

PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

A Discussion Paper

Produced for the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer by Lloyd Morin

"We need greater capacity to assess prior learning, accessible to all learners as well as all institutions in the province." This conclusion appears in the recently released *Human Resource Development Project Report* which resulted from two years of discussion with more than 3,000 British Columbians, and which was endorsed by a steering committee comprising a broad range of stakeholders.

Increasing numbers of adults are deciding that they need new skills and knowledge and often higher diplomas or other credentials if they are to continue to be employed. They believe, however, that through their work experience and other informal study they have acquired considerable learning that is directly relevant to that which they would encounter in some courses at university, college, or institute. They do not wish to enter the system at the same level as do the relatively inexperienced 18-year-olds. Furthermore, they often feel the pressure of constrained time and money and are eager to use their available resources for additional learning in the most productive way possible.

One sector in which the need for education and training of a mature workforce is evident is in the wide range of social services. A recently completed Commission Report submitted to the Ministry of Social Services urged that provision be made for assessment of competencies of personnel in the workforce as a basis for their entry into training and credentialing. With the expansion of community-based services, the need

for competent care-givers has outgrown the available supply. As a result, there is a need to enhance the career potential within this sector, to reduce attrition and to facilitate the entry of mature persons into the field, both at entry and more advanced levels.

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The business sector is another one in which substantial learning occurs in the workplace and through informal seminars and reading, for example. Some business program administrators have made provision for experienced students to receive credit for their learning and to

complete diploma requirements in reduced time.

Many educators are emphasizing the importance of developing greater autonomy in learners and of encouraging learning in other than the traditional, formal structures. It follows that learning acquired in these ways should be acknowledged in determining appropriate points of re-entry into formal education and in the awarding of credentials which provide access to employment or advancement.

DEFINITION

Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) does not produce 'credits for experience'. Its purpose is to award credit for learning that has been demonstrated, by some valid means, to be equivalent to that which would normally be acquired through formal study at the post-secondary level.

PLA is defined as the assessment of knowledge and skills

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acquired through life experiences, work and study unassociated with formal education, and the relating of that prior learning to educational program objectives and to course/program credits.

Advocates of PLA identify a range of potential benefits. The service is intended to encourage adult learners to pursue further training or education or to seek advancement within their careers by recognizing their prior learning and reducing the time required to earn a credential or other award. It is most effective, therefore, when it occurs within the context of educational or career planning. In some instances, PLA is also seen as having potential for increasing institutional efficiency by eliminating the need for some costly repeats in the training program. Some educators have reported that development and implementation of PLA services has provided the indirect benefit of giving them new skills which have enhanced curriculum and instruction within the formal education context.

METHODS

Prior learning is commonly assessed through some process of examination, through assessment of courses taken outside the formal system, or through assessment of a 'portfolio'.

Challenge exams are tests or projects applied to a specific course. Usually they are unique to an institution or department and are intended to demonstrate learning equivalent to a particular course listed in the college syllabus. While they enable many students to progress without unnecessary repetition of

course material, course challenge procedures have limited application to much prior learning, especially that which is not readily prescribed within a particular course outline; are not well suited to the evaluation of some forms of learning; and are not well suited to individuals who suffer exam anxiety.

Standardized tests also have some application, primarily as a means of demonstrating equivalent general education to that required within some college programs. Some colleges use, for example, the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) or the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support Program (DANTES).

Another PLA process involves **evaluating courses** offered in the private sector or in military training, to determine to what extent these can be **matched** with public sector courses and to what extent their instruction and evaluation processes have sufficient rigor to provide assurance that a successful student has learned and thus should have credit transferred to the public institution program. In the United States, the Program for Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI) evaluates courses, recommends a specific number of credits per course, maintains a registry of agencies and courses reviewed and monitors such activity. In British Columbia, many colleges grant credit in their business administration programs for courses taken within the chartered accountants' licensing program, for example. Because of the time involved in assessing the transferability of a course, application of this approach requires that there are a number of students who would be interested in such transfer.

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Portfolio assessment is the most flexible instrument for PLA, being applicable both to a very wide range of prior learning and to a large number of college courses. The portfolio is a collection of materials documenting experience and analyzing and organizing skills and knowledge acquired. The portfolio accomplishes three tasks: it enables the faculty experts to assess past learning and to translate it into credit; it helps the adult student discover how past learning fits with a post-secondary program; and it facilitates career planning. Sophisticated procedures for portfolio assessment have been developed.

The task of the assessors is to determine precisely the learning outcomes resulting from experience and then to match these with intended learning outcomes of a course or cluster of courses offered within the institution's program. The content may not be identical but the learning outcomes are assessed as equivalent. The tasks of clarifying the intended learning outcomes of institutional programs in terminology which enables matching with the portfolio, and the task of translating experience into learning in a reasonably explicit manner are significant challenges to the professional assessors, as well as the students.

'Portfolio development courses' are often offered to assist clients. Sometimes these courses themselves are awarded college credit because of the skills developed, for example, self-evaluation, analysis, synthesis, and career planning.

The courses are intended to help participants identify their learning experiences, match their learning to college courses or programs, articulate and document their learning in a portfolio, and request credit for specific courses.

Portfolio courses in the workplace, or in conjunction with a community group, often help overcome some psychological and time barriers for participants, and build effective bridges between the institution and its community.

Some institutions do not offer a full college credit course on portfolio development but do offer shorter orientation seminars and other assistance in developing a portfolio for assessment.

PLA IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS

PLA is applied in other provinces, states and countries and is under active consideration in even more. Within Canada, Quebec has the greatest experience, resulting from the Study

Commission on Adult Education in 1982. In 1984, the Quebec government gave priority to the implementation of Prior Learning Assessment in secondary schools, colleges and universities. In 1987, the provincial and federal governments combined committed \$4 million over three years for PLA development. Approximately 44 colleges have undertaken PLA projects. There has been considerable development of

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guidelines, manuals and assessment tools which have been broadly shared among institutions.

In April 1992, the Ontario Council of Regents distributed a discussion paper prepared by the Prior Learning Assessment Advisory Committee. This was followed in July 1992 by their final report to the Minister, in which they recommended that Ontario colleges provide challenge exams and portfolio assessments as the first phases of PLA development. Implementation is now under way at both system and institutional levels.

The final report of the Steering Committee on Prosperity, *Inventing Our Future: An Action Plan for Canada's Prosperity*, includes the following:

Action 27: Take steps to introduce competence-based systems to cover all levels of education and training.

... Universities and colleges to develop a common set of competency expectations for admission as well as graduation, ensure that credits are transferable from one institution to another and accept credits for prior learning wherever it occurred.

Many American states have substantial experience in PLA services. Colleges, institutes and universities in such diverse states as New York, Vermont, Washington, Oregon and others have active programs. The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is the major North American resource, providing publications, conferences and consultation. The Vermont approach is an example of a system-wide program. A 1985 report states:

The Vermont State Colleges Office of External Programs (OEP) — a service arm of the five state colleges — has for almost a decade administered one of the largest and

most successful assessment programs. It is a state-wide, non-institutionally based program, awarding Vermont State Colleges transfer credit to hundreds of students each year. Since its inception in 1976, this program has assisted over 2,000 Vermont adults in beginning or returning to college.

The OEP receives completed portfolios, assembles teams of faculty and career practitioners who assess the portfolios and make recommendations for credit awards. The OEP contacts the college of the student's choice. "With few exceptions every college and university in the state accepts applicable credits from students. This was not always so ..." The demonstrated thoroughness and validity of the process have earned the acceptance now enjoyed.

Great Britain, France, Sweden, and Holland also provide recognition of prior learning within their post-secondary systems. New Zealand has scheduled a major conference for April, 1993.

Should there prove to be interest in British Columbia in furthering the PLA services available, the experiences and resources of those in other jurisdictions are available.

BRITISH COLUMBIA EXPERIENCE

Prior Learning Assessment has not been a significant component in British Columbia post-secondary institutions but there have been some provisions and the interest appears to be growing in some sectors and institutions. In 1992/93, 30 per cent of all full-time and part-time students registered in non-vocational programs in British Columbia colleges and institutes were 30 years of age or older. Changing economic times will probably produce an

increase in the proportions in this age group who are seeking further opportunities.

Challenge exams are offered by most institutions but there has been reluctance to accept challenge credit awarded by a sister institution within the system.

The Open Learning Agency (OLA) has the mandate to provide a 'credit bank' and to award credit for learning acquired in a variety of settings. A small number of students have registered in a portfolio development course available in a distance education format. Other requests for assessment have been received and acted upon, calling upon professional faculty to serve as assessors. OLA officials favour further consideration of the academic and support services required and a re-appraisal of the most effective means to achieve the comprehensive objectives of PLA.

Proposals for development which include PLA components have been received by the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer in the social services and adult education sectors.

There appears to be sufficient expression of interest within the educational, economic, and human service communities to raise the issue of PLA on the human resource agenda in British Columbia, especially within public post-secondary institutions. Perhaps the first discussion point is, *What is the interest, urgency, and feasibility of an enhanced PLA service in British Columbia?* Are there particular sectors or program areas where it would be most applicable? The discussion should be encouraged throughout the educational sector and the broader community.

ACADEMIC ISSUES

A number of issues should be discussed thoroughly within the post-secondary community in British Columbia.

1. Maintenance of Quality and Credibility

The primary concern of any educational institution is that, in the process of increasing accessibility and equity, the quality of the program and the credibility of the institutional credential should not be compromised. Those who have developed the most successful and respected PLA programs have established guidelines and standards and developed procedures for assessment which are intended to

ensure that only learning that is legitimate in a post-secondary context is credited. The education/training of professional faculty in the processes of assessment is an essential component of a valid and credible PLA service.

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ISSUE 1: *By what means can the validity and credibility of a PLA service be established and maintained within the British Columbia post-secondary sector?*

2. Admission Policy

Who should be encouraged to use PLA? The intent is that those who may have faced barriers in the past should have an opportunity for access but those who are admitted must have a reasonable chance of success, that is, of being awarded credit.

Among the alternatives are the following:

- access to PLA following completion of a number of post-secondary credits, that is,

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having demonstrated capacity for post-secondary work

- access to PLA before enrolment in any formal institutional courses, that is, open opportunity to demonstrate learning whenever achieved
- access to PLA upon completion of a three-hour orientation seminar
- access to PLA via access to a full (three credit?) portfolio development course.

Access may also be limited to mature adults, or may be open and accessible regardless of age.

Does successful assessment of prior learning result in the student achieving status as a continuing student, or does it have nothing to do with admission to the formal program of a particular institution?

ISSUE 2: *How should access to PLA be determined? How should successful assessment of prior learning impact admission to the formal programs of an institution?*

3. Transfer of Credit

If PLA credit is awarded by an institution within the public post-secondary sector in British Columbia, should another institution accept this credit for transfer on the same basis as it accepts transfer of credits earned through the formal process?

Some suggest that the evaluation procedures for PLA are at least as rigorous, if not more so, than those applied in many formal instructional situations and that credit earned in this way should be treated as equal in all aspects, including transfer. Others contend the formal experience adds value beyond that reflected in the assessment and only credit earned in the formal setting should be transferable.

ISSUE 3: *Under what conditions should transfer of credit earned through PLA occur?*

4. Proportion of Credential

What limitations should be placed on the number of credits for a credential which can be earned through PLA? Some institutions require that a percentage of credits required for a diploma/degree be taken in formal courses at the institution. Others argue that such a policy is more institution-focussed than learner-focussed and that if the method of assessment is valid and reliable, there should be no limit placed on the number of PLA credits which can be applied.

Ontario has recommended that a learner should normally be required to earn a minimum of 25 per cent of credits toward a credential through courses undertaken within the provincial post-secondary system.

ISSUE 4: *Should there be a limit on the proportion of an award or credential which can be earned through PLA? How would that limit be determined? Could the percentage of required formal study be taken anywhere within the public post-secondary system in British Columbia or only within one institution?*

ADMINISTRATIVE ISSUES

What organizational and administrative provisions are appropriate for PLA at the province-wide system level and at each individual institution?

Because of concerns regarding equity and fairness and consistency of response from each component of the British Columbia public

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system, some standardization in policy and practice would be desirable.

Among the alternative organizational models which might be considered are the following:

1. One agency or institution within the system could be designated to provide the PLA option for anyone in the province who seeks a credential for prior learning experience (although it is assumed that any institution would continue its own policy of challenge exams). Because OLA has been given the mandate for a 'credit bank' in British Columbia, it might be the designated agency for a more comprehensive PLA service. The mandate and supporting funding would allow for the contracting with professionals from other institutions and from the community to serve as assessors of portfolios, since the range of expertise within one agency could not be expected to represent the full breadth of sector, discipline and program interests. As well, clear acceptance by other institutions of the process is necessary so that assessments can apply to credentials beyond those offered by one institution or agency.

A sense of ownership of the service and accountability for its delivery to a region or sector may be difficult to instill in other institutions when the mandate is seen to be given to one institution within the system.

2. Another alternative is to provide the PLA service through an agency at the system level. Potential students seeking PLA could approach the agency directly and have learning assessed — similar to the Vermont model — and then the student and the central agency could seek to gain appropriate credit for successful clients at the appropriate institution.

Some effective means of involving institutional personnel in the system-wide service would seem to be desirable if there is to be any

success in involving the institutions in awarding credit.

3. Another approach would be to develop the capacity within each of the post-secondary institutions to provide PLA in those program areas included in their calendars. The time and investment required to prepare all institutions for a fully comprehensive service might be greater than could be committed at the outset. Spreading the service broadly without adequate central support could result in uneven progress and a service very vulnerable to other pressures. Brent Sargent, Director of the Office of External Programs, Vermont, notes:

"Individual schools often lack the resources, energy, and commitment to sustain and evolve a first class PLA program over the long haul. People burn out, recruitment burns out, marketing burns out, creativity burns out, money dries up, administrative restructuring erodes the support base for the program ..."

4. A combination of system and institutional responsibility may be the desired alternative. At least at the outset, there may well be a need for a system-wide resource and co-ordinating agency to facilitate the services available through institutions and to assist in increasing public awareness of the service. (The recent decision to move toward a common application service is one example of system co-operation to produce a system resource.) An existing province-wide agency which is representative of all institutions, or a new commission or sub-committee which is representative of institutional and external stakeholders, could be charged with any of a range of co-ordination, development, staff training or assessment monitoring roles. As the service matures, as more institutions become self-sufficient, as the service becomes accepted as a continuing commitment and as effective inter-institutional transfers and co-ordination occur, the role of a central agency could decline.

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ISSUE: Among those who support the development of PLA in British Columbia, which, if any, of the four optional organizational structures is favoured? Are there other options to be considered?

FUNDING

A related organizational issue is that of funding for PLA. What should be the proportion of resources provided by the client and by the province?

In those instances where a portfolio development course is offered within the formal course offerings of an institution, tuition fees are typically assessed as for any course of equivalent duration. Should a student be charged the full costs of assessment of a portfolio? Should she or he be charged the same proportion as is normal for student tuition for other educational services? The Ontario committee recommended that

A learner participating in PLA should bear the same portion of the operating costs incurred through PLA as a part-time learner enrolled in provincially-funded college courses. That is, given current financing arrangements for part-time vocational courses, PLA participants should bear approximately 25 per cent of the operating costs.

Costs are also incurred in the development stages. The governments of Quebec and Canada invested \$4 million over three years in the establishment of the Quebec program.

Economies should be realized at this stage because of the development work that has occurred elsewhere and the advice available

through CAEL and others but there will be costs for resource persons, materials, pilot projects, and committee expenses, to name some examples.

ISSUE: How should the responsibility for funding be distributed for PLA operations and for PLA development?

NEXT STEPS

The issues briefly described in this discussion paper deserve extensive discussion within British Columbia post-secondary education and in the broader community.

On April 23, the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer will sponsor an invitational event to bring together representatives who can share the results of their discussions and advise regarding a proposed model for British Columbia. Further discussion of a draft proposal should then occur and a new policy position be prepared for the Minister of Advanced Education, hopefully in the fall of 1993.

Individuals who have a particular interest in this topic, or who have access to expertise or relevant information, are invited to contact the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer.

Invitations to designate participants for the April 23 workshop will be extended to college and institute CEOs and to academic vice-presidents of the universities. Anyone wishing to attend should contact one of those offices. The available accommodation for the workshop limits participants to 80.