also collaborating with the Centre for Education and Work in Manitoba on a national PLAR project involving communities reliant upon the forestry industry as a major employer industry. The partners are: the Centre for Education and Work, New Brunswick Training and Employment, Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, Simosko and Associates of British Columbia.

The project is at an early stage of development. A portfolio development program has been developed, and is currently being piloted in a number of communities in New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and British Columbia, where the forestry industry is facing major changes.

The traditional mindset that defines learning exclusively in terms of education and training is the most serious barrier. This mindset leads to addressing workforce and industry sector problems by giving more training. Many employers complain, however, that this often leads to duplication, ineffectiveness and inefficiency. Programs that provide employees and managers with a permanent and flexible skills and learning asset, and enable employees to better understand and take greater responsibility for their own learning and career planning, are a great value for employers and employees alike and create a powerful 'win/win' learning culture with significant bottom-line implications.

There is an increasing awareness that 'quick-fix' approaches that promise results with minimal investment of time or money are an illusion. We need to undertake more return-on-investment and impact evaluation studies that test and demonstrate the value of a number of PLAR approaches, particularly including skills and learning portfolio development programs.

The Centre interviewee noted that PLAR is still a relatively new and developing field – there is still great need for experimentation and innovation. There are a number of 'very good' practices around that need to be shared and considered, but it is premature to identify 'best practices'. The Canadian Labour Force Development Board laid down some very useful general principles that have stood the test of time, and CAPLA produced a 'Halifax Declaration' document in 2001 that

spoke to a number of national needs and possibilities, however the informant had some concerns that adopting a set of standards too quickly would cut off more creative developments. .

Once past the initial pilot demonstration process experience has shown the Centre that it becomes increasingly important to engage the awareness and support of the organization as a whole. Promising beginnings have been stalled when a senior management champion has been involved and strong grass roots response demonstrated, but interest and support from middle management has not been cultivated.

PLAR is potentially transformative not only for individuals but also for organizations. Organizations that talk in terms of building a flexible learning structure are often unprepared to deal with the wider and deeper implications of the changes they say they want. Since part of the impact of PLAR seems to be to encourage the individual to take greater responsibility, these implications will work out over time, but the initial road may be a bit bumpy.

Other important factors include the fact that the program must be voluntary, at least until it becomes seen as part of the fabric of an ongoing learning culture. It must also be clear from the outset that a Skills and Learning Portfolio belongs to the individual who produced it. The process depends upon the confidentiality and trust of the program participants and they must be able to share (and not share) what they wish. Because of the confidence the process almost invariably builds, most participants are in fact much more open about their skills and learning strengths and gaps, and their own goals and aspirations, than they were previously – but the principle is important.

The initial assessment in a PLAR Skills and Learning Portfolio Development program is, of course, by and for the participants themselves. As part of their goals and objectives (which can include employment, career change and advancement, further education and training, personal development, voluntary and community engagement, etc), the program widens its focus to include to consideration of the criteria and competencies essential to achieve those objectives and the kinds of evidence, proof and demonstration that employers, education and training institutions, community organizations would find relevant, appropriate and compelling.

In other words, strengthening the individual's capacity for self-assessment also strengthens their capacity to cope successfully with other forms of external assessment.

These factors, however, run very much against the grain of conventional thinking about learning and, besides, they are rather abstract. The Centre has found that the best immediate determinant of success is an actual demonstration. A portfolio development program can be undertaken with 8- 12 participants at modest cost. The Centre has found that virtually without exception, the impact and results of these pilot demonstrations have been extraordinarily striking and positive. Practical, concrete examples contribute significantly to further discussions of utilizing PLAR in a more long-term and large-scale basis.

The principles and practices of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition do provide ways to bridge and ease this contradiction. PLAR is never about evading standards; rather it is about finding innovative ways to meet and test those standards. All of us know that we – and everybody else – have acquired a great deal of our skills and knowledge through experience, rather than through school. PLAR provides ways to identify, analyze, demonstrate and use that vast, below the surface 'iceberg' of ability, competence and knowledge that we have come to take for granted and disregard.

4.7.2.2   PLAR in the Home Building Sector (PLA Centre Perspective)

The Centre has been working with the Atlantic Home Building and Renovation Sector Council (AHB&RSC) on a major 'professionalization' initiative. A part of this initiative will result in designing PLAR processes and programs that will enable employees – many of whom have acquired much of their skills and knowledge through on-the-job experience – to be certified and eligible for further upgrading.

The partners involved in this effort include AHB&RSC, Nova Scotia Community College, Department of Community Services, and the Apprenticeship Branch. Initial discussions led to an Action Plan adopted by the AHB&RSC Pro Spec conference in March 2004. The plan outlines a number of steps to move the professionalization initiative forward. Within the plan it is acknowledged that PLAR needs to be developed as an integral part of any certification program.

4.7.2.3   Role of Training Providers (PLA Centre Perspective)

The college sector overall has been more open to PLAR principles and practices than have the universities. The Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) has been the only post-secondary institution in the country to declare itself a Portfolio Learning College and to integrate PLAR principles and practices into every aspect of its work. The Centre has worked in close partnership with the College both in training and certifying NSCC PLAR Practitioners, and also in some specific projects.

4.7.2.4   Role of the Apprenticeship Provider (PLA Centre Perspective)

The Apprenticeship system traditionally relies on acknowledging experiential and on the job learning. The apprenticeship challenge currently is to make their approaches to PLAR more open and innovative. Apprenticeship and industry ought to be allies in pressing to have PLAR options much more accessible. There seems to be a gap between what actually happens on the ground in industry and what apprenticeship believes apprentices need to be trained to do.

4.7.2.5   Role of the Industry Associations (PLA Centre Perspective)

There is great pressure on many industry sectors brought about by demography and difficulties with recruitment, retention and succession. They want a workforce that can adapt to new circumstances and standards. Industry representatives must be more forceful in articulating their needs to the education and training system. They need to set up consultation arrangements with colleges that can negotiate new programs, and PLAR support programs to assist their employees to identify, evaluate and build on what they already know.

Industry must provide the leadership and the on-the-ground practical knowledge for the occupation, as well as information on trends in the field. They and their employees are the knowledge leaders; they know the realities of the industry better than the colleges or the apprenticeship branch.

Industry needs to be more active and exert leverage and provide leadership. The education and training providers are great resources for industry, but industry must negotiate with confidence in meeting new business learning challenges. These institutions can change with the leadership of industry. Industry has the political influence and money to exert significant leverage the other players. Apprenticeship, government and the learning institutions must collaborate with each other and with industry. Industry must think and act strategically.

4.7.2.6   Systems for Certifying (PLA Centre Perspective)

The British and Australian National Vocational Qualification systems have developed enormous sets of criteria in every sector, using PLAR for advising and assessment. This infrastructure has

the advantage of taking care of all the tracking and record–keeping aspects of the system. Such a national system would be difficult to establish in Canada because of the jurisdictional issues.

In the Canadian context, encouraging individuals to take responsibility for keeping track of their own skills and learning achievements through programs like portfolio development and learning 'passports', is part of the answer. Over time, as many individuals as possible should be encouraged and supported to develop such learning assets and records. Developing systems for greater transferability and credential exchange is another. Schools can help people get started, and apprenticeship services and employers can provide follow-up support.

The association of health professionals, which includes 48 sub-occupations (not including doctors and nurses) is doing innovative work in combining a system of occupational standards and competencies