

TAKING ACCOUNT:
A Report on the Number
of PLAR Assessments
Conducted by Public
Post-secondary Institutions
in Canada



ADULT LEARNING KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

CENTRE DU SAVOIR SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE CHEZ LES ADULTES

Prepared by:
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January, 2009

The logo for the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) is located in the top left corner. It consists of the letters 'CIRL' in a large, white, serif font. The background of the top of the page features a scenic landscape with a blue sky, a golden field, a line of green trees, and a white lighthouse on the right side.

Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning
Institut canadien de reconnaissance de l'apprentissage

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The opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author. The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre and the Canadian Council on Learning bear no responsibility for the content of the report.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) was a participant in an OECD-led, international study on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. As a result of that study, we gained new data on PLAR

1. at the national level: in preparing the Canada Background Report for the OECD, we obtained up-to-date information on PLAR activities across the country.
2. at the international level: we obtained statistical information from several countries on the number of assessments conducted annually by post-secondary institutions. We learned, for example, that France, generally seen as a leader in PLAR activity, conducts about 14,000 assessments each year.

These data suggested that the PLAR activity level in Canadian post-secondary institutions might be higher than previously thought, and that Canada's performance may compare favourably with the efforts of other countries, particularly in terms of the number of assessments conducted. As there is currently no single source of information available on the number of assessments conducted by Canada's public post-secondary institutions, CIRL approached the Adult Learning Knowledge Centre with a proposal to investigate possible sources of reliable data. This report represents the results of that investigation.

PROJECT PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this project was to

1. collect already available, reliable statistics from governments and individual public institutions across Canada on the number of prior learning assessments conducted annually at the post-secondary level. It was hoped that data from at least 80 institutions for three academic years (2004/05, 2005/06, and 2006/07) would be available.
2. compare the level of assessment activity with comparable activities in other countries.

CIRL's interest in obtaining this data was reinforced by a recent CIRL study on quality assurance in PLAR, which found that post-secondary institutions had not developed clear quality assurance measures for PLAR. A growth in PLAR activity levels underlines the need for institutions to improve their quality assurance measures.

The scope of this project was limited to determining the number of assessments conducted for academic credit/exemption and program admission. No private institutions and not all of Canada's public post-secondary institutions were surveyed. The project also did not include PLAR for occupational certification or for personal, educational, or career planning purposes, all of which are growing aspects of the field.

This report does not examine or take into account the methodologies used or the quality of reported assessments.

METHODOLOGY

The intent of this project was to collect pre-existing data from reliable sources. Sources were identified from Canadian literature on PLAR, from CIRL records, and from *OECD Activity: Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Report on Provincial/Territorial Activities and Pan-Canadian Overview* (2008), prepared by CIRL for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The intention was to obtain data from all institutions offering PLAR that were cited in the literature.

The Adult Learning Knowledge Centre asked CIRL to use the conceptual framework proposed in *Mapping the Field: A Framework for Measuring, Monitoring and Reporting on Adult Learning in Canada—Validation Report* to position the prior learning identified in this project. The prior learning referenced in this study and presented in the following definition is aligned with the *Mapping the Field's* spheres of informal learning in everyday life as well as the spheres of non-formal, organized, not-for-credit learning, and formal workplace-based training.

PLAR is a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes relevant learning (knowledge and skills) acquired through work and other life experience that cannot be fully recognized by the traditional means of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, or accreditation.

The project was based on assessments undertaken by public community colleges and universities, which, according to the framework outlined in *Mapping the Field*, represent the sphere of formal, ladder, for-credit, structured education. Positioning prior learning within the *Mapping the Field* framework helps us to visualize the possible contexts in which creditable prior learning takes place and draws attention to the powerful position held by post-secondary institutions in determining the social value placed on prior learning.

Data and contextual information were obtained from published reports, telephone interviews and correspondence with PLAR administrators and registrars at public post-secondary institutions, and provincial government organizations responsible for monitoring institutional activities. Data from four provinces were provided by the provincial departments to which post-secondary institutions are required to report (British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec). All other data were obtained directly from individual institutions. Any anomalies were addressed by direct contact with the institutions, and in two cases, provincial data required correction. A list of organizational sources is provided in Attachment A.

International data were obtained from a series of country background reports published by the OECD as part of its international study, as well as from the recently published *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition* (2008). All literature sources are presented in Attachment B.

Given the straightforward purpose of the project, the question asked of each information source was correspondingly direct:

Can you provide the project with data on the number of PLAR assessments conducted annually for the academic years 2004/05, 2005/06, and 2006/07?

CIRL also asked each source if their reported assessments related to individual courses or course groupings such as in portfolio assessment. Institutional and government responses were recorded and analyzed to determine assessment levels and trends and to identify challenges to the data collection process.

CHALLENGES

Several factors hampered our systematic data collection and analysis. For example, some of the organizations we contacted

- conduct PLAR but do not collect data;
- have incomplete PLAR records;
- conduct PLAR but do not collect data at the institutional level;
- do not have data available for all three years;
- have different academic years;
- could only provide provincial totals;
- conduct PLAR for continuing education credit courses but not for courses in full-time programs;
- include credit transfers as part of their PLAR process and cannot disentangle them in their statistics (these institutions were not included in the data collection or analysis);
- collect data only on the number of candidates rather than the number of assessments;
- do not record unsuccessful assessments;
- declined to release their PLAR data; or
- had anomalous data (i.e., the data supplied by the ministry and that supplied by the institution did not correspond).

Although some of these challenges were resolved during the study, our investigation of PLAR assessment activity is necessarily incomplete.

RESULTS

A total of 128 institutions are represented in this report. The majority are colleges/institutes (110/128). Thirteen are universities, and five are university-colleges. For 2004/05, 80 institutions were represented: 62 were able to provide PLAR statistics; 17 could not provide data; and one declined to release its data. For 2005/06, the same 80 institutions were represented: 65 were able to provide PLAR statistics; 14 could not provide data; and one declined to release its data. For 2006/07, 128 institutions were represented: 115 were able to provide PLAR statistics; 12 could not provide data; and one declined to release its data.. The total number of institutions for which data were available for 2006/07 is significantly higher than that for the other years because data on Quebec Cégeps were not available for 2004/05 and 2005/06. Aggregate data were available for 2006/07. Quebec reports that it will be able to report its data on an institution-by-institution basis by the end of 2008.

With few exceptions, institutions reported conducting PLAR with respect to granting academic credit/exemptions. Based on our consultations and review of institutional practices, it is estimated that fewer than 200 of the total number of assessments conducted in any of the three years were for the purpose of program admission. Although detailed statistics are not available, institutions generally reported that one assessment corresponds to credit or exemption for one course. Credits granted through portfolios were reported separately for each course referenced in the portfolios. Very few clustered courses or program outcome assessments were reported.

The majority of challenges experienced during the study related to limitations in collecting data on PLAR assessments that were conducted but not captured by institutions.

In 2004/05, 12,374 assessments were reported by 62 institutions. In 2005/06, 13,109 assessments were reported by 65 institutions. In 2006/07, 25,012 assessments were reported by 115 institutions. PLAR activities by province and institution are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Assessments by Institution—2004–2007

Province	Institution	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Alberta	Bow Valley College	123	73	47
	Grant MacEwan College	18	101	77
	Lethbridge College	306	338	334
	Medicine Hat College	123	108	84
	Olds College	111	196	256
	Red Deer College	127	130	97
	SAIT	74	86	112
	Mount Royal College	Does not collect data		
	NAIT	Does not collect data		
	Northern Lakes College	Does not collect data		
	Grande Prairie College	Does not collect data		
	Lakeland College	Does not collect data		
	Athabasca University*	Declined to provide data		
	TOTAL		882	1032
British Columbia	BCIT	236	405	263
	Camosun College	133	113	120
	Douglas College	278	186	168
	Emily Carr Institute	39	53	28
	University College of the Fraser Valley	184	108	155
	Justice Institute of BC	403	665	806
	Kwantlen University College	270	167	161
	Langara College	47	67	77
	Malaspina University-College	72	66	37
	College of New Caledonia	5	5	5
	North Island College	38	61	22
	Northern Lights College	5	5	7
	Northwest Community College	20	25	40
	North Vancouver Institute of Technology	5	9	9
	Okanagan College/OUC	26	10	12
	College of the Rockies	36	7	20
	Selkirk College	67	27	27

Province	Institution	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
	Thompson Rivers University	66	26	48
	TRU Open Learning	143	153	107
	Vancouver Community College	60	43	67
	Royal Roads University	n/a	n/a	n/a
TOTAL		2133	2201	2179
Manitoba	Assiniboine Community College	387	444	250
	Brandon University	20	8	19
	Red River College	787	667	740
	St. Boniface University College	42	26	17
	University of Winnipeg	14	21	35
	University College of the North	131	120	85
	Winnipeg Technical College	131	232	232
	University of Manitoba	n/a	4	41
TOTAL		1512	1522	1419
New Brunswick	New Brunswick Community College	n/a	n/a	806
	University of Moncton	62	33	33
	University of New Brunswick	52	42	49
TOTAL		114	75	888
Newfoundland and Labrador	College of the North Atlantic	n/a	334	382
Northwest Territories	Aurora College	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nova Scotia	Nova Scotia Community College	1481	1562	2445
	Cape Breton University	20	111	222
	Dalhousie University		Does not collect data	
	St. Mary's University	n/a	4	6
TOTAL		1501	1677	2673
Nunavut	Nunavut Arctic College	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ontario	Algonquin College	295	256	263
	College Boreal	0	0	0
	Cambrian College	22	30	32
	Canadore College	38	25	17

Province	Institution	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
	Centennial College	140	230	211
	Conestoga College	101	106	99
	Confederation College	59	48	30
	Durham College	84	101	113
	Fanshawe College	328	232	269
	George Brown College	50	87	106
	Georgian College	331	554	484
	Humber College	1387	1082	4125
	La Cite College	97	0	60
	Lambton College	0	24	40
	Loyalist College	110	168	154
	Mohawk College	365	357	567
	Niagara College	1199	1014	1262
	Northern College	0	88	128
	Saint Clair College	135	158	132
	St. Lawrence College	101	70	78
	Sault College	57	49	57
	Seneca College	244	249	244
	Sheridan College	217	333	199
	Sir Sanford Fleming College	68	75	29
TOTAL		5428	5336	8699
Prince Edward Island	Holland College	Does not collect data		
	University of PEI	n/a	n/a	n/a
Quebec	Quebec Cégeps (48)	n/a	n/a	6829
Saskatchewan	SIAST	804	932	936
Yukon	Yukon College	n/a	n/a	n/a
TOTAL		12,374	13,109	25,012

* For further information on Athabasca University's PLAR assessments, contact the University.

Over the three years covered in this study, the number of PLAR assessments rose in seven provinces (Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Saskatchewan) and declined slightly in one province (Manitoba). Comparable data for the three-year period are not available for the three territories (Northwest Territories, Nunavut, and Yukon Territory) and two provinces (Quebec and Prince Edward Island).

We obtained the most complete set of data for the year 2006/7. During that year, the three provinces with the highest number of assessments were Ontario (8,699), Quebec (6,829), and Nova Scotia (2,673). Table 2 presents the number of assessments by province/territory.

Table 2: Number of Assessments by Province/Territory

Province	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Alberta	882	1032	1007
British Columbia	2133	2201	2179
Manitoba	1512	1522	1419
New Brunswick	114	75	888
Newfoundland and Labrador	n/a	334	382
Northwest Territories	n/a	n/a	n/a
Nova Scotia	1501	1677	2673
Nunavut	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ontario	5428	5336	8699
Prince Edward Island	n/a	n/a	n/a
Quebec	n/a	n/a	6829
Saskatchewan	804	932	936
Yukon Territory	n/a	n/a	n/a
TOTAL	12,374	13,109	25,012

Note: n/a = not available

Table 3 presents the average number of assessments by year based on the data available. It suggests that assessment levels are rising. However, more detailed analysis indicates that PLAR activity varies across post-secondary institutions and a small number of institutions with high activity levels in 2006/07 tend to skew the results. For example, Humber College in Ontario conducted over 4,000 assessments, accounting for almost half of that province's total assessments.

Table 3: Average Number of Assessments by Year

Number of Institutions with Available Data	Average Number of Assessments in 2004/05	Average Number of Assessments in 2005/06	Average number of Assessments in 2006/07
62/80	200		
65/80		202	
115/127			218

Note: The figure 80 represents the number of institutions included in the study in nine provinces and three territories. The figure of 127 for 2006/07 includes the 48 Cégeps of Quebec. In 2006/07, 66 institutions outside Quebec provided data. One institution declined.

The majority of institutions reported less than one hundred assessments annually. Table 4 presents institutional assessment activity by numeric groupings in 2006/07.

Table 4: Institutions in Nine Provinces and Three Territories by Numeric Assessment Groupings, 2006/07

Assessments	Number of Institutions
Less than 100 assessments	34
101 – 200 assessments	12
201 – 300 assessments	9
301 – 400 assessments	2
401 – 500 assessments	1
More than 500 assessments	8
TOTAL	66

Note: These figures reflect assessments conducted by the 66 institutions for which individual institutional data were provided.

INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES

In order to place Canada's institutional PLAR assessment levels in an international context, CIRL examined data from countries currently participating in the OECD-led study on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL). The reports, prepared by the source countries, represent the most current information available.

Analysis reveals that few countries systematically collect data on PLAR. Among those that do so, there are variations in the type of data collected, which may focus on secondary school level learning, post-secondary level learning, or occupational competencies. The following list is based on information provided to the OECD during the RNFIL study. It illustrates the variety of approaches to RNFIL and the consequent challenges when conducting international comparisons.

Australia	In 2005, 3.5% of VET students were granted recognition for non-formal or informal learning based on PLAR.
Austria	No data on PLAR are collected.
Belgium	No data on PLAR are collected.
Czech Republic	Legislation was passed in August 2007. No data are yet available.
Denmark	In 2006, 24,421 people undertook RNFIL for recognition of competencies applicable to employment and VET educational programs.
Germany	No data on PLAR are collected.
Greece	No data on PLAR are collected.
Hungary	No data on PLAR are collected.
Iceland	176 people have completed RNFIL in 12 workplace-based pilot projects since 2004.
Ireland	RPL is used for admissions in further education and higher education, but data are not centrally collected. Some institutions collect their own data.
Italy	No data on PLAR are collected.
Korea	Degrees are granted based on recognition of self-education (by 2006, 9,200 had been conferred).

Norway	By the end of 2001, over 24,000 people had taken part in the piloting of various PLAR methods and tools; 15,000 had their prior learning charted and validated in upper secondary education. Between 2000 and 2005, approximately, 60,000 people underwent assessment for upper secondary school level credit. In 2006, 2,700 people sought recognition for admission to a program in higher education. In 2001, 6,000 people undertook validation for admission to higher education study programs. In 2001 and 2002, between 7% and 8% of all applicants to higher education enrolled as a result of validation processes. Since this initial surge, annual figures have dropped to about 1,300 per year.
Slovenia	No data on PLAR are collected.
Spain	In 2003/04, 19,853 people undertook standardized examinations to gain access to university programs, and in 2005/06, 20,000 persons undertook standardized examinations to gain access to VET programs based on their prior learning. It is not clear whether these examinations conform to the EU and OECD concepts of RNFIL.
Switzerland	No data on PLAR are collected.
The Netherlands	In 2006, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 assessments were conducted. More detailed data are not available.
United Kingdom	No data on PLAR are available.

Our review of the literature on PLAR in France revealed the following statistics on PLAR activity levels:

France	Between 2002 and 2005, VAE was used in the awarding of more than 50,000 qualifications. Between 2003 and 2005, about 4,000 of the 30,000 qualifications awarded through VAE were entire university degrees.
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CONCLUSIONS

Table 1 shows the minimum number of post-secondary PLAR assessments conducted in Canada during the study period, since not all post-secondary institutions were included in the study and not all assessments were captured. Although the challenges in obtaining data create only a partial picture of PLAR assessment activity, the data as reported, are higher than expected and can be used with confidence for future research. All statistics were obtained from official, reliable sources that used the study's definition of PLAR and limited their reports to the study's stated purpose and scope. Given the number of challenges relating to assessments that were conducted but not captured, it is reasonable to conclude that the final totals are an under-representation of the total number of PLAR assessments conducted in each year of the study. Nevertheless, the stated limitations of the data should be taken into account in citing the statistics from this report in other studies.

Data collection and reporting on institutional PLAR assessments are currently inadequate. The challenges we experienced in obtaining assessment data suggest that for some provinces and institutions data collection on PLAR is not a priority. This is consistent with an observation made in *Mapping the Field: A Framework for Measuring, Monitoring and Reporting on Adult Learning in Canada*: "there is not a lot of comprehensive and reliable information available to track participation in adult learning in Canada, and what there is does not paint a very positive picture" (p. 50).

Universities appear to be the least engaged in PLAR. Although far fewer universities than colleges were investigated in this study, CIRL contacted all the universities that have had PLAR policies for some time and were considered the most likely to collect data.

The wide variation in levels of assessment across colleges also raises questions about the factors that motivate colleges to provide PLAR services.

Anecdotally, Canadian postsecondary institutions appear to be more engaged in PLAR than postsecondary institutions in the other 21 countries involved in the current OECD study with the possible exceptions of Australia where all registered training organizations must provide PLAR and France where all institutions including universities must provide PLAR, and entire degrees can be obtained through PLAR.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All public colleges, universities, and university-colleges should examine their manual and electronic information systems to ensure that procedures are in place to systematically collect data on PLAR assessments. Basic data should include the number of PLAR candidates, the number of assessments conducted, the number of assessments that were successful, program areas in which the assessments were conducted, and the assessment methods used (e.g., written examinations, oral examinations, performance assessments, product assessments). Statistics on institutional PLAR assessments should be reported in the institutions' annual reports.

All provincial and territorial ministries/departments/councils responsible for post-secondary education and all quality assurance agencies to which post-secondary institutions are accountable should require institutions to report to them annually on their PLAR assessment activities. These reports should be made available to the public.

A consultation with institutions with high PLAR assessment levels should be convened in order share and document practices that have contributed to their achievement. Quality assurance in PLAR should be an integral part of these discussions.

The lack of PLAR at universities continues to be detrimental to adult learners. A consultation with university representatives at the most senior level should be convened by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), together with the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), in order to explore strategies to increase delivery of PLAR services. PLAR developments in the educational systems of other countries should be part of these discussions.

The issues and challenges related to the systematic collection of PLAR data should be incorporated into phase two of the current CCL-supported initiative, *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Canada*, led by the PLA Centre in Halifax.

CONTACTS: PLAR ACTIVITY LEVELS

Alberta

Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfers
Athabasca University
Bow Valley College
Grande Prairie College
Grant MacEwan College
Lakeland College
Lethbridge College
Medicine Hat College
Mount Royal College
Northern Alberta Institute of Technology
Northern Lakes College
Olds College
Red Deer College
Southern Alberta Institute of Technology

British Columbia

Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development
Royal Roads University
Thompson Rivers University

Manitoba

Brandon University
Council on Post-Secondary Education
Red River College
University of Manitoba
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg Technical College

New Brunswick

New Brunswick Community College
University of Moncton
University of New Brunswick

Newfoundland and Labrador

College of the North Atlantic

Nova Scotia

Cape Breton University
Dalhousie University
Nova Scotia Community College
St. Mary's University

Nunavut

Nunavut Arctic College

Ontario

Ministry of Education

Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities

Humber College

Niagara College

University of Toronto

Prince Edward Island

Holland College

University of Prince Edward Island

Quebec

Ministry of Education, Recreation and Sport

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology

Yukon Territory

Yukon College

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