

# Understanding PLAR as an asset-based approach to increase participation in adult learning: Perspectives from users, service providers and stakeholders

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## ADULT LEARNING

Knowledge Centre

June 2009

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## 1.0 Research overview and context

This research report examines how PLAR as an asset-based practice might broaden the participation of adults in lifelong learning, particularly those adults who are under-represented in existing learning activities.

Specifically, the report uses short composite narratives to describe how PLAR users (academic and workplace settings), PLAR service providers, and PLAR stakeholders (persons from literacy organizations, human resources, career development, and government) understand the effectiveness of PLAR as an asset-based approach to adult learning. These composite narratives are derived from data documented in a 2008 report, *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians*, prepared by the Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment (CAPLA).

The composite narratives help frame a secondary discussion; namely, how can asset-based approaches provide a conceptual and operational policy framework to increase participation in adult lifelong learning? In order to explore this question, the principles and typologies of asset-based approaches are presented along with a brief discussion of adult lifelong learning concepts. The research report concludes by discussing how PLAR practices and policies could be improved and made more effective.

**1.1 Central research question.** This study investigates the following research question.

*How do PLAR users, service providers, and stakeholders (e.g. educators practitioners, human resource personnel, career development specialists, government officials) understand PLAR as an asset-based approach to broaden participation in adult learning?*

**Subsidiary questions:** Subsidiary questions address overlapping attributes of the central research question.

*How do PLAR users, practitioners and communities understand the effectiveness of PLAR?*

*What are the roles of PLAR service providers and stakeholders in ensuring PLAR effectiveness?*

*What can PLAR practitioners and communities learn from these narratives?*

*What asset-based and lifelong learning qualities do PLAR approaches exhibit?*

*How can asset-based social practices and policies provide a conceptual and operational policy framework to increase participation in adult lifelong learning?*

**1.2 Literature used.** The study draws from a number of different sources. First, the study incorporates the original qualitative data gathered for and presented in the unpublished research report *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* (CAPLA, 2008). The purpose of that report was to:

- collect perspectives from across Canada of PLAR users drawn from either academic or workplace settings, PLAR assessing bodies (service providers), and PLAR-knowledgeable communities (stakeholders)
- inductively draw out emerging themes from collected data
- reflect on the effectiveness of PLAR

The three composite narratives in this current report are comprised of interview data documented in the *Effectiveness of PLAR* report. Appendices A, B, and C summarize the interview questions used to gather the data for the *Effectiveness of PLAR* study while Appendix D provides an overview of the participants.

Second, this study uses research data pertaining to PLAR found in other reports (see reference list). This additional PLAR data enriches the study by deepening and supporting the qualitative data from the *Effectiveness* report.

Third, the study draws from the asset-based literature in Canada, the United States, Australia, the Nordic countries, and the UK. The asset-based literature comes from library databases, peer reviewed journals, government policy documents, advocacy reports, conference presentations and organizational web-sites.

**1.3 Terminology.** While writers devote considerable text to explicating the distinctions among the terms “lifelong learning”, “adult learning” and “adult education”, this paper proposes that the three terms are so tightly connected that the differences are more nuanced than literal. That is, the concept of lifelong learning encompasses the fields of adult learning and adult education. Thus, adult learning and adult education are subset attributes of lifelong learning. Specifically, adult learning is a subset of lifelong learning as it refers to the learning that takes place during the adult years (18 yrs plus) and adult education is a subset of lifelong learning and adult learning, in that learning by adults occurs both within the framework of adult education, and also beyond it” (Council of Ministers of Education Canada [CMEC], 2005, p. 7). The following definitions combine elements used in various reports (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006 & 2007; CMEC, 2004, 2005 & 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005) to bring additional clarity to these terms.

*Lifelong Learning* – a process that develops human potential in a continuously supportive manner and which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and understandings that they will require throughout their lifetimes as individuals, citizens, parents, partners, friends, neighbours, and workers.

*Adult Learning* - the process of or the result of adults gaining knowledge and expertise through experience, practice, or instruction. Adult learning may be intentional or non-intentional, formal or informal, and may take place in a variety of settings, at home, in educational institutions, at work, or in the community.

*Adult Education* – all of the sustained, systematic, and structured educational and learning activities, at any level beyond adulthood (18yrs plus). Adult education can be offered and acquired formally or informally, and is undertaken by adults for the purposes of personal, social, or workplace knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values acquisition.

In addition to these aforementioned terms, the terms formal and informal denote attributes of adult lifelong learning that describe where, how, and why learning takes place. While there is considerable debate regarding the breadth of these terms, this paper defines them as follows:

*Formal learning* – structured educational programs and learning activities provided by educational institutions, workplaces, agencies and communities. Formal learning includes: for credit learning offered in post-secondary institutions; organized not-for-credit programs offered through continuing education departments, libraries, adult literacy programs, and educational media agencies; and formal workplace-based training including skills upgrading, professional certification, structured job training, and apprenticeship.

*Informal learning* – all of the incidental, tacit, self-directed, and experiential learning that occurs in the workplace, the community, and, occasionally, within formal institutions (although in the latter setting, informal learning is recognized rarely as part of the formal, institutional learning outcomes). These learning experiences include: informal work-related learning which is often initiated by the learner but provided by employers, unions, and professional development associations; community social learning which occurs as a

result of participation in community activity; self-directed learning that occurs individually or with others; and finally, incidental/tacit learning that occurs through daily life experiences. PLAR is often used as a process to identify, document, assess, and recognize informal learning.

## **2.0 The appeal of asset-based social policies and practices**

Asset-based social policies and practices have a strong emotional, political, and theoretical appeal. There is something compelling about a social policy that, among other things, portrays the recognition and ownership of intrinsic and tangible assets as available to everyone; that establishes causal links between the recognition of assets and community stability; that provides a foundation for risk taking; that encourages learning; that increases social influence; and stimulates the development of human capital (Oliver & Shapiro, 1990; Sherraden, 1991). Expanding opportunities for people to recognize their learning assets has broad social and economic appeal because it both transcends and complements existing social policy; particularly, those policies related to inclusion and participation of marginalized groups in society (Bynner and Paxton, 2001; Sodha and Lister, 2006).

**2.1 A new way of thinking.** Asset-based policies reflect a new way of thinking about social policy as they focus on dealing with the broad transitions in one's life rather than the effects of policies at a particular point in time (Lind, 2006; Mills, 2005; White et al, 2001). The premise is that government support, while necessary, does not lead to the recognition or accumulation of assets since it is directed primarily at enabling consumption. Moreover, a base of empirical evidence is beginning to emerge on which program designs are likely to work best under certain circumstances. While many existing initiatives remain in the early stages, often in an experimental or pilot mode, the quantitative and qualitative evidence to support their wide spread introduction appears to be promising.



**2.2 Complementary to existing social policy.** The theory behind asset-based approaches is that governments can increase individual and collective assets by using and augmenting a broad range of existing public policies. These policies include:

- health and education policies that build human capital (e.g. PLAR);
- transportation policies that bring opportunities for development and growth; and
- environmental policies that help develop and preserve resources for future generations.

In practice, many government policies and programs do in fact support asset accumulation. For instance, in addition to income, individuals are supported by several kinds of assets and resources including human capital, social capital, housing and financial assets. Current public policies in many countries already recognize the importance of these resources and assets through various forms of measures that facilitate their acquisition. Access to adequate levels of income is ensured via a range of income support measures (including minimum wage legislation, employment insurance and social security) and human capital development is promoted through a variety of learning and training policies and programs that are aimed at building skills and knowledge. The acquisition of financial assets (i.e. savings accounts, investment funds or equity in a house for example) is also facilitated through many different incentives and financial instruments.

While adequate employment-based income and human capital development opportunities are recognized as primary tools for achieving social mobility and security, human capital assets (which can be recognized through PLAR) are also considered as critical resources for allowing people to pursue learning, to be protected against life crises, and to achieve and sustain self-sufficiency over the long-term. In effect, PLAR can be understood as a tangible asset-based process that reveals intangible assets necessary for helping people to achieve self-confidence and ultimately self-sufficiency.

### **3.0 Understanding asset-based approaches: rationale, terminology, and typology**

While income feeds people's stomachs, assets change their minds  
(Sherraden, 1991, p. 13).

In order to understand PLAR as an asset-based approach, it is important to understand the rationale, terminology, and typology that underpin asset-based policies and programs.

**3.1 Rationale.** Most governments use a suite of universal and/or targeted measures to alleviate persistent hardships in specific segments of the population. However, supporters of asset-based programs argue that such programs are often limited because they do little to support civic engagement or to foster a learning society, they rarely focus on building self-confidence, and, generally, they do not encourage people to take risks (Loke and Sherraden, 2006). The focus of these 'traditional' measures (e.g. formal education which does not acknowledge prior learning) is on deficits rather than assets, short-term interventions rather than long-term policies, and present needs rather than future possibilities (Sherraden, 1991).

Asset-based approaches offer a different perspective of learning needs and provide more strategic options for developing long-term policy that can address gaps in current social welfare and adult learning supports. That is, asset-based practices focus less on personal deficits and more on personal assets. These practices begin by encouraging people to recognize their own abilities. In so doing, asset-based approaches awaken people to their own capabilities. PLAR is an asset-based approach known for carrying such "awakening" attributes (as discussed in the composite narrative section).

While the literature does not portray asset-based programs as the sole model for self-sufficiency and lifelong learning support, many writers argue that the principles inherent

in asset-based programs do help increase peoples' confidence while also improving their educational well-being (Nares et al, 2001; Sodha and Lister, 2006). Further, they submit that the resulting lived human experience attributes of improved self-confidence and well being that result from asset-based activities support increased participation in learning since people are more likely to see themselves as active citizens. Sherraden (1991) believes that these participation benefits have an even greater impact on civil society as he asserts that asset-based approaches cross economic, social, cultural, and psychological and institutional boundaries.

**3.2 Terminology.** The core idea of asset-based strategies is to facilitate the experience of opportunity, ownership, and self-confidence so that individuals can make decisions about building resources and capabilities for the future. In practice, asset-based strategies are sometime used to assist people on low-incomes with the purchase of physical assets such as a home. However, asset-based approaches are increasingly seen as key elements in assisting people to recognize prior learning in order to invest in additional education and training. By removing attitudinal barriers ('My experiential learning is not real or valid', 'I cannot take part in formal learning activities') new behaviour patterns are encouraged. These behaviours encourage people to pursue additional learning by removing attitudinal barriers.

Two terminology clarifications help in understanding how PLAR is an asset-based strategy.

First, consider the term *assets*. In the context of this research document and in most of the PLAR literature, *assets* are those human, educational, experiential, financial, and social resources that can be acquired, developed, improved and transferred throughout one's life. Assets include the abilities, capacities, and experiences that enable people to achieve greater social mobility and economic security (Brown & Beeferman, 2001). Thus, assets are linked closely to the concept of capabilities as they are not merely resources used to build livelihood but they are, in essence, those personal attributes and societal frameworks that give people the ability to be and to act (Bebbington, 1999; Ford Foundation, 2004). Governments, institutions, businesses, and communities can help

foster the development of individual and collective assets through a broad range of public policies (e.g. from health to education) that enable the recognition of and foster the development of an individual's social, cultural, political, and economic capital.

Second, it is important to highlight the distinction between *asset building* and *asset accumulation* as the terms are often used interchangeably in the research and policy literature even though they have distinctly different meanings. Boshara and Sherraden (2004) point out that *asset building* is often used to describe how to increase societal and institutional support for assisting people to build assets. However, *asset building* is, in their view, a top-down asset-based approach characterized by short-term interventions that are applied universally. Boshara and Sherraden argue that *asset accumulation* is more reflective of a long-term, developmental, and targeted process where the role of policy and practice is focused less on short-term, universal directives and more on how to help people recognize, develop, acquire, and use their assets. An *asset accumulation strategy* is therefore a bottom-up process that involves individuals, households, communities, workplaces, institutions, and governments over a long period of time.

In the literature, PLAR is portrayed as effective when it is practiced as a bottom-up process that starts with the individual and with support from organizations and institutions. Further, PLAR is understood by most users, service providers and stakeholders as a long-term strategy rather than a short-term intervention. Thus, PLAR is usually presented and practiced as an *asset accumulation* process rather than an *asset building* one.

As an operational element of PLAR, asset accumulation focuses directly on creating sustainable opportunities for people to recognize, develop, acquire, and use their learning assets. Further, as an asset accumulation policy, PLAR frames social protection as a long-term developmental process rather than a short-term relief assistance program. As a result, asset accumulation strategies such as PLAR are understood as carrying inherent

risk for individuals since people must reflect on past experiences to plan for future learning experiences that may seem, at least initially, out of reach. However, such risk is viewed as an opportunity rather than something to be avoided. That is, asset accumulation policies and strategies assume that the biggest risk for an individual is not taking a risk.

This paper emphasizes *asset accumulation* (rather than *asset building*) as a more sustainable supporting concept for the development of long-term, asset-based PLAR approaches that help increase participation in adult lifelong learning.

**3.3 Typology.** In order to discuss PLAR within the context of asset-based strategies, it is also necessary to understand the typical objectives (typology) of asset-based approaches. Three general objectives of asset-based practice and policy are found in the research literature and within current practice: lifelong learning, poverty reduction, and behavioural change.

1. *Lifelong learning:* Asset-based approaches are used tap into the demand for lifelong learning by providing individuals with control over the form and content of their own learning. The lifelong learning policies and practices emanating from an asset-based perspective often give preference to *widening* the demand for learning by *targeting* individuals who do not traditionally engage in formal learning contexts. Such practices also work to increase participants' asset holdings and their own stake in learning. As a result, there is an emphasis on: encouraging people to contribute to their own learning; and helping people realize their identity capital by recognizing their informal learning (Nares et al, 2001; Sodha and Lister, 2006). The Individual Development Accounts (ILAs) in the UK and the Lifelong Learning Accounts (LiLAs) in the US are two examples of lifelong learning programs that draw from an asset-based perspective (Nares et al, 2001).

2. *Poverty reduction:* A core attribute of asset-based policies is their objective of reducing poverty by focusing on prevention. Many asset-based policies and programs seek to address the background determinants of poverty such as a lack of educational opportunities and poor savings habits rather than attempt to address directly the outcomes of inequality and poverty (Bynner and Paxton, 2001; Sherraden et al, 2005). Traditional welfare often deals with the symptoms of poverty whereas asset-based policies deal with the means by which individuals can take positive and active steps to move out of poverty and break the patterns of intergenerational poverty. In essence, asset-based policies focus on the individual, community, and societal factors that give rise to poverty and explore ways to ameliorate those factors.
  
3. *Behavioural change:* Supporters of asset-based programs also assert that the most significant change arising from an accumulation of assets is a change in behaviour and attitude (e.g. willingness to take risks, improved self-confidence). In this respect, asset-based policies seek to promote a sense of autonomy, personal independence and forward planning. Page-Adams (1996) and Sherraden (1991) summarize these attitudinal and behavioural changes by noting that asset-based programs:
  - create an orientation toward the future
  - stimulate the development of human capital and other assets
  - enable focus and specialization
  - provide a foundation for risk taking
  - increase personal efficacy
  - increase social influence
  - increase political participation
  - enhance the welfare of dependants

While these changes could be considered subjective and, in some cases, intangible, they are often put forward under the broad heading of *identity capital* which is portrayed as a primary rationale for the development and implementation of asset-based policies. A detailed description of identity capital and its relationship to PLAR is included later in this document.

#### **4.0 Understanding adult lifelong learning**

Adult learning and education have always played a significant, if undervalued, role in the development of this nation's economic strength and formation of its multicultural traditions. The demands of the 21st century have placed renewed emphasis on the role and importance of learning broadly and adult learning in particular as a key agent in this nation's renewal and revitalization. (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2004, p. v)

Lifelong learning continues to emerge as a central policy issue as it gains contemporary currency in many international agencies, governments, and academic settings. This growing conceptual development of and interest in lifelong learning within organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD fosters a compass-like use of the term as countries seek help in navigating the emerging and uncharted waters of global, knowledge based societies and economies. However, even though such policy research on lifelong learning brings new understandings to these contemporary challenges, many of the discourses used to describe the attributes of lifelong learning privilege the individual adult learner and, in so doing, ignore how inequalities in power, resources, and class can influence participation in and access to adult lifelong learning.

This paper posits that many adult learning policies explicate a circumscribed view of lifelong learning which limits the inclusiveness of programs, overlooks the value of experiential learning, and constrains the participation of adults in learning activities. Further, the ensuing discussion outlines the relative importance of the state, the workplace, the community, and the individual in the cultural structuring of organized and experiential lifelong learning opportunities.

**4.1 The development of a concept.** The term *lifelong learning* often creates more confusion than clarity. Is it a descriptor for adults who, in order to survive in modern societies, must remain enchained to formal learning activities throughout their lives or does the term offer a broader view of a more inclusive learning horizon where the experiential and formal fuse together to create a rich learning landscape?

A short definition of the lifelong learning terminology was provided in the opening pages but, in general terms, this paper takes a broad view of the term adult lifelong learning, understanding it as encompassing all training, education, and experiential learning activities undertaken by adults (18 years and older) for professional and personal reasons. In effect, adult lifelong learning is both lifewide and lifelong. It includes formal learning (credential based learning within educational institutions, public and private agencies, and the workplace) and informal learning (often self directed, tacit, experiential and occurring in the workplace, the community and usually not recognized by a credential). Thus, adult lifelong learning takes in those learning experiences within general, vocational and enterprise-based education and training during an adult's lifespan (from 18 years onward). Further, adult lifelong learning can occur through individual experiences and/or be provided in a structured manner by numerous organizations, including the public and private sector, educational institutions, companies, NGOs, and community organizations.

**4.2 The possibility of the learning society.** One emerging concept that receives particular attention in the adult education literature is the learning society. Most often, the learning society is portrayed as a conceptually broadening construct that fosters learning spaces that are diverse, collective, and within and outside of formal educational systems (Bron, 2002; Giddens, 1998; Johnson, 1999). Emphasis is placed on a new form of active citizenship that acknowledges the need for and the value of learning throughout life, and for a variety of purposes. These purposes for learning are not restricted to vocational and skill requirements but incorporate a number of themes, including learning for work,



economic sustainability, and the growth of human capital. Thus, the learning society concept considers the societal demographics on workplace restructuring, early or voluntary retirement, and increased lifespan. This consideration results in a view of learning that includes older adults and all their facets of living. What is envisioned, in a learning society, is a reestablishment of the central purpose of adult education, which is to stimulate thought and develop knowledge and skills for living in an ever-changing world (OECD, 2005).

Supporters of a learning society argue that it is the vitality of a learning culture that sustains a civil society with all of its inherent social, political, cultural, and economic aspects. Therefore, the social investment and the renewal aspects of lifelong learning should be stressed (Johnson, 1999) in any adult lifelong learning policy. The social investment aspect emphasizes active labour market policies, particularly the need for investment in human capital, which is where lifelong learning gains much of its current impetus in government policies. While the social investment concept can be problematic, particularly as it relates to human capital, the emphasis on social investment does have a significant impact on lifelong learning policy and practice (e.g. PLAR). That is, the renewal aspect encourages partnerships, investment, new social movements, and is concerned about community revival, the protection of the public sphere and involvement of the third sector (government, NGOs, communities working in partnership). Specifically, there is an understanding of a predominant social capital principle; namely, that educated citizens make better citizens, hence better societies and better economies. There is a realization that adult lifelong learning takes place in an ever-changing world – a world in which learning is important for working and for living.

The essence of the learning society concept is that it provides governments with greater opportunities to develop inclusive lifelong learning policies and practices (Johnson, 1999). This is because as a concept it incorporates a vision of learning throughout the life span and integrated across all facets of living thereby broadening the concept of lifelong learning to include lifewide learning for both formal and informal purposes.

**4.3 Use vs. exchange value of learning.** The research completed for this report indicates that those countries with high participation rates and greater inclusiveness in adult learning are less likely to allocate funding based solely on performance criteria such as educational gains, income maintenance, and labour market success (Rubenson, 2007; Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana, 2006). Certainly the criteria around knowledge and skills (exchange value of learning) are not ignored but they are placed within a broader social agenda that accentuates citizenship and social inclusiveness (use value of learning) as equal goals of adult lifelong learning. Put simply, the countries with high participation rates balance the need to prepare adults for the demands of global labour markets with the goal of preparing citizens for building civil society (Rubenson, 2007). Further, the policies developed in these countries build upon the concept of a learning society – a concept that recognizes the various settings in which learning occurs (not just the formal, institutional ones) and the variety of purposes it serves including vocational, personal, employment related, and citizenship.

While the current Canadian adult lifelong learning policies and instruments do carry some evidence of these broader social aims, they often emphasize a skills-based approach (exchange value) to learning rather than an experiential one (use value). As a result, funding for adult lifelong learning is often allocated based upon performance criteria such as educational gains and/or the labour market successes of program participants. Heckman and Smith (2003) conclude that such a skills emphasis has the unintended outcome of focusing not on the most vulnerable but on those with the best prospects to succeed. For example, in a study completed by Heinz & Taylor (2005), the authors compared the education and training policies of Canada and Germany. Their findings led them to conclude that deindustrialization, growing unemployment, corporatist or market driven education and employment policies, are negatively impacting the school-to-work transition routes and employment opportunities in Canada. While the authors noted an increase in the educational and training policies in both countries, they found that Canada's cultural and social policies were not as supportive of strengthening human capital and fostering a lifelong learning culture as those policies in Germany. The authors

posit that it is a lack of emphasis on the *use value* of learning and a strong emphasis on the *exchange value* that leads to limited participation in learning among Canadian adults.

## **5.0 Understanding Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)**

As with lifelong learning, the definition of PLAR is a focus of continued debate. Perhaps the most important difference of approach centres on the question of whether PLAR should include processes for transferring academic credits and recognizing formal education credentials in addition to assessing and recognizing informal or experiential learning. This paper assumes that PLAR includes all of these purposes and characteristics.

For the purposes of this research, PLAR is understood as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (i.e., skills, knowledge and values). This learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences. Recognition of learning can be used toward the requirements of education and training programs, occupational and professional certification, labour market entry, and organizational and human resource capacity building (Morrissey et al, 2008). As such, PLAR provides a process that determines what a person knows and can do by identifying knowledge and skills that have been acquired and then assessing the level of learning/competence acquired against established learning outcomes and required competencies. If the level of learning or competence meets the requirements, recognition is granted.

### **5.1 Benefits**

In addition to translating prior learning into credits, credentials or jobs, PLAR offers other significant benefits to adult learners (Simosko and Cook, 1996; Aarts et al., 2003). Additional PLAR benefits claimed by adult learners include:

- Improved self-confidence and self-esteem
- Reduced formal learning time and costs

- Demonstrated competence for jobs especially when formal credentials are lacking
- Recognition for certification (e.g. diplomas, degrees, trades or professional licenses)
- Enhanced quality of life (e.g. pathways to better pay, better career prospects)
- Increased desire to participate in citizenship activities

One of the most documented outcomes of PLAR is that it opens up possibilities for further formal education and training by individuals who previously saw such opportunities as completely beyond their reach. Indeed, PLAR has its origins in efforts to provide access on the basis of a person's experiential learning to just such formal education and training programs (Morrissey et al, 2008).

## **5.2 Core values**

PLAR enables individuals to recognize themselves as capable citizens and learners with the skills and knowledge to engage in their community and to obtain employment and further education and training. Indeed, such self-recognition, self-confidence and motivation (referred to as *identity capital* in the asset-based literature) are viewed in the literature as the most fundamental outcome of PLAR.

Morrissey (2008) asserts that there are three core values expressed in PLAR practice and policy:

1. Adult learners should not have to devote additional time, energy and money learning over again what they already know and can do.
2. What adults know and can do matters more than where or how they acquired that learning.
3. Services and programs should be available so that adult learners are able to have the skills and knowledge they have acquired through their life and work experience, as well as their formal education and training, appropriately evaluated and recognized.

### ***5.3 Increasing participation in adult learning through PLAR***

Research on informal learning provides convincing evidence that virtually all adults initiate and/or participate in significant learning activities on a continuous basis (Livingstone, Raykov & Turner, 2005). This is true regardless of their levels of formal schooling, their occupations, incomes, gender, where they live and the cultural sub-groups to which they belong (Livingstone, 1999). Canadian adults are avid and constant learners. However, the inadequate levels of participation in the kinds of adult learning programs and activities that impact most directly and measurably on economic growth and stability (among many other things) do not reflect any lack of capable and active learners. Rather, this situation results from policy weaknesses and institutional arrangements that do not recognize informal learning and do not provide the access and support that learners need to make transitions and personal investments in lifelong learning (Morrissey et al, 2008).

A key policy and practice challenge for adult lifelong learning in Canada is that the linkages and/or bridges between the formal and informal learning spheres are inadequately developed. The result of this fragmentation is that many adults with significant knowledge and skills are blocked from access to employment opportunities that make use of their skills and capacities, and from educational opportunities that build on their learning foundations and provide credentials for progress in the work world. Thus, a process to recognize and provide the portability of professional and personal competencies across territorial and provincial boundaries should be a part of an adult learning framework (Morrissey et al, 2008). The development of this framework would require the various certifying industry bodies to recognize and support the principle of portability. Further, the recognition of professional qualifications and work experiences would need to be part of the provincial post-secondary systems.

## 6.0 Research methodology

The literature review for this report involved the standard research practice of examining journals, articles, reports, conference presentations, and policy documents in both paper and electronic format from Canada, the United States, Australia, the Nordic countries, and the UK. However, the examination of the qualitative data as documented in the unpublished report *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* required a different approach.

In an effort to understand how PLAR users, service providers and stakeholders understand PLAR, the author who examined CAPLA's report and prepared this paper *Understanding PLAR Effectiveness*, adopted a philosophical approach for the qualitative analysis based upon hermeneutic phenomenology—an interpretive, constructivist paradigm (Schwandt, 2000). The aim of this report was to seek the insightful aspects, the uniqueness and the commonalities of peoples' experiences, noting their relevant contexts. The intent was not to write a biography of the users, provide a study of the adult educational system or construct a grounded theory of PLAR; rather, the purpose was to understand what these users, service providers and stakeholders experience with PLAR and how they understand these experiences. Keeping oneself open to their *lifeworld* was a principal component of the research.

**6.1 Understanding hermeneutic phenomenology.** Hermeneutic phenomenology (Gadamer, 1989) considers the interpretive (hermeneutical) and the descriptive (phenomenological) aspects of a phenomenon and its inquiry process. Two principal methodological components of the research involved using the hermeneutic concepts of *epoché* and *bracketing* (Gadamer, 1989, Husserl, 1970) to ensure being open to the users' understandings (their *lifeworld*). Epoché involves setting aside or suspending everyday understandings and judgments, and looking inside oneself to become aware of bias, prejudice and personal involvement with the phenomenon (Husserl, 1965; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, following epoché (in this case, preconceptions of PLAR users and the researcher's previous PLAR experiences), the researcher "bracketed" the phenomenon, enabling a stepping back from and setting aside usual assumptions about PLAR users, service providers and stakeholders.

**6.2 Analyzing data.** The iterative and cumulative analysis of the interview data as found in the CAPLA study followed several overlapping stages: the organizing and coding of interview data; critically interpreting the data; analyzing the context surrounding the PLAR experiences, and identifying themes and issues. One result of all this activity was a composite portrayal using the words of the users.

It is important to note that the researcher did not have access to the original interview transcripts gathered for the CAPLA study. Instead, the researcher relied on the interview data as presented in the CAPLA (2008) report. Although the CAPLA study made some attempt at initial synthesis of the interview data, it contained many uninterrupted quotations and was structured so that lengthy responses to interview questions were presented in their entirety. This original quotation style resulted in a rich and unedited presentation of the interviews and provided sufficient qualitative data for the current report.

**6.3 Representing interpretation.** In addition to following the reporting conventions of a qualitative research document, this research report uses composite portrayals to represent interpretations. van Manen (1997) reminds qualitative researchers that, “A phenomenological text should never be read merely for its surface message....In thoughtful phenomenological texts, the distinction between poetic and narrative is hard to draw” (p. 343). He accepts the notion, developed by Merleau-Ponty (1968), that phenomenology is inherently a poetizing activity that explores and speaks about experiences in an evocative and primal manner. Therefore the composite narratives strive to move beyond the surface message to deeper understandings.

The composite rendering of interview accounts provides several advantages over a straightforward transcript. First, composite narratives pull the reader into the text and open up a deeper analysis. Conventional, empirically based, interpretive prose does not implicate the subjects (users/practitioners/communities), authors (researchers) and the reader (others) in the interpretation. Further, the resulting thematic discussion (findings

and recommendations) is linked more closely to the actual understandings and voices of those who were interviewed than is often the case in traditional empirical studies. By interrogating the poetic, metaphoric and rhetorical dimensions of the interviewees using a more abstract/creative form of writing, the elusive inner experiences and understandings are moved out of their linguistic and academic shadows. As a result, composite representations have a greater likelihood of engaging readers in a reflexive analysis of the research question. Such careful analysis often produces practice and policy recommendations that resonate with the reader because they are linked directly to the data.

Second, composite portrayals integrate themes, qualities and contexts from the interview data to present a single-voice understanding that is less dominating and a more relational than conventional research prose. Such fused accounts essentially create a single experience of a representative user, practitioner, and community person from many different experiences. These composite portrayals respect the understandings related by providing research anonymity and the sharing of communicative power. Further, they are recognized increasingly within the qualitative methodology literature as concise writing approaches that yield a deeper and more complete thematic portrayal than what emerges from standard verification/triangulation analysis.

Finally, the use of composite text provides clarity as it brings the voices of the interviewees “to life” by presenting actual quotes in a readable form. As a result, the research data becomes more interesting and themes that often lie hidden in lengthy quotes emerge in the narrative arc of a story told in the actual words of the interviewees.

## **7.0 Understanding the effectiveness of PLAR: composite narratives**

Three composite narratives are presented: *users*, *service providers* and *stakeholders*. To ensure that the composite portrayals do not stray from the lived experience of the PLAR interviewees,



only the words of the interviewees as presented in the CAPLA (2009) study are used to construct the text. Any exceptions are noted in brackets [composite].

### **7.1 PLAR User**

The following composite is drawn from the personal stories of PLAR users in academic (university and college) and workplace settings. The users discuss a range of topics including: their reasons for accessing PLAR, their general perspectives on the PLAR process, the value and role of PLAR advisors, the benefits of PLAR, and the importance of consistent and transparent practices and policies.

#### ***Composite narrative***

Well, I got involved with PLAR because I wanted to get recognition for my experience, for the things I knew already ... for the things that they [learning institutions] want to teach you. I wanted to prove that I had knowledge, to be acknowledged for the effort I put in outside of an institution [and] I also wanted to improve my situation. But I did not have time in my job [to attend classes] and I have four kids and a house to take care of ... there just wouldn't be time to do the courses at night or to actually go and sit in a classroom and take courses. It wouldn't be possible!

[So] I looked at the learning outcomes of an educational program and I realized that I had the competencies, the experiences, and the practical applications. I realized that I had most of the courses for the certificate and thought, 'I might as well go for it'!

The PLAR advisor told me very specifically what needed to be done [and] helped me compile my information. She was encouraging; when you got stuck on something or you were not devoting enough time to it, she was good at

reminding you what the outcome was ... her processes seemed to be very well laid out. She was able to walk me through the process [and] loaned me some books on PLAR and [explained] how I should approach it in terms of my submission. We were in contact with the faculty and ... there was much momentum, interest and excitement. It was an excellent process because the more you matched competencies to courses the more you understood where you [could] use it and how you [could] enhance the learning. The experience allowed me to identify the fact that even though I did not have formal credentials, I did have experience – I did have skills and I did have credibility.

Doing the general portfolio ... was an arduous task because you're involved with life – looking after an aged parent, raising a child, and working full time, but I completed it and really enjoyed the process. It took me quite a while to write my life history [and] work history, but when I was done, the program coordinator and I went through the document and we came up with a new plan in terms of what I would do. [The] portfolio points out what your strengths are and you actually feel you've accomplished a lot more than you realized. I had to write documents saying what I did and support this with letters from old employers saying it's true. If you're not a bridge-burner, it can be good!

I liked it [the portfolio] because the content was mine. It was my life ... You are able to draw out skills from all kinds of life experiences and it enhances self-esteem ... it gives momentum and the will to keep going forward. You get to assess yourself thoroughly, get your bearings as to where you are from an educational, employment, and personal point of view. I just found it very engaging [and] was amazed at the information that came out.... I never spent a lot of time looking at my life, my skills, my abilities ... it really was the first time that I understood that as a human being, I had value ... that someone [would] recognize I had skills and am making a contribution to society.

Prior learning also allows you to become involved with a learning institution – it's so uplifting to do something like that. [But] sometimes the university is advertising the PLAR process but they don't know how they [are] going to [implement] PLAR. They try to be helpful [but] they have too many other things on their plate with not enough staff. [Further], PLAR is sometimes applied differently for different candidates ... my one criticism would be you need a consistent way of processing this [and] everyone needs to be committed.

The PLAR process is a great experience when strong relationships exist among stakeholders: learners, program administration, faculty, assessors, and advisors. [And] while it's an evolving process ..., it works when ... they [institutions and faculty] have the courage to go forward with PLAR. When they have clearly articulated PLAR processes and evaluation criteria ..., they maintain and give credibility to their institutions.

Without the PLAR process, a lot of people who have dreams of pursuing credentials would be stopped in their tracks.... It's a daunting process to do 30 or 40 courses while working full-time – you are never going to get it done. [However], the PLAR process opens up a new way of doing things ... and prepares you for changes that might come into your life. PLAR allows you to interact with a most interesting group of people while learning about yourself - your strengths and weaknesses and patterns you did not realize existing in your life. It is a kind of release ... to think that it's actually possible to work with the colleges to do this sort of thing without having to give up your job and get some sort of special arrangements from work.

I would recommend the PLAR process to anyone who has worked for a number of years and who wants to pursue higher education [or] who wants to get

certification ... perhaps for your job [or] to get a job. It was so great to have the recognition that the things I had been doing were the level of what is being taught in college. It's fantastic to work in your trade, benefit your industry, and be recognized for your work experience.

At the end, I received a formal credential that was credible and portable. I got my certificate very quickly and ... my opportunity for advancement. Achieving the diploma and going through the graduation exercise were big things in my family ... it made an impression on my children. For me it was verification of what I did know without having to go through a lengthy process or spend lots of money ... like a pat on the back for being in my industry and staying involved. PLAR is another door that gives hope ... I was really happy with the outcome.

## **7.2 PLAR Service Provider**

Service providers interviewed include individuals who advise learners, assess learning, facilitate portfolio development, and coordinate PLAR initiatives with their institutions, organizations and workplaces. Their comments reveal the multi-faceted roles that they play – working with learners, assessing and mentoring, collaborating with other PLAR stakeholders, developing policies and procedures, and promoting PLAR. Generally, most agree that PLAR is effective because it allows learners to get their bearings as to where they are from a personal, educational and employment perspective. However, they also note several issues including the lack of transparency in assessment and evaluation, unclear policy and procedures, limited professional development for service providers, an absence of national standards, marginalization of PLAR within post-secondary institutions, limited understanding of PLAR within the workplace, and poor marketing of PLAR services and practices.

### **Composite narrative**

When you believe and buy into lifelong learning it's easy to promote PLAR because you can always see that there's another way, there's another road and another direction. That is what PLAR allows us to explore because nine out of ten of us never realize all the gifts and talents and opportunities that ... we possess.

[PLAR] is effective because it values the person. It's really a respectful process. It's motivating [and] it promotes lifelong learning and ... lifewide learning. It absolutely changes people. They look at themselves differently, they think about themselves differently, they reach out to others differently, [and] they think about learning differently. And I think that's the biggest advantage because then everybody gets to experience them as new and reborn people. [Some] go on to other learning ... at the postsecondary level. Others have the confidence to go out and apply to another job. [For instance] I'd hear back 'I got it! Can you believe it? I've been home and a mother for X years but I got the job'. So yes, it's really quite an incredible process!

But someone else needs to bring that [the experiences] forward and ... extrapolate all those things ... all the learning. That's my job. My role with prior learning assessment and recognition ... is multifaceted. I work as an advisor to people seeking PLAR ..., as a trainer of people involved with PLAR ..., as a presenter [and] also as a consultant. My role started years ago [and] at various times I sat on and chaired the provincial PLA working group ... a PLA steering committee which was overseeing the whole initiative. So I played a lot of roles.

This is not always an easy job and you have to be fair and persistent. You have to be truthful and honest with your assessments and your knowledge of your workers. It's no good to be giving people more credit than they deserve; if you honestly think they need the extra training I think you have to be up front and

say so, and not recommend that they be given credit for it. Clear lines of communication, all the way up and all the way down to the person that you're dealing with ... [and] making sure that you document the process ... and that everyone understands the process... I think that's the main thing and I think collaboration, you know, with different departments, so that everybody is aware of what you're doing, how you're going to do it, when you're going to do it, and all that kind of stuff. So, I think being honest and straightforward with your assessments ... is a key asset.

I think for the most part PLAR is very positive ... [but] I think it's a buy-in type thing, in that once people ... realize that they can get credit for their past experience and they take advantage of it, then other people take advantage of it. But I think that you will find some negativity because ... some people feel because they worked 20-plus years ... that they should get credit for everything that they do. But the process is formalized and it is tight and, you know you just can't give out PLAR; it's got to be a formalized process. I think people have to realize that. And then, you know, I think it's positive when it works.

Certainly one of the main advantages [of PLAR] is that we're giving credit towards previous knowledge and that does wonderful things. [For instance], people don't have to spend more time re-doing something, they don't have to spend money and they can accelerate their training which I think is very positive. Students are recognized, are valued for what they know and can do. That saves [them] the trouble of having ... to go sit in a classroom environment where they feel – and at times we feel – that it's really a waste of their time. Nobody wants to be wasting anybody's time in this day and age - it's just not necessary.

For universities and colleges, I see several advantages ... toward enrolment and [integrating] relevant experiences. It's giving people access where they were previously denied. Our institution is competitive and looks to be competitive within the other institutions in Canada and in fact internationally, and we welcome students interested in studying at our institution ... [and] certainly value and recognize that applicants to our programs might well have practical experience in the field itself. So we value the practical backgrounds of potential students ... [and] recognize and value the place of prior learning ... in terms of admission and advanced standing.

For employers ... and government another advantage of PLAR is its cost-saving mission (characteristics). The more [people] who receive credit, the less it costs industry and government for training. So I do think it's effective ... as it helps identify who really needs extra training. [In addition], there is potential for people to become specialized down the road. And we're in a labour shortage right across the country and as people retire in the next five to ten years, we're going to need more people... more immigrants coming into the country.... And you know we're going to need to do PLAR so that people are going to be available to participate in training but not in a formalized process [like] somebody coming out of high school because they have already been out in the workforce.

PLAR [also] works for the individuals that have ... taken it on themselves to professionalize themselves early on in their careers ... and I think it's going to become more and more relevant as time goes by because we do have ... this forgotten group that are into the 30 to 50 year age range that are coming back to school, that we have to pick up the pieces with.... They're not the ones that want to go to school and start off and have to spend two or three years doing upgrading and all this kind of stuff. They've already been out in the workforce

[and] they've already been trained to a certain degree. So, they want recognition not obstacles.

I believe that this tool, if it were incorporated in all aspects of society ... would certainly go a long way to breaking down barriers. It would expand societal thinking. It certainly would open opportunities ... and educational institutions need to expand their thinking.

I think it opens up another possibility for education [because] PLAR participants represent uncapped resources in our economy. We have so many people in our population that contribute to our society and we're not recognizing them. The major part of our society that is our working mechanism isn't represented. [So] it is certainly helping to bring down stereotypes ... [and] starting to get people thinking about the qualities and experiences that people already have.... And this helps bring people together in a common understanding [which] helps with individual empowerment ... and community sustainability.

The key point is that PLAR raises consciousness. It raises the consciousness of individuals who actually participate in PLAR. It raises the consciousness of educational institutions, employers, and also within the community; anyone who's involved with PLAR can very quickly see the benefits ... because it opens up a whole new area of accessing people.

So overall, I would say that PLAR has been very effective ... [but] it has sort of degrees of effectiveness and the effectiveness is often based upon the goals of the learner.... One of the things that I noticed is that PLAR can be effective where the R is a capital R or where the R is a small r. By that I mean the 'R' recognition could mean that someone's been successful in getting college and university credits or a trade certification or employment.... Or, another 'r' is it



could be effective in helping someone to value themselves more, to have increased self-esteem and self-confidence so that they can even begin to think about looking for a job or returning to college or because of PLAR they can better help themselves and therefore become a better parent or a better son or daughter. So the piece on recognition is about valuing oneself.

[Obviously], I'm a firm, firm believer in PLAR [but] it's only as effective ... as the staff that you have, the commitment of the organization conducting the PLAR process ... and the community and industry acceptance of it. It's only as effective as their commitment to make it work and ... to use proper facilitators and proper assessors. So those are the hurdles you have to overcome.... You're looking at the commitment of the organization that is doing the PLAR process to ... put the resources into it to do it right. You're looking at the education of the overall staff and the use of [trained] facilitators and assessors. And then your final hinge pin is the industry and the community. Are industry organizations and community groups going to accept it (PLAR)? And maybe that's either your starting point or your ending point.

The difficulty with PLAR is that it takes time and it takes educating people, educating individuals who actually go through the PLAR process. It takes time to educate communities, service providers, any part of our community. It's not a familiar [process] ... and it's a new approach, relatively speaking and it's very, very time-consuming. [But] as far as the disadvantages, I think they're more perceived than they are real – that, again, is my opinion.

[PLAR] takes work; it takes work to put together a portfolio, to challenge for a credit course.... So, I've heard a lot of people say well, you should just take the course. And that is probably one of the biggest disadvantages. It takes time; it takes commitment and sometimes it might be a little bit more [time and

commitment] than what people think is required.... And so, we have to work very hard to make ourselves people-friendly.

I'd like to add that there's so much more work still to be done. [For instance], we don't have national standards ... for training of PLAR staff. One of the things I'd like to talk about is the opportunity to professionalize ... on a broader scale in regards to some of the workshops that are available nationally.

We also don't have standard practices across the country for completing assessments ... or for preparing a Portfolio. Many people don't even know about PLAR [and] many post-secondary institutions don't support it. We need a national PLAR campaign [and] we need to work closely with existing PLAR providers to convince institutions and industry of the value of PLAR. [Also], I think we need to look at ... a more formalized process - inter-provincial, articulation agreements. We're a global community now and ... we're exploring articulation agreements here in Canada but also internationally. And as they evolve we have to look at how to assess individuals from other countries and what they do in their school systems and how it can effect what we're doing with PLAR.

[Finally], even though it's ... an energetic and exciting time to be in PLAR, there aren't a lot of us doing this! We need more folks in the game and it would be really nice to have more people involved and engaged ... because I think the future is really bright. Those who are involved in PLAR will have really bright years ahead.

### **7.3 PLAR Stakeholder**

Stakeholders represent adult literacy organizations, immigrant services groups, and human resources specialists working with industry, labour force development and government. The stakeholders discuss: the value of PLAR, the inclusiveness of the process, the requirement for industry and community commitment, the use of PLAR as an employment recruitment tool, the importance of flexible PLAR strategies that meet specific needs, and the need for maintaining forward momentum by developing national marketing strategies that highlight PLAR successes.

### ***Composite narrative***

Well for me personally, all the experiences that I've had with PLAR have been sort of an eye-opener.... The word that pops to mind is 'exciting' ... because it holds so much potential.... It's just phenomenal to think there is something out there that can really lift people up and show them the ... good things that they have [and] that they can use to move forward.... You can actually measure people's capacity by having them demonstrate what they know.

[You see], we deal with individuals who, when it comes to learning in particular, they see learning in a very negative light. They don't feel that they've been successful at all in their learning and they feel that they don't have anything. Like: 'I'm not educated'. Often we hear the words 'I'm stupid, you know; I can't learn; I have nothing to offer'. ... So they're coming from a very negative place when it comes to learning.... But why is it so hard for individuals to re-engage in the learning process? I really feel it's more around the psychological and emotional issues attached to learning ... it's always around the fact that... 'You're broken; let us fix you'. ... 'You have a big deficit. There's something wrong with you [so] come, we have to fix you' ... PLAR comes from a different direction ... because it's pulling out your strengths; it's pulling out your skills; it's pulling out your abilities, your talents, and your interests. It's about strengths versus ... weaknesses and gaps.... It's about what you can do rather than what you cannot do.

I believe ... that PLAR not only affects the person but that person in turn affects their neighbours within their communities.... You'll see people empowered to do things in their community that they normally wouldn't do otherwise.... So, we're seeing it spill out into some of the work methods of the employment facilitators. They're thinking more about it. But also we're seeing it in their personal lives. Like some of the workers will come and talk about how now they think about this or that, or they look at this differently. So, you know, we see ... [that] it's not just the value for the one person; it empowers people.

The [other] advantages are sort of obvious. Your skill, your knowledge is recognized without you having to go through 40, 80 or 120 hours of learning that you already have just to write a test at the end which you could have passed before you walked in. So, you have a huge time consideration. You have recognition of what you actually know without having to go through a class. [Also], one of the advantages is certainly cost - it's much more cost-effective than having to go back and do a two-year program. Accessibility [is another advantage] ... so PLAR allows us to access a potential workforce that previously wasn't available to us.

So yes, it's effective ... because it is practical; people can actually show you what they know, they can tell you stories that you can gather that information of what they know.... PLAR is the only way to move forward because how else are we going to capture the brilliance of both the aging population ... [and] these skilled immigrants that are coming? And we keep saying we need skilled people.... we are short of skills ... But, yet, we allow people to immigrate and we don't find ways to capture their skills.... I think that there's a huge need for us to look at foreign-trained credentials or foreign-trained individuals. [But] ... if we continue down the road where we say 'You have to write these exams, you have to do this and you have to do that, in the way of the written text' we're

really doing them a disservice. ... So, if they used to do a particular job in their country and it doesn't align with something here and they're looking for employment, we need to be able to assess what they know and then see how well it aligns to three or four different types of jobs here, ... and that gets them going, gets them into work, gets them ... English as a Second Language training, and lets them progress from there.

There are definite changes that need to be made. [For instance], when you're talking to colleges and universities they have ideas about PLAR that may not necessarily suit the people that you're dealing with. You walk in, you sit down, you sign a paper, they put a test in front of you; they give you a brief explanation and tell you to write. It is way too sterilized. [It needs to be] a little more humanized.... People need to feel comfortable. People need to be able to talk to you. People need to be able to tell you about what they do, how they do it and in some cases you need to help them...so you need to challenge people to improve the process...And sometimes the college gets carried away with 'This is what we do'. Well, I don't really care what you do. This is what we do and I'm paying for it.

My other caution is [that people] have to go into it [PLAR] with the right mentality and with the right set of goals. One of the things that I've had to [do is] remind staff that this is not about just getting stuff on paper; this is not just a matter of doing the research and copying it or getting together in your group. It has to be about your experience, what you've learned and sort of where you've gone, and identifying gaps and then perhaps doing research or making an opportunity to fill that gap by getting experience.... or more education.

[So] my advice is to explore it [PLAR] ... from your own perspective and your own clientele that you're working with ... explore what potential is there because

I really do believe that there's potential. ...And that's another thing I love about prior learning is that it's universal.... We look at it and see the huge value for individuals who've been marginalized due to lack of literacy skills or formal learning. But for ourselves as a group of professionals doing the portfolio development training now, we are also growing ... and we're gaining so much from this process. And when I read the literature on ... where prior learning started, in upper management and with people wanting to move into higher academic achievements such as Masters or Ph.D.'s and then realize how it can be applied anywhere, I just look at it and I think, Wow! I don't believe that there's any person or group out there that wouldn't benefit from such reflection on your life and what you've done and how it's molded you and where that knowledge can take you into the future. I just think it's universal.

[However], I don't think that PLAR is going to show its true value [until] ... we ... do a better job of marketing the successes. We need to have more people that have succeeded tell the story about how they have gone through [the PLAR process] and what they learned and ..., where they were and where they are today...Because then, ... whether it's the [government] structure that adopts this philosophy, whether it's employers that adopt it, or whether it's institutions that adopt it, people ... [will see] success. Success breeds success. And the more we talk about the successes then you... capture the wave.

[Finally], the only thing I hope is that we don't lose momentum because there was so much momentum back in the mid '90's and it sort of fell to the wayside and fear that might happen again. We just want to keep the momentum going; we want to keep talking about it; we want to keep exploring it for our own purposes, and talking to people about it and telling them about it, because I think it is truly valuable. I haven't seen too many other tools out there that are so strengths-based and that's what's really important when you're dealing with individuals who are coming from years and years and years of negative position.

You know you've got to be happy that there's something out there that takes a different spin on this and really allows people to be lifted up. So let's not lose momentum and really ... push to keep it on people's agendas and keep seeing [the] good work happen around PLAR.

## **8.0 Understanding the effectiveness of PLAR: the power of identity capital**

The composite narratives reveal a number of themes which are discussed in greater detail in the conclusions and recommendations section of this paper (section 9). However, the most predominant theme that emerges from the narratives is that people change their attitudes when they identify and recognize assets, which spills-over into other forms of social and human behaviours and civic interactions. This feeling of connectedness and self-awareness is evident in much of the PLAR literature but it is also portrayed in the asset-based research literature under the concept of *identity capital*.

A person's identity capital determines how he or she negotiates life passages in daily life, work, and learning. Thus, identity capital is reflected mostly through a person's self-esteem and self-awareness. The hypothesis is that asset-based interventions increase identity capital and, as a result, foster inclusion and participation by helping people see themselves as part of civil society. For instance, supporters of asset-based approaches assert that people with improved identity capital are more likely to take calculated risks, have a future oriented focus, and have a desire to be more active in the community. Often, the result of such improved confidence is a desire to learn (Sherraden et al, 2005).

PLAR carries qualities which result in changes in a person's identity capital. Therefore, PLAR has the potential to tackle the entrenched problems of economic and social exclusion and under-representation in adult lifelong learning by equipping all individuals with a level of confidence and personal autonomy needed to make choices about their own future.

A primary challenge in using an asset-based approach such as PLAR within a social policy framework is how to describe both the tangible and intangible measures of success - particularly, a success concept such as improved identity capital. As Collins (2005) points out “Qualitative measures are harder to collect. To count the number of jobs created is easier than to measure business perception of local government and the community” (p. 9).

The concept of collecting only quantitative data seems fairly straightforward but can be an extreme expression of the outside embodiment of language. Numbers do not reveal the positive effects of the intangible attributes of PLAR approaches such as improved identity capital. While advocates of PLAR require quantitative data in order to demonstrate how such a publicly funded strategy is cost-effective, such numeric information cannot be the only measure used to demonstrate *outcomes*. To focus exclusively on numeric units of identical value relegates qualitative impressions/expressions to the margins and places the focus of PLAR on *outputs*. It is troublesome for society and counter-intuitive for a policy focusing on assets such as PLAR, to express lived experience as an object having only quantitative representations. Thus, the challenge for PLAR supporters is to portray the effectiveness of PLAR (and its rich attributes) using an asset-based language that reveals its numeric benefits and its identity capital qualities.

Perhaps the most important PLAR concept to present publically is that if people understand themselves as adult learners then they live as adult learners. However, if people feel excluded from the *learning society*, they may see no value in learning and thus, see no reason to participate in lifelong/lifewide learning.

## **9.0 Improving the effectiveness of PLAR: conclusions and recommendations**

The three composite perspectives (user, practitioner, and community) presented in the previous section and the asset-based and lifelong learning sections provide a platform from which to discuss specific policy and practice recommendations for provincial and national PLAR



organizations, government bodies, post-secondary institutions, workplaces, and other PLAR communities. Ten recommendations are discussed:

- Ensure transparent and consistent PLAR processes
- Engage PLAR users and stakeholders as PLAR partners
- Provide training and professional development opportunities for PLAR service providers
- Publicize PLAR as an asset-based approach
- Widen and diversify PLAR approaches
- Develop an asset-based/PLAR lifelong learning portal
- Use PLAR approaches to reduce inequalities in asset accumulation
- View the workplace as a PLAR learning place
- Link asset-based PLAR objectives with adult lifelong learning values
- Use PLAR strategies to reinforce the concept of *lifecourse* learning
- Use an asset-based public discourse
- Develop a pan-Canadian PLAR framework

**9.1 Ensure transparent and consistent PLAR processes.** Users need to know up front if and how PLAR will assist them in achieving their goals. Unfortunately, as noted by several users and stakeholders, some academic institutions provide PLAR services that are not well developed. Users are left feeling unsure about the processes and unclear with regards to the assessment standards and criteria. When they ask a service provider why their evidence was insufficient and what further evidence is required, advisors are not always able to provide such information. Several writers suggest that this lack of transparency is compounded by PLAR services that are not always client-centred but rather, institutionally focused (Van Kleef et al, 2007). This institutional perspective leaves users questioning how PLAR can be used as an empowering personal process when it is designed primarily to serve institutionally-based regulations and evaluations rather than the needs of learners.

In response to such criticism, PLAR service providers assert that assessments must be based on clear learning outcomes and standards which describe the type and level of learning that is acceptable for credit, advanced standing, or competence level (Van Kleef, 2007). Further, they argue that submitted learning, regardless of the assessment option, should be evaluated by subject matter experts, in a timely manner and to the same standard that is used for traditional learning. Also, quality assessment strategies should create opportunities for PLAR users to submit additional evidence if submitted evidence is not sufficient. Although there is no one way to convey assessment results to users, the feedback method used and the transparency of the process are critical to how users feel about the entire process and often about themselves (Simosko and Cook, 1996).

Finally, the literature suggests that an effective PLAR process is one that adheres to PLAR standards and principles as set out by national organizations such as the Council on Adult Experiential Learning (2007).

**9.2 Engage PLAR users and stakeholders as PLAR partners.** The qualitative data gathered for this study, indicates that PLAR works best when users are engaged in the process as collaborators and have a clear understanding of how the process can assist them in achieving their goals. This collaborative approach also extends to stakeholders and ensures that their needs are considered and incorporated in the design and implementation of the approach. As a result of such careful consideration, stakeholders such as business and industry are more likely to embrace the process because they see PLAR as responsive to the needs of the workplace rather than only the needs of government and educational institutions.

From the qualitative data and a review of the literature, PLAR is most effective when users and stakeholders are committed to be:

- *Self-reflective*: users must be in a place in their lives where they are able to be self-reflective.

- *Self-directed*: users can only engage in PLAR when they are ready because it is a self-directed process.
- *Actively engaged*: users and stakeholders must be actively engaged in the process and prepared to set goals.
- *Persistent*: users and stakeholders must be patient and persistent
- *Prepared for change*: users and stakeholders must be prepared to embrace change as PLAR not only provides a process to evaluate past experiences but also to set goals for what comes next – personally and professionally.
- *Dedicated and organized*: users require time to clarify goals, collect evidence, select assessment options, be assessed, and receive feedback. Stakeholders must provide this time and acknowledge that recognition only comes from tenacious effort.
- *Involved in selecting assessment options that fit personal and professional contexts*: there are many ways to demonstrate learning and users must be involved in selecting the option that they are the most comfortable using and which will best reveal their strengths. Stakeholders should also be consulted regarding assessment criteria and may also be involved in the evaluation process.

### **9.3 Provide training and professional development opportunities for PLAR**

**service providers.** To be successful, PLAR approaches must be instructionally sound, motivating, and well designed. Such quality in design and content permits both facilitator-led processes/practices and self-directed processes/practices to be used as users have confidence in the approach. These quality standards must also be complemented by professional development opportunities for staff working in PLAR learning settings. However, such learning opportunities are not offered consistently across the PLAR spectrum and many service providers are accorded little time or funding for professional development.

A comprehensive suite of PLAR service provider learning workshops and courses offered by national organizations (e.g. Canadian Association for Prior Learning and Assessment - CAPLA) and post-secondary institutions (perhaps in partnership with CAPLA) would

help to provide a multi-faceted professional development model for all those practitioners and facilitators working in PLAR service delivery.

**9.4 Publicize PLAR as an asset approach.** The qualitative data presented in this report and the data gathered from the research literature demonstrates that PLAR holds promise for increasing and widening participation in adult lifelong learning. In light of the demographic reality of a diminishing number of 14-18 year-olds, many colleges and universities are seeking to bolster undergraduate enrolments by actively recruiting older students (18+), seniors, and part-time students. Therefore, it would seem wise—in both social and economic terms—for public policy makers and institutional leaders to devote at least a portion of their attention, energy and investment to developing and enhancing the vast pool of experiential skill and talent that exists in the adult population; especially within the those populations not currently participating.

Studies, such as the WALL survey (The Work and Lifelong Learning Network, 2006) demonstrate that many Canadians have an underdeveloped understanding and appreciation of their informal or experiential learning, even if they have had success in formal and credentialed education and training. In a turbulent economy where even highly qualified individuals face sudden, unexpected and demoralizing change, the importance of understanding, recognizing, and using all of one's skills and knowledge has never been greater.

Therefore, if government wishes to increase participation in formal adult education and training, the provision of PLAR services should be a vital component of an adult lifelong learning policy suite. Moreover, an economical and efficient means to provide such PLAR services is already in place, through the community-based organizations which now serve the needs of many who have had little success in the formal system—the voluntary sector, community learning and literacy networks, immigrant settlement organizations, employment and social service agencies, and other NGOs. At the same

time, much better provision for accessible and effective PLAR processes needs to be put in place by the post-secondary sector.

More comprehensive studies on how PLAR increases participation in adult learning are needed. However, current research findings certainly suggest that further development and implementation of national PLAR policies and practices would have positive effects on the educational development of Canadian adults (particularly those from low income groups) and would increase educational and training and employment opportunities for those who currently face greater barriers (Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment, 2002; Centre for Education and Work, 2001; Davison and Gill, 2006, Myers and Livingston, 2007).

**9.5 Widen and diversify PLAR approaches.** Respondents from all participant groups agreed portfolio was the predominant tool used for assessment. The value of portfolio development in PLAR is described as personally empowering because it not only enhances personal value and self-esteem, but also legitimizes the skill sets users have acquired in their work and community experiences.

However, since the context drives the appropriateness of PLAR assessment tools, a variety of authentic assessment options should be used. Service providers and stakeholders indicate a lack of non-portfolio assessment tools in industry; although, workplace participants gave examples of a number of assessment tools that could be used – competency-based tests, standardized/written tests, interviews, on-the-job assessments. In effect, they demonstrated greater effectiveness in assessment flexibility than many academic institutions. Unfortunately, the research literature indicates that many universities are not willing to assess work experience for credit – thus making PLAR ineffective in these situations (Van Kleef, 2007). Nonetheless, PLAR approaches should continue to be broadened and diversified to represent the various ways in which people understand and use the process.

**9.6 Develop an asset-based/PLAR lifelong learning portal.** Navigating the range of adult lifelong learning programs and understanding their purposes is a challenge. While the information is available electronically, it is not housed in one e-location, is sometimes confusing, and does not always use similar navigation templates.

A lifelong learning asset portal would provide learners with easy web access to PLAR and other adult learning supports including: information on financing services, personal development planning, portfolio development, counselling, learning opportunities, and funding. The portal would link services across government, provinces and regions with links to applications (completed samples provided) and regulations.

Using clear navigation tools, a key aim would be to provide a seamless PLAR learning place that makes it easier for learners to become engaged and remain engaged in lifelong learning. The portal could have links to the websites of colleges, universities and other bodies that provide 'formal' learning opportunities and PLAR assessment services. It could also provide information about 'informal' learning opportunities in places such as museums, art galleries, and regional and community learning activities. Finally, the portal could enable the exchange of ideas and the sharing of experiences.

The portal should be managed by a national learning organization. The learning portal of the European Commission ([elearningeuropa.info](http://elearningeuropa.info)) is one example of a national e-learning portal.

**9.7 Use PLAR approaches to reduce inequalities in asset accumulation.** The inertia that often accompanies formal adult learning approaches may stem from incentives which benefit those with higher levels education and income but not those adults with lower formal education and income levels. This context does not mean that adult learning programs should be replaced. Many middle-income families and individuals require such supports to pursue education and maintain a household. What is

needed is better coordination and targeted expansion of existing learning supports (e.g. PLAR) so that they augment essential educational support strategies. The focus of such coordination and expansion should be on reducing inequality in *asset accumulation*, which several authors argue will broaden participation in lifelong learning as individuals recognize how existing learning can be used for future educational experiences (Nares et al, 2001; Townson, 2004).

Trends in adult learning, employment, and training show the need to prevent more adults from falling further into disadvantage. Therefore, a social policy that facilitates new opportunities for those with low self-confidence, little if any formal education experience, and who are marginalized from learning is a solid investment for a country seeking social and economic growth. People change their attitudes when they recognize experiential learning assets, which spills-over into other forms of social and human behaviours and civic interactions (intangible assets). Certainly one of the main advantages of asset-based approaches such as PLAR is that they give people confidence and connect them to the learning society—not just because they attend a post-secondary institution for the first time but because they speak of feeling like stakeholders in the society in which they live. This feeling of connectedness and self-awareness is portrayed in the research literature as being a primary factor in adults recognizing their own abilities and also, a factor in encouraging participation in learning.

**9.8 View the workplace as a PLAR learning place.** Organizations need a highly skilled workforce to stay competitive and yet, several studies note that a significant demand for job-related training is not currently being met. According to the Adult Education Training Survey (Statistics Canada, 2003), in 2002, about 28% of working adults reported that there was job-related training that they wanted to take but did not. Twenty-eight per cent of the adult work force amounts to 3.9 million workers who might have participated in training activities under certain conditions. Myers and de Broucker (2006) argue that even among categories of workers with low rates of expressed interest in training, notably workers with the lowest levels of formal schooling, there are

significant numbers who might participate if access was improved. However, much of the current workforce training in North American societies is available only in larger companies and tends to concentrate on workers who are already qualified and/or who enjoy relatively high status. Older workers, those with lower skills, and employees of small and medium sized firms are often left out of workplace training programs. Further, many employers do not recognize the value of workplace learning. Their view is that employee development and learning is a budget expense and a peripheral activity to organizational growth.

To turn around this pattern of limited investment in employees particularly within small and medium sized industries, workplace training models that value the prior and experiential learning of employees should be explored. In effect, PLAR would become an incentive to support workplace training and help build a learning culture. The recognition of the workplace as a learning place would help organizations understand that workplace learning has enterprise and morale implications. Such an understanding would help foster a workplace learning culture that placed value on PLAR approaches in the training and professional development of employees.

**9.9 Link asset-based PLAR objectives with adult lifelong learning values.** By now, it should be clear that asset-based approaches such as PLAR are built upon the understanding that assets can be recognized in such a manner that they can have a positive impact on people's lives. While the research on the effectiveness of asset-based approaches such as PLAR remains largely localized and somewhat incomplete, the data that is emerging does support the assertion that the recognition of assets generates multiple positive benefits for people. Further, there are several key linkages between asset-based and PLAR objectives and adult lifelong learning values that should be considered in the development of PLAR policy and practice.



First, the asset-based and PLAR concept of enabling people to recognize past and present learning successes in order to plan for future learning supports the adult lifelong learning value of reducing learning barriers. Asset-based approaches such as PLAR are future oriented and this forward looking concept provides individuals with a motivation to learn and a process for doing so (e.g. using a Portfolio). Thus, individuals can benefit from asset-based initiatives by preparing for future learning opportunities. Such a forward looking policy builds on adult lifelong learning models which desire sustainable, socially inclusive communities where adults have the opportunity to pursue learning throughout their lives.

Second, the principles of mutual responsibility and equality of opportunity support the adult learning values of self-determination and inclusiveness. Assets give people choice and play an important role in giving people social standing and access to formal institutional learning. Assets also buy social capital (new contacts, networks of protection and support) which is an inherent attribute of adult lifelong learning with its emphasis on opening doors to new ideas and possibilities.

Third, the assertion from users, service providers and stakeholders involved in asset-based initiatives such as PLAR is that asset-based policies and practices complement rather than replace existing educational supports. This sentiment is similar to the understanding of adult lifelong learning as a process that expands and makes more inclusive existing educational frameworks without replacing them. That is, when post-secondary institutions recognize informal learning, they broaden adult participation in existing formal learning because such acknowledgement gives past experiential learning a 'valid' place in future learning contexts. Asset-based approaches have a broadening effect because they give learning a future oriented focus rather than a temporary intervention view. People understand the long-term possibilities of learning, including participation in formal learning, rather than seeing only the short-term benefits of participating in a course.

Finally, the theoretical concept of building identity capital through asset recognition strongly supports the adult learning concept of recognizing experiential (informal) learning. That is, identity capital implicitly acknowledges that learning outside of the formal system must be recognized, celebrated and strengthened both as a legitimate and multi-functional process in and of itself, as well as in order to increase external leverage to open access to formal education and training where appropriate. Instead of focusing on what adults lack, there is an emphasis on taking stock of what they already have in terms of resources, abilities, and pure will. This is the essence of asset-based thinking.

**9.10 Use PLAR strategies to reinforce the concept of lifecourse learning.** As an asset-based approach, PLAR supports a long-term accumulation process over one's lifetime rather than a single intervention strategy at a point in time. In this regard, such *lifecourse* asset-based approaches view learning as indirect and occasionally interrupted rather than linear and mostly unbroken.

Ironically, while many adult lifelong learning reports assert that learning is more of an iterative process, many formal learning approaches support a view of learning that is based on a sequential approach. Sequential learning assumes that most learning takes place within institutions during a very precise time period in people's lives. For instance, the most common perception is one that targets the education of children and which is structured around the assumption that they will attend a formal institution somewhere around their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. For some families, this linear incentive works well but, for most adults and an increasing number of young people, learning does not take place in such a lock-step fashion. That is, people 'dip in and out' of learning (at least within the formal sphere) even though many formal post-secondary learning systems and government incentives reward and encourage sequential, full-time learning. Under a sequential approach, the circumstances of peoples' lives seem to have little bearing on their participation in learning. And yet, in people's daily lives, disruptions happen: parents get sick, people lose their jobs, and manufacturing firms close.

Fortunately, the emerging understanding in the PLAR literature is that learning is not limited to the formal sphere of institutions but also resides in the dynamics and dimensions of everyday experience (Morrissey, 2008). The result of such an enriched understanding of learning is that lifelong learning projects will frame their policies and practices under a *lifecourse* rubric—one that encourages asset accumulation over a lifetime and for a variety of purposes. In this sense, PLAR holds great promise for advancing a broader and richer view of adult lifelong learning than is commonly portrayed by linear, age-restrictive perspectives.

**9.11 Use an asset-based public discourse.** PLAR initiatives in Canada and in many other countries give credence to the assertion, strongly voiced in the adult education literature, that the most important element in learning is not academic success but self-esteem. That is, learning starts with self-esteem and self-esteem is built through a positive discourse. Asset-based approaches such as PLAR use a positive learning discourse to help people take stock of what they have (rather than what they do not have) and then provide encouragement and a defined process to help them to move forward to where they want or need to go. The focus of the approach and its relevant process, marketing, and policy materials is on strengths rather than shortcomings. The result is that people look for opportunities rather than problems. Therefore, perhaps when PLAR is presented to the public, it should encourage people to identify their strengths (desire to learn) rather than to identify their deficits (limited formal education). As discussed earlier, when people decrease their focus on what is wrong (deficit-based thinking) and increase their focus on what is right (asset-based thinking), they build enthusiasm, increase energy, strengthen relationships, and move themselves and their aspirations to another level.

**9.12 Develop a pan-Canadian PLAR framework.**

Although the 2008 CAPLA report indicates that the respondents believe in the value of coordinated services, the literature suggests that the broad coordination of PLAR services is not evident across the country. Further, while organizations such as CAPLA carry the PLAR portfolio for much of Canada additional partnerships are needed. Partnerships among all levels of government, the private sector, post-secondary institutions, not-for-profit organizations and volunteer agencies leads to comprehensive and coordinated integration strategies rather than fragmented and silo-type practices. But who should initiate such a partnership exercise?

The literature reveals that national bodies are in the best position to develop such coordinated partnerships because they have the power to ensure equality of access; they can act as impartial monitors and evaluators; they can create a climate for cross agency partnerships; and they can provide the broad perspective (Morrissey et al, 2008). However, such organizations cannot do all of these tasks on their own. In countries with successful PLAR strategies, power sharing and decision making with all local stakeholders is a primary characteristic of local leadership teams. Such broad coordinated decision making results in resources that are used effectively and makes ideals that once seemed out of reach (e.g. the provision of PLAR services throughout the country) possible.

Accordingly, the development of a pan-Canadian PLAR framework (in concert with existing national NGOs and organizations such as CAPLA) would build on an understanding of the needs of people in transition and move towards a larger agenda of social innovation and social inclusion. Framework elements would include qualification recognition, competency assessment, and portfolio development. These elements would give voice to the multi-level cultural, language and workplace transitions of new immigrants as well as the ‘work to learning’ and ‘school-to work’, transitions of the under or newly employed. The framework would operate within a larger perspective that assumes the need to include the more marginalized members of society in a full employment economy and just society; and within an awareness of the mismatch between the education system and the new demands of a rapidly changing world.

A dynamic pan-Canadian framework would also devote particular attention and priority to those who face special barriers to participation in education and training including those who experience essential skills gaps and literacy challenges, language barriers, physical or intellectual disabilities, and barriers related to income, age, gender, race and ethnicity (Morrissey et al, 2008). At the same time the framework would span and be applicable to the whole of society and all adults facing significant transition challenges. While portfolio development and learning (where people have an opportunity to reflect on and record prior learning) are not panaceas, it is also true that such measures can open up a range of options and possibilities – including further education and training – that would have previously seemed impossible. Such portfolio initiatives can also provide adults with higher level credentials with an opportunity to determine future learning and career choices.

## **10.0 Using PLAR to broaden and deepen participation in the learning society**

Unlike the more localized occupational shortages evident in the past, the declining size of the Canadian labour force means that the country will face significant labour shortages across many occupations and industries. This situation highlights the importance of targeted efforts to increase labour force participation by ensuring that individuals have the skills to participate in the economy as workers and active citizens and do not face barriers or disincentives to do so.

These shortages require a new labour market and social policy strategy. That is, Canada no longer needs to find jobs for people, but rather people for jobs. This task is made increasingly difficult given that many workers have greater work and care giving responsibilities than previous generations. Other workers find themselves with skills that are no longer needed by employers. The labour market conditions that existed at the height of the baby boom generation are vastly different from those that exist today; adapting to this situation requires regulatory and attitudinal reform and a commitment to adult learning. As the labour force changes, so too have

the expectations of its young entrants. These changes alter both the nature of work and the attitudes towards it.

In order to respond to this new labour market reality and increase participation in learning, pan-Canadian PLAR services need to be developed and offered within a Canadian asset-based adult learning framework. Many of the major studies on current adult learning participation rates (CCL 2006 & 2007; Myers and Livingstone, 2007; WALL, 2006), provide evidence that participation rates in formal adult learning are not increasing. Also, the reports reveal that these rates are not spread consistently across the adult population in Canada as low participation tends to be a characteristic of more or less distinct populations that face particular barriers or constraints.

If overall participation rates in adult learning need to increase to ensure labour market growth and active citizenship, the pursuit of this goal will require strategies to reduce access barriers for particular groups of people who face financial, educational, cultural, gender, and/or institutional barriers. The provision of PLAR services for these groups is a first step in reducing such barriers to learning. A second step is to ensure that PLAR services are also available to adults who have skills and credentials but find themselves facing career and employment transitions.

As a starting point for advancing PLAR policy and practice in Canada, national adult learning messages should strive to use an asset-based language that focuses on what people can do and have done well in the past rather than language which elucidates deficits. Such positive messaging bolsters the confidence of adults as learners and helps foster a national awareness of the many dynamics and dimensions of learning. If the citizens of a nation feel like adult learners, they will act as such.

National messaging regarding PLAR can also play a significant role in educating the populace about what they already know, what they can do, and what they can learn. However, such messaging also requires a rethinking of traditional formal educational structures, an explicit recognition, value and support of informal and experimental educational opportunities, and the

development of appropriate quality and assessment measures. It also requires an increased participation by disadvantaged groups and those with low-level skills in learning opportunities.

In summary, this paper reveals that PLAR does not rely on blind optimism or magical thinking. It does not offer quick fixes to social ills or over-promise results. It is not based on ideals of sweeping social transformation but it does seek fairness and equality. Further, while the supporting asset-based theoretical constructs provide a meta-language for analysis, the approach is not based on theory alone. This is an approach based on direct, systematic observation into how a growing number of highly effective organizations and people think, feel and act with regard to what their citizens have and can be (learning assets) rather than on what they do not possess and cannot do (learning deficits). Deficit-based thinking is rooted in fear. Asset-based thinking arises from hope.

**Appendix A**  
**Interview Guide<sup>1</sup>**  
**PLAR Users**

1. Tell me about yourself and how you became involved in activities related to assessment and recognition of learning?

*Prompt*

- Why were you interested?
- How did you find out about where to go for PLAR?

2. Tell me about your experiences (good or bad) with the PLAR process.

*Prompt*

- How did you get started and what happened?

3. What was the outcome of the assessment?

*Prompt*

- Did you get recognition?

4. What did you think about the outcome?

*Prompt*

- Were you satisfied?
- What benefits did you gain from the process?
  - Did it allow you to proceed with further education?
  - Did it allow you to get your professional license?
  - Did it allow you to get a job?
  - Did it allow you to get a promotion?
- What did you learn from the process or outcome?

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<sup>1</sup> These interview guides were used by the author by the researchers who prepared the report *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* (2008). Unpublished report. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment.



5. Based on your experience, what advice would you give to other adults:
  - People who wish to use the PLAR process?
  - People who assessed your prior learning?
  - People who advised/mentored you?
6. In your opinion is PLAR effective? Please explain.
7. Is there something I haven't covered that you wish to talk about?

Thank You

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Guide<sup>2</sup>**  
**PLAR Service Providers**

1. Tell me a bit about your role with PLAR.
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of PLAR for you and your organization/sector?  
*Prompt*
  - How does it affect your enrolment?
  - How does it affect your attrition rate?
  - How does it affect your graduation rate?
  - How does it affect your ability to be competitive (workplace assessors)?
  - How does it contribute to occupational mobility, recruitment practices, promotion and other career opportunities for your workplace?
3. How would you characterize your organization's commitment to PLAR?  
*Prompt*
  - Are there financial supports, policies, personnel?
4. How would you characterize your experiences with PLAR?  
*Prompt*
  - Can you give examples of a time when it worked well?
  - Can you give examples of a time when it did not work so well?
5. What advice would you give other professionals working with adults on PLAR?  
*Prompt*
  - Should they be given training opportunities?

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<sup>2</sup> These interview guides were used by the researchers who prepared the report *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* (2008). Unpublished report. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment.

6. What advice would you give to adults who want to access your system?
7. Are there any broader advantages or disadvantages affected by PLAR?  
*Prompt*
  - What about equity?
  - What about minority or aboriginal groups?
  - What about homemakers returning to work?
  - What about the internationally trained?
8. In your opinion is PLAR effective? Please explain.
9. Is there something I haven't covered that you wish to talk about?

Thank You

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Guide<sup>3</sup>**  
**PLAR-Stakeholders**

1. Tell me a bit about your involvement with PLAR.
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages for PLAR for your community?
3. How would you characterize your experiences with PLAR?  
*Prompts*
  - Can you give examples of a time when it worked well?
  - Can you give examples of a time when it did not work so well?
4. What advice would you give professionals in positions similar to yours?
5. What is your perspective on PLAR and its impact on the community at large?  
*Prompts*
  - What about equity?
  - What about minority or aboriginal groups?
  - What about homemakers returning to work?
  - What about the internationally trained?
6. In your opinion is PLAR effective? Please explain.
7. Is there something I haven't covered that you wish to talk about?

Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> These interview guides were used by the researchers who prepared the report *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* (2008). Unpublished report. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment.

## Appendix D

### Number of Participants Represented in Each Province<sup>4</sup>

C = College

HR = Human Resources

U = University

CD = Career Development

R = Regulatory Body

PC = Private Consultant

G = Government

SB = School Board

L = Literacy

ISA = Immigrant Serving Agency

Provinces	PLAR Users– Academic		PLAR Users– Work- place	PLAR Service Providers						PLAR Community Representatives			
	C	U		C	U	R	PC	SB	ISA	HR	L	CD	G
P.E.I.				1									
Newfoundland						2			1		1		
Yukon				1									
Nova Scotia			2	2	2					1		1	
Quebec						1							
Ontario	7			1			2						
Saskatchewan		2	3										1
Manitoba			5							1			
British Columbia					1								
Quebec								1					
Total number of Participants	9		10	15						5			

<sup>4</sup> From the *Effectiveness of PLAR: A qualitative study of the voices of Canadians* (2008). Unpublished report. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Association of Prior Learning and Assessment.

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