

Recognizing Prior Learning

You live. You learn. It all counts.

Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) in Saskatchewan

Provincial Policy Framework

“All learning is valued because it contributes to the social and economic well being and growth of individuals and our communities.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) is part of the Government of Saskatchewan's mandate to ensure an effective and efficient education and training system in Saskatchewan. For employers, RPL can mean cost savings by identifying a greater number of candidates from within their current workforce who have the skills to fill vacant and/or new positions. By enabling people to apply what they already know and can do, RPL can reduce barriers and create opportunities that will lead to greater social and economic prosperity for the residents of our province.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board (SLFDB) championed the advancement of RPL by building on the commitment of its reference group, the Forum for Racialized Canadians, to create fair and equitable learning and foreign credential recognition processes.

The Minister of Learning formally introduced the *Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) in Saskatchewan Provincial Policy Framework* in the Legislative Assembly in June 2004, and charged provincial stakeholders with coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the Framework's goals through the Recognizing Prior Learning Coordinating Group.

The Framework continues to inform the strategic planning of Saskatchewan stakeholders as we work together to improve the learning recognition system in our province. The Government of Saskatchewan acknowledges the contributions of many individuals and organizations, and the leadership of the Saskatchewan Labour Force Development Board, in completing this important work.

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INTRODUCTION

While there are successful examples of learning recognition processes and practices in place across the country and in Saskatchewan, a major learning recognition gap continues to exist.

In September 2001 the Conference Board of Canada estimated that eliminating the learning recognition gap in Canada would enable Canadians to earn an additional \$4.1 billion to \$5.9 billion in income annually.¹ Without appropriate recognition of their skills and abilities, many highly skilled people remain unemployed or underemployed. As a result, they are inclined to move elsewhere (the “brain drain”) to increase their earning power and career prospects.

The Conference Board’s 2001 survey identified those individuals who have the most serious problems in getting their learning recognized and rewarded: immigrants, people with work-based training, and people who have transferred between educational institutions or provinces in licensed professions.

Closing the learning recognition gap is even more critical given the demographic and labour market trend projections in Canada:

- The ratio of retired to working and retired population to school age population is declining. Young Canadians entering the workforce will not fully replace number of retiring workers. By 2025, 20% of the Canadian population will be over the age of 65. By way of comparison, only 10% of the Canadian population was over the age of 65 in 1980. (Conference Board of Canada and Statistics Canada as cited by Bloom.²)
- A lack of skilled workers restricts business growth in many regions of Canada. Experiential learning and prior learning in general are undervalued by employers. Employers do not yet see recognition as a major solution to the skills shortage.³
- Employers will need to look beyond the traditional labour supply and find ways to attract and retain workers with a variety of backgrounds and experiences, including First Nations, Métis, immigrants and older workers.
- The workplace is changing, requiring workers to develop and apply new skill sets, often acquiring these skills on-the-job. Continuous learning is a growing expectation in the workplace, and Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) is a means to support, encourage and reward that learning. Learning recognition enhances the performance of businesses, as it

¹ Brain Gain: The Economic Benefits of Recognized Learning and Learning Credentials in Canada. The Conference Board of Canada: 2001. P.1.

² Bloom, M. (2007, November 26). Broadening the Skilled Workforce: Recognizing Learning, Competencies and Credentials. CAPLA Fall Focus Workshop. Retrieved June 2, 2008, from http://www.capla.ca/2007_fall_focus/pre/Michael_Bloom.pdf

³ Bloom, M. (2007, November 26). Broadening the Skilled Workforce: Recognizing Learning, Competencies and Credentials. CAPLA Fall Focus Workshop. Retrieved June 2, 2008, from http://www.capla.ca/2007_fall_focus/pre/Michael_Bloom.pdf

encourages staff to improve their own skills and abilities by building on what they know — leading to innovation and improved productivity. Workers also seek to have transferable and portable skills, and RPL provides a means to do that.

- The demands placed by learners on the education system are changing and have resulted in the development of more learner-focused institutions that provide flexible and responsive programming. The growing trend of part-time and non-sequential learners, including learners enrolling in part-time programs while maintaining full-time employment, has created a need for RPL services that serve as a bridge to the recognition of workplace learning. Thus, finding ways to value and recognize prior learning is becoming increasingly important for educational institutions that promote and support a life long learning culture.
- RPL can also serve as a means to achieve a representative workforce, as it requires a competency-based approach to assessing an individual's skills and attributes and therefore is a more inclusive assessment than accepting only formal credentials. In this way, the learnings acquired through different cultural practices or traditions can be assessed and documented, then applied against the requirements of a job or educational program. An example would be the benefits of being able to assess and recognize an individual's proficiency in Cree as equivalent to a university language credit requirement.

A national call for improved RPL is clearly articulated in the “Halifax Declaration for the Recognition of Prior Learning”, a document produced as a legacy from the Recognizing Learning National Conference in October 2001 and in the Canadian Council on Learning Report “Achieving our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Canada” October 2008. The importance of RPL is referenced in key federal and provincial strategic policy, including the federal *Innovation Strategy: Knowledge Matters* paper and the provincial post-secondary sector strategic plan. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), in its 2007 *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada*, recommends that degree granting institutions publish policies with respect to prior learning assessment and credit transfer. The CMEC further recommends that admission processes include prior learning assessment and credit transfer, and that learners be made aware of such processes.

Stakeholders have identified a number of barriers that will need to be addressed if a system of RPL services is to be successfully implemented, including:

- A concern that RPL may lead to a decline in quality or standards in a workplace or educational institution;
- Issues related to the resources required to support RPL services, including the implications of organizational change and adoption of new ways of recruiting and retaining workers;
- Existing funding models and capacity limitations at educational institutions that may hamper the development/implementation of RPL services;
- Costs of RPL to individuals, which may deter low-income individuals from seeking employment or further training;
- The timeliness of the assessment process. - some people express concern that it takes longer for the assessment than to re-take the training program;

- A lack of awareness, especially among small and medium businesses, about RPL services and benefits;
- A perception that RPL could lead to an increase in staff turnover due to enhancing skills portability;
- A perceived lack of coordination in the delivery of RPL services;
- Difficulty incorporating RPL processes into established qualification recognition practices; and,
- Concern around a lack of national RPL standards and portability of credentials or recognition.

This Framework is intended to serve as a mechanism to address learning recognition challenges and provide a plan to make progress on closing the learning recognition gap in Saskatchewan.

VISION STATEMENT

Saskatchewan's education and training sector, professional and trade associations, regulatory bodies, government, industry (business and labour), and communities work collaboratively to promote and support the recognition of *all* learning, while maintaining standards, contributing to a skilled, flexible, and responsive labour force, making Saskatchewan an ideal place to live and work. All learning is valued because it contributes to the social and economic well-being and growth of individuals and our communities.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In 1997, guiding principles were put forth by the Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) as a framework for the development of an effective national system for the recognition of prior learning. The CLFDB set of guiding principles have been adapted and modified in the guiding principles listed below:

Accessibility: RPL must be accessible and recognize the unique needs and abilities of individuals. The delivery of RPL services must also be inclusive and respectful of the diversity of Saskatchewan's population. While the process is voluntary, all learners will be encouraged and supported in accessing RPL services, regardless of their place of residence, socio-economic circumstances, culture, or demographic characteristics.

Transparency: The RPL process and costs must be transparent. Criteria and standards of assessment, as well as RPL processes and outcomes, must be well-understood.

Effective Service: All personnel involved in RPL should have appropriate skills and knowledge, relevant to their roles and responsibilities in the RPL process.

High-Quality Assessment: Assessors are content specialists, and the assessment tools are valid and reliable. Learners will receive recognition and credit for demonstrated knowledge, skills and attributes, and not solely for experience.

Relevance: The RPL outcomes will be recognized by individuals, industry, education/training providers, professional regulatory bodies/associations, and credit awarded will be transferable between different organizations.

Flexibility: Different assessment mechanisms and procedures are necessary to accommodate the needs of different individuals (for example, academic credentials, employment, career advancement, lifelong learning).

Efficiency: RPL processes are efficient and timely by making the best use of resources.

Right of Appeal: If a person is not satisfied with the RPL assessment, an appeal process must be available.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Recognizing Prior Learning Working Group (the RCG) established the following goals and objectives to guide their decision making for learning recognition actions in Saskatchewan.

GOAL A: DEMONSTRATE LEADERSHIP
OBJECTIVES
A.1 COORDINATE PLANNING AND SUPPORT FOR RPL SERVICES
A.2 CONDUCT AND SHARE RESEARCH ON BEST PRACTICES AND THE BENEFITS OF RPL
A.3 INCREASE AWARENESS OF RPL SERVICES AND BENEFITS
GOAL B: PROMOTE AND SUPPORT THE DELIVERY OF HIGH-QUALITY, ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT RPL SERVICES IN SASKATCHEWAN
OBJECTIVES
B.1 INTEGRATE RPL PROCESSES INTO EMPLOYERS' HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT PRACTICES
B.2 ADOPT RPL AS A SERVICE PROVIDED BY SASKATCHEWAN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS/TRAINING PROVIDERS
B.3 USE RPL AS A MEANS TO SUPPORT LABOUR MOBILITY FROM OTHER PROVINCES AND COUNTRIES
B.4 INCORPORATE RPL INTO THE CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES PROVIDED BY COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES/AGENCIES
GOAL C: DEMONSTRATE ACCOUNTABILITY
OBJECTIVES
C.1 EVALUATE RPL SERVICES AND OUTCOMES

ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

The Framework was developed based on the input of many individuals, groups and organizations, whose participation reflected a variety of perspectives. A collaborative approach to the management and delivery of RPL services is required to achieve the vision and successfully implement the Framework. The partnership of stakeholders includes: individuals, education and training providers, industry, community-based organizations, professional and trade associations, regulatory bodies, and government.

Each stakeholder has a role to play, supporting actions and initiatives that aim to achieve a series of goals and objectives. The implementation of this Framework respects the individual mandates and/or terms of reference of stakeholders.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The *Terms of Reference*, developed by the RCG, is reviewed and updated annually to articulate what is to be achieved by the RCG stakeholders, how it will be achieved, and who will take part.

WHAT IS THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING?

Learning does not always take place in the classroom: it also happens on the job, at home, and in the community — through hands-on experience, volunteer work, military service, independent study, even leisure activities and travel. Often the skills acquired through these experiences can be applied to the skills or knowledge required in the workplace, at school, or elsewhere.

The recognition of prior learning is a reliable process that takes into consideration ALL learning. It is a practical process that looks at what a person knows and can do, and may lead to recognition for skills and knowledge — regardless of how they were acquired. It is a way to address the challenges of skills identification and assessment in a knowledge-based economy where continuous learning must be encouraged and supported.

DEFINITIONS

Recognizing Prior Learning

The term “Recognizing Prior Learning” (RPL) is a broad “umbrella concept” that includes recognition practices undertaken in the fields of qualification recognition (QR), credit transfer (CT), and prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Although terminology in the RPL field may vary according to a range of contexts and perspectives, the development of a general understanding of key terms is essential to facilitating communication among diverse stakeholder groups in the province. The following section outlines several working definitions of important concepts in the field of RPL and it is anticipated that these definitions will continue to evolve.

Prior Learning is comprised of three commonly understood categories including:

- **Formal Learning** – Learning which is structured and intentional, is achieved through credit-based programs/courses at accredited educational institutions (e.g., certificate, diploma or degree) or recognized by a regulatory body/professional organization for certification.
- **Non-Formal Learning** – Learning which is intentional, gained through participation in organized workplace-based training, non-credit courses and workshops but does not receive formal credit (e.g. certificates of participation or attendance).
- **Informal Learning** – Learning which is the incidental learning resulting from life experience, workplace-based tasks, volunteer activities, self-directed learning, hobbies, family responsibilities, etc.

Qualification Recognition (QR) practices involve the fair, credible, and standardized assessment of credentials to assist employers, educational institutions and professional regulatory bodies in making informed decisions. QR includes, but is not limited to international credential recognition. The process of QR involves the assessment of credentials obtained at a recognized institution, to determine the degree of comparability with the level of education and standards of an educational institution or professional regulatory body/association. QR processes can lead to, but does not necessarily include, the determination of equivalency of subject matter.

Credit Transfer (CT) is defined as the process by which credit is granted towards a credential by one institution for programs or courses previously completed at a recognized institution. The granting of credit is based on the evaluation of equivalencies of subject matter.

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a systematic process that assesses and recognizes an individual's knowledge and skills regardless of where or how the learning was acquired. A PLAR process generally involves the assessment of experiential learning for a variety of purposes including: career development planning, promotion in the workplace, and obtaining educational credit or occupational certification with reference to the standards of the credential granting body. Experiential learning can be non-formal (e.g., workplace-based training, non-credit courses) or informal (e.g., learning resulting from life experience, workplace-based tasks, hobbies, volunteer activities, family responsibilities, etc.).

The PLAR process includes four key steps:

1. **Identification:** An individual identifies what he/she knows and can do; often an advisor will guide the individual through this process.
2. **Documentation:** Evidence is gathered that demonstrates the individual's knowledge and skills. There are many forms of evidence, such as letters of validation, work samples, course outlines, performance appraisals, and portfolios. Individuals can also demonstrate their skills and abilities through role plays, interviews, completing an assignment, taking a test, preparing a case study, etc.
3. **Assessment:** A trained and experienced Assessor will review evidence and determine if it meets the established requirements for recognition.

4. **Recognition:** Recognition is awarded, and can take various forms, such as educational credit(s), occupational certification, employment, workplace advancement, or self-recognition.

* In addition to the four steps listed above, an ideal PLAR process will also provide candidates with adequate pre and post-assessment guidance, as required.

WHY IS RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IMPORTANT?

RPL has a variety of benefits for individuals, workers, education and training providers, employers and industry, and professional regulatory bodies and professional associations.

RPL can help individuals/workers:

- Identify personal strengths and abilities and set career and life goals;
- Demonstrate skills and knowledge to do a specific job;
- Work toward achieving academic credits or occupational certification;
- Improve their job marketability and mobility; and,
- Clarify employment goals.

For example:

Cindy needed to obtain occupational certification in her field of Early Childhood Education to keep her job due to regulatory changes. Since she had several years of work-based experience in the field, she decided to challenge the practicum for PLAR credit at SIAST. Cindy demonstrated that she had acquired knowledge and skills from her work experience that matched the practicum's learning outcomes by providing work samples and participating in an interview. She received a PLAR credit for the practicum and is currently taking other courses on a part-time basis to complete her credential. Cindy was very satisfied with the process because she didn't need to duplicate her learning and it saved her time and money. She's also pleased because she can continue to work in her field while attending school.

RPL can help education/training providers:

- Increase recruitment and retention of adult learners;
- Make better use of resources;
- Broaden the range of assessment tools for learners;
- Provide more lifelong learning and career development opportunities;
- Provide flexible and responsive training and education programs that meet the needs of learners and industry; and,
- Forge strategic partnerships with the industry and community.

For example:

Diane acquired most of her welding knowledge and skills on the job, but didn't have her journey person's certificate that would make her more employable and increase her earning power. The company she worked for went through a major reorganization and her welding crew was "downsized".

The company's Employee Relations manager met with Canada-Saskatchewan Career and Employment Services to discuss employment/training options for the welders who would soon be out of work. They decided to find out how many of the welders wanted to work towards a journeyperson's certificate and discovered that the majority of them wanted this certificate. These welders participated in a prior learning assessment and recognition process provided by the Apprenticeship and Trade Certification Commission (ATCC) to identify the knowledge/skills they already had and to determine individualized knowledge/skills gaps. After participating in the ATCC evaluation process, the welders were awarded credits and exemptions towards applying for their examinations. SIAST provided the "top-up" training and over half of the trainees were successful in obtaining their certificate through the ATCC. ATCC and SIAST enhanced their reputations for providing effective "made-in-Saskatchewan" solutions to industry training needs by incorporating RPL through working collaboratively to meet these individuals' training needs in a very efficient and timely way. Diane and her colleagues easily found work with their new journeyperson certificate.

RPL can help industry:

- Maximize the skills and knowledge of everyone in the workplace;
- Gain a better understanding of employees' skills, knowledge and training needs;
- Recruit, develop and retain a skilled workforce;
- Promote efficiency by eliminating unnecessary repetitive training;
- Define, document and verify employees' skill/knowledge sets through a systematic process;
- Increase morale and productivity through the recognition of employees' skills/knowledge; and,
- Create job descriptions and expectations to help in hiring and training processes.

For example:

A Band Council posted an employment opportunity for a deputy returning officer. Darren believed that he had acquired the necessary knowledge and skills from his combined work experience as a firefighter, harvester of wild rice and wood-cutter and so he applied for the position. In the interview, Darren demonstrated how his work-based knowledge and skills were transferable by providing copies of the forms, policies/procedures he followed in the different workplaces, explaining how he delegated authority and showing that he had acquired math skills on-the-job as well. Although Darren did not have the formal educational requirements for the position, the Band Council recognized the transferability of Darren's prior learning and he was hired. As a result of this experience, the Band Council has incorporated competency-based interviewing into their hiring process and values the integration of a RPL process in their overall recruitment and retention strategy.

For example:

Ron owns a company in the oil and gas sector with many locations across Canada. Due to growing competition for a smaller pool of skilled workers and the need to begin succession planning in the face of anticipated retirements, Ron instructed his HR manager to explore how the recognition of prior learning could be a potential solution. So, the HR manager

worked with staff representatives and senior management to design and implement a human resources management strategy that incorporated RPL.

All employees had the opportunity to participate in a prior learning assessment to identify knowledge/skills they already had. The assessments were facilitated by industry experts and documented electronically. An analysis of the knowledge/skills set inventory was closely linked to individualized training plans. This allowed the company to plan how they would develop their employees both “horizontally” and “vertically” to tie in with succession planning (especially at the senior management levels) and position the company to secure new contracts.

The HR manager also engaged in discussions with the local regional college and universities to negotiate how the employees could obtain academic credit for prior learning gained through work experience and industry-based training. The company’s goal is to create mechanisms and flexible learning pathways for employees to obtain desired credentials at the college or university. Ron recognizes that his staff have valuable experience and are interested in moving up, which is a tremendous asset to the company, as many of his existing senior managers are close to retirement. Ron is keen on facilitating an arrangement whereby the company’s in-house administration and management training is recognized as equivalent to components of a high-quality business administration program in order to encourage existing staff to pursue promotion and advancement. From Ron’s perspective, the return on the investment required to develop and implement a RPL process is very high due to the competitive edge it gives him as an employer who is successful in recruiting and retaining the best talent in the field.

RPL can help professional regulatory bodies/associations:

- Identify competencies required to practice in the profession, and benchmark those competencies against established standards elsewhere (for example, other jurisdictions);
- Create competency-based assessment tools and practices;
- Create fair and equitable access for all prospective applicants; and,
- Meet the needs of their members and prospective members by supporting an efficient qualification recognition process and maintaining high-quality standards for entry to practice in their profession.

For example:

Kim was trained and worked as an electrical technologist in Southeast Asia for many years and now lives in Saskatchewan as a landed immigrant. He contacted the Saskatchewan Applied Science Technologists and Technicians (SASTT) to find out what the provincial regulations were for practicing in the field. Although professional membership in SASTT is voluntary, it is highly recommended because its members are recognized across Canada and internationally (in seven other countries) since the competency standards upheld by SASTT are developed in accordance with the Canadian Technology Standards. Kim decided it was in his best interest to become a member of SASTT to enhance his employability prospects and so he submitted his official documents for evaluation.

SASTT’s Board of Examiners, in conjunction with a subject matter expert and international credential evaluator, reviewed his credentials and recommended that he receive credit for all

the competency standards except computer-assisted design (CAD). A letter was sent to Kim indicating the Board's decision with recommendations for further training and a detailed outline of the competency standard he needed to complete. However, Kim believed that he already possessed the necessary knowledge/skills for the CAD component through a combination of prior learning on the job and work-based training. He followed an appeal process, submitted evidence of his CAD skills and knowledge, and was successful in his RPL challenge. He is now a SASTT member.