

Sustainability and Efficiency of Prior Learning Assessment in British Columbia's Public Post-Secondary Education System

Background Paper



**BRITISH
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**CENTRE FOR CURRICULUM,
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Background Paper

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INTRODUCTION

This background paper on sustainability and efficiency of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in British Columbia is prepared by FuturEd under contract to the BC Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2).

This paper's objectives have been, through literature review and consultation, to:

- research existing PLA practices in BC using institutional reports, the PLA Annual Report and Ministry reports that deal with infrastructure, policies, procedures, funding, and faculty workload arrangements in the provision of PLA services to identify issues around sustainability and efficiency of PLA,
- research existing PLA practices in BC and elsewhere that are intended to make the process more efficient and sustainable on a provincial level including cooperative ventures at regional or wider levels,
- describe current flexible assessment practices that are barriers and enhancements to sustainability and efficiency of PLA services, and
- present options for attaining sustainability and efficiency of PLA services in public post-secondary education (PSE) in BC, with pros and cons of adoption; and make consensus-based recommendations.

To meet these objectives, FuturEd has undertaken the following four steps: document analysis specific to PLA in BC; literature review *vis-à-vis* sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC and beyond; consultation with informed individuals in BC; and preparation of this final report, including direct input from the Sustainability and Efficiency Subcommittee of the Provincial PLA Committee.

This discussion paper includes the following five elements:

1. The issues of sustainability and efficiency in PLA – importance in general, and status in Post-Secondary Education (PSE) in BC.
2. Barriers to sustainability and efficiency in PLA from both the literature and the field,
3. Methods of addressing the barriers from both the literature and the field.
4. Existing PLA and flexible assessment practices in BC that impact on sustainability and efficiency of PLA services.
5. Potential practices to improve sustainability and efficiency of PLA services within PSE in BC with pros and cons.

SUSTAINABILITY AND EFFICIENCY IN PLA

The importance of sustainability and efficiency of PLA services cannot be underestimated. As with all innovations, there is a tendency for momentum to falter after an initial call to action. The importance of PLA to PSE in BC and in Canada makes sustainability and efficiency worthy, even critical, goals.

The Importance of Sustainability, Efficiency and PLA

The goals of sustainability and efficiency in PLA are important to the integrity of the public PSE system, to lifelong learning, to effectively serving adult learners in higher education, and to best practice in flexible assessment.

Sustainability and efficiency, as goals, are consistent with public expectations of PSE as established by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) through consultation in 1998. In other words, that for learners and taxpayers, the public PSE system is expected to ensure quality, accountability, accessibility, mobility, and relevance and responsiveness (CMEC, 1998).

Sustainability and efficiency in PLA reinforce established principles of lifelong learning. For example, the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI) of the European Commission states (ELLI, 1996 - 1):

- All citizens should have access to learning.
- The learner is the customer and the customer's needs have first priority. ¹
- Guidance and support should be available to help the learner.
- All learning - formal and informal - can be validated in a way appropriate to the learner. ²
- Collaborative, positive support for the learner should accept no barriers.

Sustainability and efficiency in PLA contribute to achieving effectiveness in serving adult learners in PSE. The Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) states that institutions should (CAEL, 2000):

- conduct its outreach to adult learners by overcoming barriers in time, place, and tradition in order to create lifelong access to educational opportunities,
- address adult learners' life and career goals before or at the onset of enrolment in order to assess and align its capacities to help learners reach their goals,
- promote choice using an array of payment options for adult learners in order to expand equity and financial flexibility,

¹ According to the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI), just as a commercial organization will tailor its product, service or process to the needs of the customer and give priority to its design and production, so, in education and training, the delivering organization should take into account the needs of each individual learner as a priority in the design of the learning product, service or process. This marks a paradigm shift of emphasis from supply to demand, from the provider to the receiver.

² According to ELLI, everyone has the right not to be intimidated by validation systems. Equally, everyone has the right to have his/her own progress in learning tested by a competent validation body as he/she sees fit. Intelligent validation, that which is designed to be a helpful guide in the individual's progress to self-knowledge and self-development, can be a useful tool.

- define and assess the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor,
- assist adult learners using comprehensive academic and student support systems in order to enhance students' capacities to become self-directed, lifelong learners, and
- engage in strategic relationships, partnerships, and collaborations with employers and other organizations in order to develop and improve educational opportunities for adult learners.

Sustainability and efficiency in learning assessment are compatible with good practice in the assessment of foreign credentials as set out by the Alliance of Credential Evaluation Services of Canada (ACESC) (Provincial Assessment Committee, - Canada, 1998).

The goals of sustainability and efficiency of PLA contribute to the efforts to improve transferability and mobility of PSE credits and credentials for:

- first and second year university students through the *1995 Pan-Canadian Protocol on Transferability of University Credits* (CMEC, 1995), and
- community college students, particularly in the context of workforce development, through the *1999 Transferability and Mobility Pan-Canadian Protocol* (ACCC, 1999).

In summation, achieving the goals of sustainability and efficiency in PLA services in BC's PSE system will mean ensuring the continuance of PLA in the face of competing priorities and financial constraints in education and training.

The continuance and enhancement of PLA in BC is necessary to achieve the important goals inherent in PLA. In general terms, PLA addresses many needed improvements to learning systems (Braham, 2000): non-redundant learning for adults; relevance of teaching/learning; higher standards of academic achievement; enhanced learning experience for students; self-directed career development for individuals; bridges between industry and education; learning flexibility for adults; and financial savings to institutions.³

As an innovation in education/training and human resources development, PLA has been promoted as a means to achieve many goals. For example:

- According to business and industry representatives, PLA has the capacity to increase the efficiency of the labour market development process, encourage training and lifelong learning, and reduce costs and duplication of education/training efforts (Hudson, 1998).
- According to the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), the benefits of PLA to colleges include a better use of limited resources, assurances that students can transfer from one plane to another, working with employers to develop courses that meet workplace needs, and access to a wider range of potential learners (ACCC, 1999). At the university level, according to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada

³ Lady Braham asserts that the portfolio student is not using classroom space and uses relatively little faculty time, freeing space for regular students.

(AUCC), PLA “allows students who are anything but typical to enter fields of higher learning from which they might previously have been barred by their lack of standard credentials” (Farr, 1999).

- For organized labour, PLA is a means to recognize and validate non-formal learning and workplace training, and to improve access to training.
- For learners themselves, PLA enables them to increase their return on training investment (ROTI) and make better career development plans. Equity groups have suggested that PLA is a way to gain credit through institutional learning, and a way to gain appreciation for past skills.
- To others, PLA is a “specialized form of career development.” According to Peruniak and Welch, the goals of career development that appear on someone’s career plan help to focus and set the context for his or her PLA activities, and both PLA and career development are concerned with enhancing human potential and capacity (Peruniak and Welch, undated).

However, PLA has, in the estimation of some, not been able to meet with all these expectations and has faced a number of challenges or barriers.

The Current Situation in BC

Prior Learning Assessment and flexible assessment (PLA/FA) practices at PSE institutions in BC are set in the context of (1) improving student-centredness of PSE delivery, (2) facilitating student mobility and credit transfer, and (3) improving access to education and training (MAE, 1996). Education support services face being transformed as institutions grapple with the challenge of becoming learning support organizations (James, 1999).

PLA/FA has been instituted as a “bottom up” innovation, with small grants being made available to all institutions to develop and implement PLA/FA in an independent fashion, although considerable leadership and coordination have been provided by the BC Council on Admissions and Transfers (BCCAT), the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2) and the Ministry of Advanced Education (MAE). The logical result has been that the processes and outcomes of PLA/FA differ across the province and between institutions. The inadvertent result is that there is limited awareness of and commitment to PLA/FA among instructional and administrative staff. Ultimately, students are not taking up the opportunity in great numbers.

In short, PLA/FA may be neither sustainable nor efficient at this time. Using the definition of sustainability developed by BC PLA Steering Committee’s Research Subcommittee⁴ as a reference (see Appendix A), it appears that:

- There is not a common understanding and acceptance of the process across institutions.
- There is not an infrastructure in each institution that supports PLA on a permanent basis.
- There are some trained personnel available to support PLA.
- Potential clients are not typically aware of PLA services and motivated to access them.

⁴ The BC PLA Steering Committee was disbanded in April 2001. The Research Subcommittee then became the Committee for PLA Research.

- All public post-secondary institutions are not necessarily willing to accept transfer credit achieved via PLA.

Referring to the Research Subcommittee’s definition of efficiency, it appears that there is a considerable ways to go, but significant efforts are being made to:

- understand the costs and effects of PLA/FA,
- streamline the assessment and advising process,
- ensure that students are not required to undertake duplicate assessments,
- ensure that assessments and resulting credit are transferable,
- ensure that provincial guidelines for PLA service delivery are consistently practiced,
- keep paperwork to a minimum, and
- assist institutions to collaborate in offering PLA services.

At this time, both sustainability of PLA/FA – i.e., ensuring that all public post-secondary educational institutions provide PLA services in as many programs and disciplines as possible – and efficiency of PLA/FA– i.e., providing PLA services across the province in such a manner that the learner and the educational institution alike experience the process as timely in its duration and reasonable in its requirements – are important but unachieved goals in PSE in BC.

BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABILITY AND EFFICIENCY

As the terms of reference for this research project suggest, the barriers to sustainability and efficiency in PLA surface from two sources: (1) practitioners and educators in BC, and (2) the wider body of literature and expertise specific to PLA.

An extensive review of the literature, particularly through the annotated bibliography made available by New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) of Canadian and international sources, reveals very few specifics about barriers or recommendations regarding sustainability and efficiency (NALL, 1999). A summary of types of barriers, in no particular order, is set out below.

Barriers from the Literature

At least eight types of barriers emerge from a review of PLA literature:

1. Inadequacy of Resources

The first barrier is inadequacy of resources. It might be argued that no innovation is funded to the level that proponents would like, but such a sweeping innovation as PLA requires substantial human and financial resources that have not been available or forthcoming. Inadequate funding has led to PLA being put in place in some cases without credible policies, procedures and quality assessment practices based on sound adult learning principles. According to NALL, costs of PLA are characteristically seen as “outside” the regular operating costs and to be found

elsewhere; and savings are “invisible and mal-distributed” (Thomas, 1998). In Ontario secondary and adult education programs, it has been suggested that with continued budget cutbacks, the monies needed to implement delivery and support will be dramatically reduced, thereby marginalizing PLA (Barlow, 1998).

The national study of PLA, titled *A Slice of the Iceberg: Cross-Canada Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition*, noted that the public policy focus on PLA diminished at some institutions over the five-year study period and resulted in a reduction of resources for PLA development (Aarts et al, 1999).⁵ In addition to convincing institutions that PLA is economically viable, NALL emphasizes the need to convince governments that PLA is a worthy investment.

2. Negative Attitudes

A second barrier is attitudinal. As Alan Thomas says in *Introduction to the PLA “Values” Statements*, “We have never seen an open, reasoned, denunciation of PLA, though the manner of its introduction has occasioned uneasiness and perhaps more difficult to deal with, indifference” (Thomas, 1998). Carolyn Mann suggests in *Prior Learning Assessment: US Experience Facilitating Lifelong Learning*, PLA has not been enthusiastically received by education administration because it entails significant changes to established practices of learning assessment and management, and changes cost money. It has not been enthusiastically received by some teachers/professors/instructors who feel that they should be in charge of the learning process, and that PLA challenges their role as “gatekeeper and bearer of all knowledge” The issue of standards and quality control keep some educators from fully embracing PLA. Negative and indifferent attitudes are barriers to sustainability and efficiency that must be addressed. (Mann, 1997).

3. Lack of Demand

A third type of barrier is lack of demand. This is particularly worrying because demand is a major internal stimulant to integrate PLA into the regular procedures and habits of evaluation. This may be related to the issue of “return on PLA investment” or value for the process. According to NALL (CLFDB, 1999),

With the recent “hypes” about PLA and its value, there is always a danger that it be perceived as a panacea for all the woes in the educational system. This leads to false expectations and subsequently a potential failure to demonstrate its true value. We need to communicate reasonable expectation about the potential benefits of this approach to both students and employers and this needs to be accompanied by solid evidence of success. One such questionable message is that if PLA were in place, there would be thousands of people who would access it. There is a sense now that the numbers are not as great as anticipated in the early 1990’s and our failure to reach these numbers now could make implementation look like a failure.

⁵ This study was conducted by the Cross-Canada Partnership on PLAR, a partnership of six colleges, one college of general and professional education (cegep) and an independent PLA consultant. Funded by Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC), this study undertook an approach similar to case study research to investigate PLA activities at seven institutions across Canada from 1993/1994 to 1997/1998 (Aarts et al, 1999).

PLA has not been received with enthusiasm by learners who face a significant investment in time and money to try to “prove” that they know something of value.

4. *Shifting Power*

A fourth type of barrier is systemic discrimination and balance of power. For First Nations, visible minorities and other non-traditional students, “cultural outsidersness” is a pivotal problem. They point out that PLA implies and insists on a basic statement of “mutuality” between individual and educational agency, transforming the process “from one of seduction of the individual in terms of learning outcomes pre-established by the Education Institution” to one of liberation for both individual and agency. “We must be careful that we do not fall into the trap of using PLA to legitimize knowledge and skills that reassembles the academic norm and which extends the academy’s traditional gate-keeping function of barring alternative cultures of knowledge and calibrates the legitimacy of students’ knowledge according to sameness and correspondence.”⁶ Thomas notes that the admission of students of diverse backgrounds impacts significantly on the balance of power within the education establishment (Thomas, 1999).

5. *Access to PLA*

A fifth barrier is unequal and/or inadequate access to PLA. According to Jim Barlow at Ontario Secondary School and Adult Education Programs, not all adults have the same PLA opportunities; there are clearly variances in philosophy and practice; and distinct differences exist among boards of education in terms of how and when an adult learner’s prior experience is assessed, the resources used in assessment, the acceptance of PLA credits, and the participation of the learner in the process. He says: “An inherent risk to PLA in Ontario’s secondary schools is that in attempting to address inconsistencies the revised policies and procedures will build barriers rather than bridge barriers to adult education... The ultimate danger is that PLA would be available to those adults who had the financial resources to access the process” (Barlow, 1998).

6. *Cost of PLA*

A sixth barrier is cost, to both the student and to the institution. According to NALL research (CLFDB, 1999),

Many of the administrative structures in educational institutions as well as those governing student support such as student loans have not adjusted to officially include PLA as an educational activity, therefore successful outcomes in PLA are often a disincentive to students - eligibility status for student loans, for example, could be jeopardized as a result of successful PLA and offer candidate less financial support that anticipated and required.

⁶ Michelson (1996, source unknown) quoted in *Introduction to PLA “Values” Statements*,(Thomas, 1998).

Hence, the cost of PLA may prevent some students from accessing PLA services. Similarly, the cost may prevent some institutions from expanding PLA services. Again, according to NALL (CLFDB, 1999),

A great deal of focus is being placed on the immediate cost benefits of offering PLA services versus that of offering the corresponding course. The resulting benefit, if any, is likely minimal and perhaps one needs to look at PLA as the institutions' short term investment for the longer term benefit of an increasing and a returning client base enrolled in programs. One of the main challenges with this approach is the shortsighted vision that usually accompanies annual budgets and the expectation of immediate revenue generation. If PLA is appropriately positioned within institutions' contracted services, and ensuing training plans are well coordinated, access to flexible training can be augmented as some training seats are freed up by successful PLA candidates. This would allow more efficient use of existing training and education capacities within our institutions.

The *Slice of the Iceberg* study reached the conclusion that “the low numbers of PLA learners and programs in which PLA was accessed over the five-year study period are disturbing signals that delivery of PLA assessments under the same financial arrangements has not been economical for some institutions” (Aarts et al, 1999).

7. *PLA Procedures*

A seventh barrier is procedural. According to Mann and others, PLA is highly individualistic and non-routine, making it unavoidably time-consuming and expensive (Mann, 1997). Simosko and Debling note that “many PLA programs based in colleges or universities seem unduly complex. Learners are often expected to jump over unnecessary administrative hurdles” (Simosko and Debling, 1999).

Further to that, not all prior learning relates to an academic setting, nor is it easily categorized as college-level learning, making the conversion from life experience to college credit quite “enigmatic.” It is particularly challenging to assessors to ascribe a volume and level of credit where the individual’s learning experience does not directly match existing unit outcomes, or where they do not exist (ELLI, 1996 – 2). As well, several years often pass before a learner petitions for assessment, making documentation difficult to compile. The *Slice of the Iceberg* study recommended that “further diversification of assessment practices and tools would help learners more fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills” (Aarts et al, 1999).

8. *Acceptance of PLA by Business*

An eighth barrier may be the lack of wider or public acceptance of PLA. According to NALL research, PLA has not been accepted or used by business and industry. It has been suggested that if the credibility of PLA is not established, and if the general public and employers have the impression that a credit or diploma can “be bought” through PLA, it is difficult to establish confidence. Writing for NALL, Simosko and Debling concur that Small and Medium-Size Enterprises (SMEs) have difficulty using PLA, facing problems with information failures,

complexity, cost, credit hours, lack of clarity about expectations, and relevance (Simosko and Debling, 1999).

NALL notes that “If we force this acceptance too quickly, without having "demonstrated" that graduates with PLA credits are highly qualified and that we have not compromised standards, we may experience a backlash and the employers will start to recognize only training and education from very specific institutions, namely those that they know do not accept PLA” (Mann, 1997).

The *Slice of the Iceberg* study identified a need for greater public awareness activities geared towards workplaces, occupational associations, and sectoral organizations (Aarts et al, 1999).

Barriers Identified in the Field

Those who work in the field, at either the practice or policy level, are able to identify many barriers to the sustainability and efficiency of PLA in PSE, and their views are captured in non-formal ways.

Within the context of this research project, a group of BC practitioners and specialists convened to discuss the real and perceived issues about sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC. To begin with, practitioners in BC affirm the eight barriers identified in the literature:

1. Inadequacy of resources – time, finances and trained specialists -- to meet the goals of sustainability and efficiency on a system-wide basis.
2. Unsupportive attitudes in the form of negativity among staff, indifference from administration, and fundamental philosophical biases against PLA and the formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning.
3. Simple lack of demand by students which may be related to:
 - a. an inability to demonstrate ROI, and scepticism about the value,
 - b. students wanting course instead of PLA to be sure they're "getting it all,"
 - c. the sheer amount of work required compared to just taking the course.
4. Underlying tensions as instructors are urged to shift power to the learner. In other words, from being the “sage on the stage, to the guide on the side.”
5. Varying access to PLA between programs within institutions, and between colleges and universities.
6. Determining actual costs for institutions and individuals, and meeting known costs.
7. Complex and unnecessary procedures from the learner’s perspective.
8. Lack of awareness and acceptance among employers and industries.

In addition, the majority of barriers from the practitioner’s perspective fall into three additional specific categories.

1. Unresolved complexities of PLA assessment resulting from:
 - varying operational definitions of the term “PLA assessment,”
 - uncertainties surrounding work done outside the province or the country,
 - lack of templates for evaluations,

- the degree of “fit” in practice between PLA and some/all disciplines, and
 - the cost of doing PLA in certain curriculum areas.
2. Unresolved complexities of institutional implementation including but not limited to:
- staff workload and remuneration,
 - transcribing and recording of PLA credit (e.g., grades),
 - marketing of PLA within and outside of institutions,
 - counting of PLA full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrolments,
 - the unfavourable culture of receiving institutions,
 - links to learning outcomes,
 - timing of PLA applications, e.g., prescribed dates only,
 - adequate clerical support to PLA coordinators and assessors,
 - student residency requirements for degree completion vis-à-vis PLA,
 - clarity throughout the institution, e.g., admissions, switchboard, and departmental assistants, and
 - development and updating of PLA action plans.
3. Unresolved complexities of system-wide PLA implementation related to:
- the overall management of change, with PLA seen as top-down attempt to create bottom-up initiative,
 - ambiguity and uncertainty about support for PLA as a mandated policy, and a perceived gap between policy and practice,
 - lack of ongoing commitment and resources,
 - inadequacy of information sharing and an imbalance in decision-making,
 - inability to resolve the policy issues in number 10 above,
 - lack of university buy-in,
 - changing membership in decision-making bodies and the need to “educate” about PLA,
 - whether PLA is viewed as good general practice or a specific innovation,
 - the extent of PLA being done under other terminology, e.g., course waiver or pre-requisite waiver,
 - a need for active and visible Management/Administration support for PLA, and
 - the concept that PLA may be a "right" that a student can "demand" and be guaranteed.

In order to improve the credibility and viability of PLA on a system-wide basis, participants in a plenary session at the 1998 CAPLA Conference, titled *The Ninth Annual PLA Conference: Individualizing Assessment: Accepting Adult Learners As Partners in Education And Human Resources Planning*, concluded that national and international standards were necessary (Blinkhorn, 1998). For them, a “common language” would be the foundation of standards in

PLA. They listed barriers to achieving standards; and these barriers may be the same that inhibit sustainability and efficiency of PLA. They include, but are not limited to the:

- fact that different institutions are at different stages in development,
- lack of accreditation for assessors,
- diversity of ethnic and learning cultures,
- wide range of types of recognition, e.g., university credit and workplace advancement,
- lack of awareness about PLA,
- difficulty in attaining consensus, and
- varying degrees of learning and experience with PLA.

This group emphasized the need to separate PLA process from PLA product. Someone suggested a Multinational Agreement on Prior Learning Assessment; someone else suggested the need to listen to opponents of PLA to see what their interpretation might be.

ADDRESSING THE BARRIERS

For this background paper, ideas and recommendations for removing or bridging barriers to the sustainability and efficiency of PLA services come two sources: (1) writing and research about PLA, and (2) PLA practitioners and experts in the field in BC. The review of the literature, particularly through the annotated bibliography made available by New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) of Canadian and international sources, reveals very few specific recommendations regarding sustainability and efficiency (NALL, 1999). Some of the more general statements are set out below, along with some “futurist” recommendations.

Recommendations from the Literature

Those who have had time to consider problems with implementing PLA at the institutional, provincial and/or national level in Canada and elsewhere have put forward a number of ways to remove barriers to sustainability and efficiency of PLA. They are included here because they may serve as a checklist and/or a framework for sorting specific recommendations.

The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) exists, in part, to achieve sustainability and efficiency of PLA. The list of CAPLA purposes may be considered the opinion of PLA practitioners and experts as to how to achieve sustainability and efficiency of PLA and/or addressing barriers to the effective and widespread implementation of PLA.⁷ To this end, CAPLA seeks to:

- identify and apply best practices or first principles necessary for quality, value-added work with adult learners in which the needs, cultural circumstances and abilities of the learner are the prime focus,

⁷ For more information on CAPLA, please see CAPLA website at <http://www.tyendinaga.net/fnti/prior/capla.htm> (last visited June 21, 2001).

- promote assessment practices that are academically-sound, learner focused and recognized nationally and internationally,
- advocate for a broader array of services for adult learners which are meaningful and responsive to the individual needs and life circumstances and which decrease the gap between work and learning,
- undertake practitioner research which demonstrates the effectiveness of the PLA process, supports the need for greater flexibility in education services to adults, and underscores the incredible amount of learning which is accomplished outside of formal settings,
- identify and apply national and international occupational learning standards and practices needed for effective work with the national and international labour force,
- create and disseminate materials and resources for use with diverse groups of adult learners which reflect the needs of Canadian adults and help prepare for employment opportunities in the global economy,
- demonstrate ongoing support and assistance for those charged with responsibility for designing and implementing PLA services,
- collaborate with other groups and organizations to pursue the CAPLA vision,
- develop and promote a set of national standards of accreditation and a system of accreditation for PLA practitioners and assessors, and
- provide national leadership and collaboration in developing financial sustainability of PLA.

In some respects, these appear to be rather esoteric goals; however, they may serve as a guide for activities and initiatives to achieve sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC.

A future vision of PLA has been created for NALL to describe PLA Value Statements, with feedback from community colleges in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick. It concludes that the following elements are integral to a healthy vision of PLA in Canada's community college system (CLFDB, 1999),

PLA needs to be integrated into the day-to-day academic activities of the institution. Its availability must be well known throughout the college community and conducted as a matter of course. It should be incorporated into all training projects and contract training activities.

PLA needs to be treated by the institution as an individual standing item on all internal administrative agendas - the college budget planning process, the professional development agenda, the college marketing strategy, the governing body's annual meeting agenda, the college research agenda.

Assessments should be conducted by the institutions for external organizations (including the workplace) on contract and thus PLA is a service provided quite apart from delivery of training but obviously linked to training in that those assessed, would seek further

training. For example, a provincial licensing body could purchase the assessment services of the college for their own purposes, not just academic credit.

PLA should offer credible flexible assessment practices for all learners -a system that will allow learners the opportunity for assessment of learning no matter when, where or how it was acquired. It should incorporate best practices which includes fair, equitable and transparent access such as identified in the Canadian Labour Force Development Board standards for PLA.

In order for PLA to be more cost-effective, it should be marketed more extensively to and developed for group assessments. This provides a much more cost-recoverable option for institutions.

In order for PLA services to be valuable, the ensuing "top up" training required as a result of the assessment must be available in a flexible manner, on an "as needed" basis and in module sizes that avoid duplication of learning already undertaken.

These are all elements that should be examined vis-à-vis overall sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC.

Simosko and Debling list the following “possible solutions” to increasing the acceptance of PLA by small business that could also contribute to achieving sustainability and efficiency of PLA services (Simosko and Debling, 1999),

Simplify and clarify the PLA process - technically, administratively and financially. Make it less cumbersome, less bureaucratic, less expensive. And do not separate it out from normal programs and services. If all assessments are quality assured by the same faculty, why discriminate against PLA candidates because of how or when they acquired their skills and knowledge?

Develop clear learning and assessment expectations: The clearer colleges and universities can be in describing what they want employees to know and be able to do, the easier and less time consuming the process will be.

Form partnerships with small businesses.

Foster the development of new credentials that better match the needs of smaller businesses.

Develop provincial promotional packages that could be disseminated through local chambers of commerce, service organizations and others by working collaboratively with post-secondary institutions.

Create mechanisms by which adult learners are entitled to student loans for part-time study and PLA.

Increase tax breaks for small businesses willing to invest in learners by supporting them through the PLA process.

These are recommendations that apply well beyond small business.

A summary report from NALL, which included employers, labour, designated equity-seeking groups, educators and learners, stressed the need for increased cooperation amongst players, particularly by the individual users of PLA.

According to the AUCC, “PLA Centres run jointly by post-secondary institutions and provincial and federal governments are popping up in every province, with the aim of helping prospective students gain access to university and college-level programs, leading in turn – everyone hopes – to solid employment opportunities” (Farr, 1999).

The PLA Centre in Halifax is a good example of this concept; it largely uses PLA in an advisory or career planning capacity. It should be noted that the PLA Centre in Manitoba, which was based on a different model than Nova Scotia’s, has closed in March 2001 after only two years.

Finally, the *Slice of the Iceberg* study made the following recommendations to institutions and public policy makers to promote sustainability and efficiency of PLA (Aarts et al, 1999),

Institutions should undertake a review of PLA services and assessment practices to:

- *ensure that written policies and procedures are implemented and practiced by all program administrators and faculty,*
- *ensure that written information on PLA procedures as well as criteria for earning credit is readily available to learners,*
- *provide PLA training to all new, full-time and part-time faculty as well as existing faculty who conduct assessments, focusing particularly on learning outcomes and authentic assessment practices,*
- *resolve faculty concerns regarding fair and consistent assessor remuneration practices,*
- *market PLA vigorously with workplaces and occupational bodies to increase PLA activities within a context of strategic partnerships in training and education,*
- *review institutional PLA facilitation practices to evaluate the impact of centralization vs. integration of PLA services,*
- *integrate PLA into educational reform activities and institutional strategic plans,*
- *conduct research into PLA with a view to contributing to a growing body of knowledge on the relationship between formal and informal learning and the impact of PLA on institutions and adult learners in Canada, and*

- *develop course registration/credit systems to facilitate flexible delivery thus allowing students with prior learning to complete programs sooner.*

Public policy makers should undertake a review of the report and use it as a basis for discussion and action to:

- *revise current public policy and the role of government in supporting PLA in post-secondary institutions (for example, allowing Registered Educational Savings Plan funds to be accessed for post-secondary PLA, and permitting PLA learners to retain their eligibility for student assistance),*
- *support PLA and apply that support to provide funding to institutions to the same degree that traditional delivery is supported,*
- *support initiatives that promote PLA research, assessment tool development and assessor training, and*
- *assist institutions to improve mechanisms for facilitating transfer of credits across institutions and provinces.*

These are all generalized recommendations to take into account in addressing sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC. A future-oriented recommendation comes from the FuturEd work on learning records, variously known as a skills passport, a Skills and Knowledge Portfolio (Barker, 1998), and an Electronic Learning Record (ELR) (Barker, 1999). Research by Barker reveals that the ELR is highly valued by individuals as an outcome of PLA, a tool for career development and for learning management. It is a recommended method of improving the efficiency of the PLA process for individuals by giving individuals a record of their prior learning in a form that can be expanded, maintained and utilized for learning and employment purposes. It is also a method of increasing the buy-in of employers as the ELR links to human capital management – the management of human resources in the knowledge economy.

Recommendations from the Field in BC

To begin with, it makes good sense to turn the identified barriers into recommended changes. In addition to that, various voices in BC speak about recommended changes and improvements: students, practitioners and educators, and PLA specialists.

Students, in a provincial opinion survey, concluded that improvements they would recommend are to (Douglas College, 2000):

- rationalize the costs of PLA to reflect the services provided,
- publicize PLA better, making it clear as to the characteristics of students who are most like to benefit from PLA, as well as providing readily accessible information about the PLA process, and
- make PLA more systematic, with clear outcomes and criteria.

In a visioning session, a group of informed educators made the following recommendations (Simosko, 2000):

- Create and maintain new connections and effective working relationships across all stakeholder groups.
- Clearly identify learning expectations not just within education contexts, but also with employers, labour and the voluntary sector.
- Develop a systematic and highly public approach to marketing and promoting learning and assessment across contexts.
- Plan for sustained cross-context professional development that will enable individuals to become master facilitators of learning, reflecting the best quality advising, teaching and assessment the province can offer.
- Identify and implement new ways of funding and sustaining PLA at post-secondary institutions as they become increasingly flexible, learning centred organizations, wanting to ensure the success of each and every learner making use of their services.
- Continue to examine and improve assessment practices in order to sustain and enhance quality.

As an acknowledged PLA specialist, Susan Simosko identifies five trends that indicate beginning effort toward sustainability and efficiency (Simosko, undated):

1. Increased flexibility
2. Integration of assessment and learning
3. Learner as assessment partner
4. Links to learning outcomes
5. Quality assurance.

A second specialist, Carol Ebner Howorth lists recommended methods of improving sustainability and efficiency (Howorth, 1997):

- Ensuring clear learning outcomes for whole programs and learning modules.
- Incorporating more flexible learning environments.
- Assisting students to develop individual education plans.
- Providing for on-going assessment and changing faculty roles.
- Ensuring top-up learning opportunities through gap analysis.
- funding students and programs by outcomes rather than inputs.
- Creating new funding partnerships with employers and licensing agencies.

In a quality audit of BC's PLA services against the recommended national PLA standards, Kathryn Barker, noted that BC was "doing the right things right" and recommended that more attention be paid to understanding and meeting the needs of PLA consumers, and more effort be made to make PLA relevant to the employer community (Barker, 1998 – 1).

In an informal gathering assembled to discuss the issue of cost-effectiveness of PLA in BC, the following recommendations were made:

- involve PSE financial officers in the process of defining costs and effects,
- operationally define and limit the term “PLA assessment,”
- take a longitudinal approach to data gathering,
- reach system-wide agreement about what it takes for a PLA student to continue their studies,
- compare what it costs to produce a course credit through PLA vs. through conventional means,
- institute a consistent method for counting FTE equivalents,
- increase awareness of the technical requirements that should be used to award grades and credits via PLA, and
- enable institutions to award credit and grades for “advance standing” so that the PLA numbers are more realistic and so that the students’ Grade Point Average (GPA) are not negatively impacted,
- fund PLA FTEs on a pro rated basis vis-à-vis conventional FTEs,
- find means to demonstrate positive impact to program productivity and benefits to programs, and
- be sure to look at the costs and benefits of PLA to students as well as to institutions.

This small group also identified the difference between colleges and universities as problematic to the sustainability and efficiency of PLA at PSE in BC.

FLEXIBLE ASSESSMENT IN BC

Within the public PSE sector in BC, the concept of PLA has been enlarged and labelled “flexible assessment” (C2T2, 2000). In order to capture the costs associated with PLA, it had become linked to the funding of students and the award of credit. PLA had been defined “as any activity that results in an award of credit and shortens program completion time”, and this definition was intended to allow for consistent reporting of PLA activity across the province. (C2T2, 2000)

However, PLA services have expanded and evolved to include a variety of assessment policies, procedures and tools; and the term flexible assessment to broadly describe all the assessment options available to learners. The above definition disallowed flexible assessment activity within non-credit and continuing education programs, thereby acting as a disincentive for institutions to develop processes that accurately capture and report the degree of assessment innovation

occurring within non-base-funded programs. As a result, flexible assessment is a term that has come to include:

- formal and informal assessment activities within both base and non-base funded programs resulting in the award of credit,
- formal and informal assessment activities within both base and non-base funded programs resulting in non-credit awards, e.g., advanced standing, exemptions and placement activities, non-articulated transfer requests, and
- other related activities such as learner advising services, workplace-based training program reviews, and top-up learning.

These activities and innovations have all been for the right reasons: meeting student needs, improving learning efficiency for students and employers, becoming more student-centred. However, the issue becomes whether this makes PLA more or less sustainable and efficient. The following is a discussion of current practices associated with flexible assessment that impact on PLA sustainability and efficiency.

Practices that Improve Efficiency and Sustainability

The following practices have deliberately and/or inadvertently contributed to improving sustainability and efficiency of PLA services at PSE institutions in BC.

Program-based Learning Outcomes

One practice that greatly enhances PLA services is the example set by those responsible for the Applied Business Technology Programs in BC, which set of common learning outcomes and/or occupational skill standards for all programs in the province (Battersby and the Learning Outcomes Network, undated). This has greatly enhanced the ability to offer consistent and useful PLA services to learners, and it has made the job of assessors much easier. In addition to improving PLA processes, consistent occupational skill standards help employers recruit, develop and maintain a skilled workforce; ensure that occupational requirements are equitable; increase competitiveness and productivity; facilitate mobility of labour within Canada; identify and communicate human resources and training needs; create instructional programs; upgrade employee skills; design assessment and evaluation guidelines; develop accreditation/certification process; and enhance corporate image. It is made easier by the standardized process, available from HRDC, for creating industry-based occupational skills.⁸ This is a recommended practice for all programs, made particularly important by the move to e-learning and the creation of reusable learning objects.

Limiting the Scope of PLA Assessment

A second practice that improves sustainability and efficiency of PLA services is to set clear limits to the types of assessments that are conducted and accounted for by an institution. For example, at Douglas College, only three types of assessment are considered to be PLA for administrative purposes: challenge exams, workplace-based analysis, and portfolio assessment.

⁸ Complete step-by-step process is available at website page *Occupational Standards Development Process (HRDC, undated)* http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/hrrib/hrp-prh/english/nos/toc_e.shtml (last visited June 21, 2001).

This is because PLA at Douglas College must be cost-recoverable. Repeatedly, practitioners ask for consistency of methods, as this enables the process of counting FTEs, among other things.

Collegiality among Practitioners

The information sharing and joint professional development among practitioners of PLA throughout the province has greatly enhanced the viability and growth of PLA in BC, such as through the provincial Institutional PLA Coordinators' Working Group (ICWG).⁹ PLA practitioners are not in competition as their institutions sometimes are, and they are often marginalized within their institutions. The implementation of PLA continues to be a struggle, and collaboration with other practitioners has made the struggle possible and worthwhile for some. In further discussions of PLA/FA, practitioners would like to encourage participation of the institutional financial officers.

In conclusion, these are samples of particular practices that have contributed to the sustainability and efficiency of PLA. They are in addition to all the years of thoughtful policy development, planning and systematic implementation that has gone on. On balance, however, the barriers and negative practices seem to outweigh the positive practices and fading optimism for PLA/FA in PSE in BC.

Practices Negatively Impacting on Sustainability and Efficiency

The following practices impact negatively on the sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC's PSE system.

Insufficient Data for Decision-making

One problematic practice is the system-wide inadequacy of research and data gathering resources and expectations in general, and specific to PLA and student transfer. In an analysis of student access and mobility within the BC PSE system, Dennison states (Dennison, 2000),

Although a considerable amount of data are currently available, the limitations upon what is known became apparent. For example, very little information is available regarding the number of students who, although qualified, are unable to obtain places in the university of their choice. It is not known what transfer pathways are pursued. There is a paucity of information on the contributions of the BC Open University, the university colleges or the University of Northern BC to the transfer process.

This contributes to the uncertainty and lack of decision-making about the effects or impacts of PLA as part of the transfer "pathway." From various sources, it is clear that there are significant gaps in the PSE data currently available and PLA reporting mechanisms that do exist need to be improved.

⁹ The ICWG is a working group that fosters the development of flexible assessment principles and procedures within the coordinators' institutions. The ICWG members represent 28 of BC's post-secondary institutions and have institutional responsibility for implementing PLA.

Confusion about Definitions

This second problem – confusion about definitions used for PLA - is directly related to “insufficient data for decision making.” Put succinctly, it is impossible to gather meaningful data if a consistent definition is not used to describe the data under study. Through e-conversations among PLA practitioners, it has recently come to light that at least three different definitions are being used across the province. According to synthesis by John FitzGibbon of C2T2, the definition changes depending on perspective: learner, PSE institutions, and Ministry of Advanced Education (See Appendix C). This became obvious to C2T2 in the process of analyzing data for the 1999/2000 PLA Annual Report when it became apparent that institutions were providing data based on different definitions of PLA activity. It is not an understatement to say that a consistent definition is critical to the continuance of PLA activity, and that the definition must include all perspectives.

Blending with Other Changes

A third “practice” negatively affecting PLA is the speed and complexity of other system-wide changes, such as the implementation of applied degrees, recognition of private training institutions, and introduction of e-learning options. Dennison notes that the primary role of BC’s PSE system is to accommodate the needs of students to attain diverse educational goals through a diversity of institutions, and that student mobility is increasingly more complex as a result. Dennison identifies the need for comprehensive planning involving all post-secondary institutions, but adds that the tradition of institutional autonomy requires participation in planning exercises to be on a voluntary basis. Although, as Dennison says, the effectiveness of the system of post-secondary education depends on such factors as adequate funding, careful planning and collaboration among institutions to provide the best of opportunities with the resources available, the implementation of PLA appears to be one of inadequate funding, limited planning, and an attitude of indifferent independence by institutions (Dennison, 2000).

Inconsistency between Institutions

Most PLA policies and practices differ between and among institutions: personnel involved, workload and payment for services, assessment practices, types of recognition, student eligibility, programs included, and many other factors. For example, according to information collected from the ICWG by C2T2, transcribing practices range from no grade attached to actual grades assigned, with any number of means of recording the participation in PLA processes by the learner. This makes it difficult to speak of PLA in any encompassing fashion or to assume that there is a common language in the field. To compound the problem of inconsistencies is the probability that most practitioners and administrators are not fully aware of the situation. Further to that, it is unclear if PLA policies have actually been implemented within institutions as was intended. The resulting uncertainty and miscommunication contributes to a diffused sense of purpose and inhibits real growth in the field.

Inadequate Funding

While each institution receives \$20 000 annually by MAE in the form of PLA Implementation Grants, this amount does not begin to cover the actual costs involved in implementing institution-wide PLA services and policies. This is compounded by the problem that, in many cases, the actual costs are not known. Further to that, the diversity and complexity of PLA

assessment and advising processes makes it difficult to establish cost categories. In the absence of an agreed-upon framework for the delivery of PLA services, it is difficult to argue for more funds, especially in the face of competing priorities for financial and human resources.

Related to this general situation is the specific problem that many flexible assessment practices are not funded under the current mechanism. According to C2T2's 1999/2000 Annual PLA Report, FA activities extended well beyond the award of credit, with 19 institutions reporting over 55 FA activities; and ten institutions reported over 23 activities that could not be counted using the provincial funding definition as they occur in programs not covered by base funding (C2T2, 2000).

Workload Pressures

Workload pressures are a particularly pressing problem. This becomes apparent in the discussion just who has to do the assessment and student advising, given that it is an add-on to existing work requirements in most cases. In part, this is an issue within the context of the collective agreement, and in part it is an issue of adequacy of training to conduct PLA. In either case, most institutional coordinators identify the need for more human resources to contribute to the PLA endeavour. In addition, there is no consistency in how assessors are compensated. For example, payment to PLA assessors ranges from hourly fees, through the number of credits assessed, to number of assessments made. Workload pressures extend beyond PLA/FA, and there is an urgent need to think about how instructors operate in a knowledge-based environment.

According to the 1999/2000 PLA Annual Report, this problem is manifested as stress on regular faculty workload (C2T2, 2000). Among the specific issues or problems identified in that report are:

- embedding PLA into regular workloads which puts pressure on faculty who might otherwise be fully supportive of PLA,
- a lack of clear and consistent institutional PLA policies and procedures, without which PLA practitioners have difficulty applying PLA across program areas,
- a shortage of individuals with available time to do PLA, and
- an inability to accurately predict how much time will be required in the assessment and advising process.

In summation, these are particular practices that impact negatively on the sustainability and efficiency of PLA in PSE in BC. They are, in most cases, manifestations of the long list of barriers identified from within the field in BC and the related literature. In all cases, the problems could be addressed head-on and solved.

ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY AND EFFICIENCY OF PLA IN BC

Efforts to achieve sustainability and efficiency of PLA in BC must reflect and combine the needs, perspectives and contributions of learners, educators and policy makers. In no particular order, the following are options for improving sustainability and efficiency of flexible assessment with pros and cons of each.

Increase Demand

One obvious means of increasing the sustainability of PLA/FA is to increase the use of the services. This could, perhaps, be achieved through a public relations campaign extolling the benefits of PLA to learners inside and outside the institution. As well, the identified barriers must be addressed or removed. Many have suggested that, for example, mechanisms must be created to entitle adult learners to student loans for part-time study and PLA. A related campaign would also be needed within institutions to increase acceptance by instructional staff who would then advocate for and promote PLA.

The pro of doing this is the obvious increase in utilization and rationalization of the services. The con is that the benefits are not well understood or documented. As well, there is currently no need for institutions to recruit new students as demand exceeds supply.

Decrease Costs

A second means of enhancing PLA's sustainability is to reduce costs. For example, this could be done through:

- group assessments rather than individualized assessments,
- outsourcing of assessment services,
- narrowing the categories of learners eligible for PLA/FA to those most likely to be successful,
- creating standardized assessment and record-keeping tools, and
- sharing assessors between institutions or between program-types.

Simosko and Debling recommend that efforts be made to “simplify and clarify the PLA process-technically, administratively and financially. Make it less cumbersome, less bureaucratic, less expensive. And do not separate it out from normal programs and services” (Simosko and Debling, 1999).

The pros of doing these types of things is that they make systems more efficient. The cons are that:

- group assessment techniques may not be available and/or valid,
- “outsourcing” is not politically viable at this time, and
- creation of any new tools requires more, not less funds in the short term.

Generate Income

It may be possible to actually generate income by marketing PLA services to such potential clients as other institutions, businesses of all sizes, immigrant-serving agencies. This would mean that those bodies would not have to develop their own systems and would get consistent, high-quality assessments. According to NALL research, representatives of community colleges recommended that assessments be conducted by institutions for external organizations, including the workplace, on contract, making PLA a service provided quite apart from delivery of training.

The pros are that this increases efficiency of PLA services throughout the economy and society; and it expands the use to clients already targeted as logical PLA users. The cons are that this would have to be preceded by substantial public education around the benefits and processes of PLA for the target groups. It would also require considerable formalization of the field, with credentialed assessors and standardized systems that do not currently exist.

Disperse Costs

If the costs cannot be reduced, they may be dispersed in a different fashion. It makes some sense to consolidate PLA/FA services within, for example, regions of the province or industry sectors. Already the Open Learning Agency (OLA) provides PLA/FA services to some programs and institutions; and OLA has regional learning centres that could be further employed in the delivery of PLA on a regional basis. The OLA Credit Review Service¹⁰ model could be expanded; and Skills Centres have become the education/training focus of many communities.

The pro of doing this is that there are existing models to build on and learn from; and at least one agency prepared to develop this option. As well, this substantially increases efficiency of PLA/FA service province-wide. The con is that institutions have to present consistent learning outcomes for courses and programs, not a viable situation at this time.

Increase Utility for Students

Students themselves have said that there is an urgent need to increase the effectiveness and appeal of PLA. They have asked that costs be rationalized to reflect the services provided, and that PLA be made more systematic, with clear outcomes and criteria. For example, this could/should be done through:

- minimizing the time, costs and paperwork,
- increasing the Return on Investment (ROI), and
- increasing the applications of PLA to include a digital record of acquired learning as an outcome of the PLA process, e.g., an Electronic Learning Record that can be updated and used for various purposes.

¹⁰ OLA's Credit Review Service is a national program designed to recognize learning and award academic credit to workplace-based training programs that are found to be comparable to those offered at colleges or universities. For more information, see <http://www.ola.bc.ca/credit/> (last visited June 22, 2001).

Howorth has recommended assisting students to develop individual education plans and ensuring top-up learning opportunities through gap analysis (Howorth, 1997).

The pros of doing these things are that they contribute to increased student-centredness and reflect a genuine concern for learning productivity. The cons are that:

- “minimizing” may jeopardize quality assurance,
- neither the real costs or real benefits are known in order to demonstrate ROI to the student or anyone else, and
- systems and processes would have to be put in place to enable students to develop and maintain digital records of learning.

Minimize Opposition to PLA

Opposition to PLA appears to come from academics, employers and students themselves all concerned about the quality of the assessment and recognition awarded. One means of reducing this opposition might be to engage one accrediting body to certify PLA credits and/or all formal learning. The pro of this is that PSE institutions can focus on teaching and research, handing off certification and accreditation to a central agency. The con is that it is a major paradigm shift to the concept of learning systems that are effective and efficient from a consumer’s point of view, and consumers are not the current focus of the education enterprise.

Redesign the Delivery of Learning

In order for PLA/FA to be fully incorporated into teaching and learning at the PSE level, substantial change must take place. First, all courses have to be described in terms of intended learning outcomes and the specific skills and knowledge to be acquired. Second, courses must be modularized so that, when a student is able to demonstrate through PLA/FA that they need only part of a course, that part is available to them.

In NALL research, community colleges went on record as saying, “In order for PLA services to be valuable, the ensuing "top up" training required as a result of the assessment must be available in a flexible manner, on an "as needed" basis and in module sizes that avoid duplication of learning already undertaken” (CLFDB, 1999). Similarly, CAPLA advocates for a broader array of services for adult learners which are meaningful and responsive to the individual needs and life circumstances and which decrease the gap between work and learning. Informed educators in BC envisioned the implementation of new ways of funding and sustaining PLA at post-secondary institutions as they became increasingly flexible, learning centred organizations.

The pros are that this is critical to the continuance of PLA/FA as it is promoted in BC and elsewhere and to the application of student-centred principles of teaching. The con is that this, too, is a paradigm shift for post-secondary education.

Reconceptualize the Management of Learning

As PLA/FA is currently used, the only valuable learning is that which can be accredited. To realize the full potential of the concept, it is necessary to promote other uses of PLA/FA. The process of identifying, describing, reflecting, validating what a person knows and can do is

becoming an essential career management skill. It is, as well, a reasonable function of PSE – to develop the whole person rather than simply accredit a morsel of learning.

The pros of this are that it maximizes the utility of PLA/FA, increases its appeal for students, and promotes lifelong learning. The con is that it requires PSE to relinquish responsibility for the only learning with value.

Study and Demonstrate Return on Investment

The principles and practices of ROI may/should be adapted and applied to education and training activities. The analysis of ROI would take various perspectives: learners, institutions, and funders (e.g. MAE). Clearly costs and returns vary by stakeholder group, yet all are concerned about ROI. This would require:

- creating and applying templates for learners, institutions and funders for tabulating the costs associated with PLA assessment and advising, and
- generating and applying templates for potential benefits or “returns” from PLA.

In an informal gathering assembled to discuss the issue of cost-effectiveness of PLA in BC, recommendations were made to involve PSE financial officers in the process of defining costs and effects, operationally defining and limiting the term “PLA assessment,” and taking a longitudinal approach to data gathering.

The pro of doing this is substantially increased understanding of personal and organizational impacts of PLA. The con is that this requires research funds and specialized expertise.

Change Funding Mechanisms

The efforts to make PLA activity fit into the negotiated FTE student profile funding mechanism has been like forcing a square peg into a round hole. It would make more sense to create a new, parallel funding mechanism for PLA credits and/or fund it as a service rather than a type of student status. The Slice of the Iceberg study recommended that governments “support PLA and apply that support to provide funding to institutions to the same degree that traditional delivery is supported” (Aarts et al, 1999). Howorth recommended funding students and programs by outcomes rather than inputs and creating new funding partnerships with employers and licensing agencies (Howorth, 1997).

The pro is that the field will continue to grow and mature as new types of funds are infused; the con is that this will take time and creativity.

Address Workload Issues

The scope and nature of workload issues specific to PLA should be addressed head-on. It is noteworthy that there are many workload issues causing stress for faculty: curriculum changes, greater diversity in students, and public demands for accountability. It has been recommended that PLA workload issues should be embedded in a discussion of the larger issues. This could/should be done in a concerted way, perhaps through a mediation or arbitration-type setting where there is a commitment to change and action. This could be tried as a demonstration project

(federally-funded) for others to learn from as well. Both sides – management and unions – have innovations to put on the table. For example, Camosun College’s PLA Coordinator suggests that faculty workload should be calculated on the basis of many and varied roles, not just student contact hours. Others suggest specific PLA assessment and adviser roles distinct from faculty positions.

Increase Acceptance

PLA practitioners lament the disinterest, even animosity exhibited by instructional staff towards the concept of PLA/FA. It might be possible to increase acceptance, both philosophically and in practice, by encouraging/enabling all staff to create digital records of acquired learning, e.g. an Electronic Learning Record. In other words, to go through the PLA/FA process to some extent.

The pro is that they are modeling the behaviour they expect of others (students). The con is that this requires both an Electronic Learning Record prototype and resources to provide the necessary time and development workshops.

Another means of increasing acceptance would be to promote PLA/FA as good practice, providing professional development for instructional staff, then building in the expectation of pre-testing and post-testing using a variety of assessment tools. The *Slice of the Iceberg* study recommended that institutions provide PLA training to all new, full-time and part-time faculty as well as existing faculty who conduct assessments, focusing particularly on learning outcomes and authentic assessment practices.

The pro is that this is relatively simple to do. The con is that not all staff are interested in changing their established practices.

CONCLUSION

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APPENDIX A - TERMINOLOGY

The key terms – sustainability and efficiency – have been operationalized for this background paper by the BC PLA Steering Committee’s Research Subcommittee as follows.

Sustainability—Ensuring that all public post-secondary educational institutions provide PLA services in as many programs and disciplines as possible.

- There is a common understanding and acceptance of the process across institutions.
- There is an infrastructure in each institution that supports PLA on a permanent basis.
- There are trained personnel available to support PLA.
- Potential clients are aware of PLA services and motivated to access them.
- All public post-secondary institutions are willing to accept transfer credit achieved via PLA.

Efficiency—Providing PLA services across the province in such a manner that the learner and the educational institution alike experience the process as timely in its duration and reasonable in its requirements.

- It is cost effective.
- The assessment and advising process is streamlined.
- Students should not be required to undertake duplicate assessments.
- Assessments and resulting credit are transferable.
- Provincial guidelines for PLA service delivery are consistently practiced.
- Paperwork is kept to a minimum.
- Institutions collaborate in offering PLA services.

APPENDIX B – BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

To set the stage, the following background and rationale is excerpted directly from the Request for Proposals.

PLA is an initiative fully endorsed by the Province of British Columbia and supported by the Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology (C2T2). British Columbia has been exploring PLA and its applications since the late 1980's. In 1993, the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer formed a Standing Committee on PLA. During these early years, guidelines and standards for PLA were published, awareness raising and training events were held and a handful of pilot projects were funded.

By 1995, it was clear that the groundwork had been laid for the systemic implementation of PLA through the province's post-secondary system. Government support over the next few years included the provision of implementation grants to those institutions that showed evidence of PLA-readiness. By the fall of 2000, 27 of the 28 publicly funded institutions--colleges, university-colleges, universities, institutions and agencies—had received funds to implement PLA services in some of their programs.

In 1998 PLA Implementation Guidelines were revised with input from many stakeholders and accepted by institutions and the Ministry as the basis for provincial policy and procedures governing the assessment of prior learning. Enhancement grants have been provided at both institutional and province-wide program levels to encourage the adoption of institutional policies that would sustain and enhance the provision of flexible assessment services. Advice on the provision and scope of these grants by the Ministry was provided by the PLA Steering Committee and the Institutional Coordinators Working Group (ICWG). The PLA Steering Committee provides policy advice to the Ministry and C2T2 and the ICWG provides more specific advice and information regarding implementation issues at the institutional level.

For the 2000/01 fiscal year, the Ministry has requested C2T2 work with the PLA Steering Committee to explore models of delivering PLA services that could reduce costs and increase efficiency and to explore strategies, policies and procedures that could deal effectively with workload issues. The Steering Committee interpreted this request to be a request to look at how to sustain PLA services across the province and how to make their delivery more efficient. The Steering Committee struck the Sustainability and Efficiency Subcommittee to investigate these issues and bring options for action to the Ministry and C2T2.

APPENDIX C- DEFINING PLA

This paper is intended to clarify how PLA is defined to suggest appropriate data to be gathered in light of PLA definitions. The reason for this clarification arose during the data gathering process for the 2000/01 PLA Annual Report. Institutions were providing information to C2T2 based on different definitions of PLA activity. While PLA can be defined differently depending on the context, it is important to report consistently on activities using a common definition if the activity is to be recognized provincially. In the discussion on the PLA listserv there appeared to be three potential definitions based on three contexts. The three definitions below are based on the BCCAT, Ministry of Advanced Education (MAE), Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) C2T2, PLA Training Modules, and C2T2 PLA Learner Brochure definitions with additions from comment off the PLA listserv. At the end of the three definitions is a section that suggests the kinds of information we should be gathering that would provide information about the success of PLA in the system consistent with the definitions.

The Learner

For the learner, Prior Learning Assessment is only one potential element of the process of gaining a credential and/or recognition of prior learning. This definition includes the activities of finding out about PLA, generating and clarifying goals, gathering or generating evidence, having that evidence assessed, potentially earning credit, and refining goals. PLA can be defined from the learner's point of view as:

Prior Learning Assessment is a rigorous process that helps you to earn credit and gain recognition for the skills and knowledge you already possess, regardless of how and where your learning took place. The recognition of prior learning can be used toward the requirements of an academic or training program, occupational/professional certification or for employment/labour market entry purposes.

Post-secondary Institutions

The post-secondary institutions wish to be able to account for the time, work and funding that supports this activity and hence their PLA definition is intended to cover the entire range of flexible assessment activities that institutions agree includes PLA. These elements include the creation of the structure for providing the service, the advising and assessment activities, and the provision of credit, admission, or advanced standing. PLA can be defined from the post-secondary system's point of view as:

PLA is the development and maintenance of a process within institutions to advise students regarding their learning options and to formally assess their evidence of learning when there is no documentation or confirmation of the outcome of that learning from a recognized educational authority. A successful assessment may result in the award of credit, admission, or advanced standing and may, in some cases, reduce program completion time.

PLA:

- is a meaningful and high quality assessment using a consistent set of standards
- includes the training of assessors and advisors and the provision of advising and assessment services
- includes the development of an infrastructure within the institution to provide PLA services to students
- includes a variety of assessment tools
- does not include transfer credit
- may or may not result in a shortened program completion time
- may be eligible for transfer credit at other institutions
- is not limited to base-funded programs

Ministry of Advanced Education

The Ministry of Advanced Education defines PLA in order to be able to account for the funding it provides to support the activity. Since MAE funding to the college, university college, institute and agency system is determined by a negotiated FTE profile, the definition of PLA is limited to that which relates to the generation of “PLA” FTEs. As a result, the MAE definition is a narrower definition than that of the post-secondary system.

PLA is a formal assessment of an individual's evidence of learning when there is no documentation or confirmation of the outcome of that learning from a recognized educational authority.

PLA:

- must shorten program completion time and result in an award of credit.
- may include a variety of assessment tools including course challenge.
- does not include transfer credit for a credential granted by another institution or agency.
- does not include the granting of advanced placement, advanced standing, course exemption or course waiver

Data Collection

In order to provide valid and reliable information to the field and the Ministry, consistent data gathering procedures that honour the three definitions above need to be determined and agreed upon by the system and MAE. We suggest that all post-secondary institutions report the following data:

- The number of learners that apply for PLA credit and/or advanced standing using the Post-secondary Institution definition above.
- The number of learners that gain credit and/or advanced standing through a flexible assessment process using the Post-secondary Institution definition above.
- The total advanced standing granted.
- The number of PLA FTEs generated in base funded programs using the MAE definition above including total credit and course hour equivalents (CHE).