

***RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)  
WITHIN THE NEWCOMER COMMUNITY:  
A NEEDS ASSESSMENT***

***FINAL REPORT***

*Prepared on behalf of the Saskatchewan Association of  
Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA)*

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# **Acknowledgements**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Refugees and immigrants in Saskatchewan currently receive or access services through the Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA).

Members of SAISIA are:

- \* The Regina Open Door Society Inc. (RODS): Provides accessible settlement, community, education and employment programming and services to an annual average of 2,000 refugee and immigrant clients. RODS has been in operation for twenty-six years.
- \* The Saskatoon Open Door Society Inc. (SODS): Provides integrated support services that include: English as a Second Language (ESL); employment and career counselling; cultural orientation and adjustment programs; multicultural daycare; and referrals to community resources. In operation for twenty years, SODS provides services to an annual average of 2,000 clients.
- \* The Moose Jaw Multicultural Council (MJMC): A refugee and immigrant-serving agency for twelve years providing direct and indirect support for clients in the community and surrounding areas. MJMC provides direct settlement services, a volunteer support program, English as a Second Language, on-site child care for students, employment preparation and cross cultural educational programs.
- \* The Prince Albert Multicultural Council (PAMC): Works with the community and various community organizations to acknowledge, recognize, respect and accept the multicultural reality of Saskatchewan and Canada. The PAMC offers direct settlement services including English as a Second Language training to immigrants in Prince Albert and area.

In addition to language training, the greatest client demand continues to be for the employment and career counselling services that the settlement agencies provide. For recently arrived refugees and immigrants recognition of past learning has been the subject of considerable discussion. While the assessment and accreditation of foreign credentials and the obstacles posed by recognition from professional associations have been well documented, the potential needs of the above identified client group to utilize Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), has not been formally examined in Saskatchewan. Recognition of Prior Learning and the RPL components are defined as follows:

#### Recognition of Prior Learning

The Recognition of 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). There are three commonly understood categories of prior learning, including:

- \* Formal Learning - Learning which is structured and intentional, is achieved through credit-based programs/courses at accredited educational institutions (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., certificate/diploma/degree).
- \* Informal Learning - Learning which is the incidental learning resulting from life experience, workplace-based learning, volunteer activities, self-directed learning, hobbies, family, responsibilities, etc.

Qualification Recognition (QR)

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.

Credit Transfer (CT)

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)

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 learning, hobbies, volunteer activities, family responsibilities, etc.)

Previous research revealed that three groups across Canada suffer the most serious problems in obtaining recognition of prior learning and experience. These groups include: immigrants, people with prior learning gained through work and training, and transferees between post-secondary learning institutions or, in the case of licensed professions, between provinces.

With this information, the Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA) initiated a research project to determine if there was a need for RPL within the Newcomer Community.

RODS, in partnership with SODS, MJMC and PAMC, received funding from Saskatchewan Learning through the JobStart/Future Skills Sector Partnerships Program, to undertake a needs assessment and gap analysis in order to identify and gather essential information and statistical data regarding immigrants and refugees in Saskatchewan for whom RPL/PLAR may be of benefit.

The overall objective of the project was to identify the need and substantiate the perceived obstacles surrounding RPL. This is the first step in facilitating the ongoing goal of increasing access to relevant employment opportunities for immigrants and refugees whose skills and prior learning are not fully recognized. With the data collected from this project, settlement agencies will be able to develop and administer employment services that provide their clients with purposeful employment opportunities based on their experience and skills. Project deliverables included:

- \* Completion of a literature review of relevant material and related initiatives;
- \* Development of a 'framework for engagement' outlining the process for gathering the required data from the study population;
- \* Implementation of a process to access current agency files and data and conduct individual interviews to gather the necessary data;
- \* Development of a database, input of data, data analysis;
- \* Development of recommendations and strategies to begin a process of addressing the needs identified through the needs and gap analysis; and
- \* Completion of a final report outlining the work completed and recommendations developed.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Project Coordination

A Project Coordinator/Consultant, Zoya Shmyr was contracted to complete the project deliverables and Barrington Research Group Inc. was sub-contracted as the Database Consultant.

### Steering Committee

A RPL Steering Committee was established to oversee the project, provide input into the research process and ensure that project objectives were met.

### Research Process

The Steering Committee determined that sixty client names, presently in SAISIA employment records, would be screened for eligibility and that these eligibility prerequisites would include:

- \* Immigrants and refugees with at least primary education from outside Canada or who had a minimum of three years of work experience from outside Canada;
- \* Immigrants/refugees with at least a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) 3 language level.

An interview guide/schedule was developed and a pre-screening and random sample process of current SAISIA employment files, was implemented. Twenty-five phone interviews were conducted in Saskatoon, twenty-four phone interviews and one personal interview were conducted in Regina, and five phone interviews were conducted in each of the cities of Moose Jaw and Prince Albert.

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

### About the Interviewees

The research population included male/female immigrants/refugees who were primarily twenty-six to forty-five years old. The majority of the interviewees had been in Saskatchewan for less than two years. Although immigration status was not determined as an interview prerequisite, a greater number of the interviewees were 'immigrants' and the percentage of immigrants to refugees surveyed reflected present Saskatchewan immigration trends. In addition, the research produced a cross-section of immigrants and refugees from varying source countries.

### Education: Outside Canada

All sixty respondents had formal education from outside of Canada and the survey results indicated that seventy-seven percent of Newcomers had post-secondary education from an international country. Although academic themes were extremely varied, the primary areas of specialization were engineering and science.

### Educational Documents Brought to Canada and Assessed

The majority of the interviewees brought some form of educational document with them to Canada. The survey indicated that twenty-five immigrants and refugees had their documents assessed to Canadian standards. All of these interviewees requested the assessment on their own behalf and these assessments were generally completed by the International Qualifications Assessment Service (IQAS), the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan. The majority of the respondents received pre-assessment guidance during the assessment process, however post-assessment guidance was limited. In addition, most respondents indicated that the assessment was requested for entry into post-secondary education and after assessment, these immigrants/refugees applied for or entered, post-secondary institutions. The survey also showed that interviewees who brought post-secondary documents with them to Canada, did not bring primary or secondary school documents as they felt that these credentials were 'not necessary'.

Fifteen respondents reported that their degrees would have to be assessed by a professional licensing board for recognition and employment purposes and eight interviewees initiated this assessment. For one respondent, assessment resulted in full recognition of education obtained outside Canada and the granting of professional licensure to practice in Saskatchewan. For the other respondents, the results of assessments indicated that further education/exams as well as further experience in their professional field were required. Respondents indicated that the timeframe to complete the licensing procedure could range from zero to five years. During the assessment process, interviewees received both pre and post-assessment guidance.

### **Employment: Outside Canada**

Ninety-two percent of all interviewees had paid employment from outside Canada and generally these immigrants and refugees worked within a primary occupation for an average of eight and two-thirds (8.6) years. Since the occupations correlated with their highest level of education, engineering and science were the primary occupational themes. Interviewees, who had second jobs outside Canada, indicated that these jobs were in the areas of office/cashier/sales.

### **Volunteer Work and Other Skills: Outside Canada**

Although interviewees had an understanding of the role of a volunteer in Canada, they did not consider their non-paying work from outside Canada in the same context as a volunteer in Canada. After an explanation of the role of a volunteer, immigrants/refugees did indicate that they had non-paying jobs outside Canada, and these jobs were primarily in the areas of teacher/caregiver. Respondents also had difficulty identifying additional skills and abilities, obtained from outside Canada, not related to formal education. Many immigrants/refugees did not consider that skills learned on their own or outside an educational institution, could be measured or evaluated. After considerable discussion, interviewees indicated that they did have other skills/abilities and the primary skills themes reported were office duties, administration and computers.

### **Education: In Canada**

Seventy-two percent of all interviewees have attended or are attending the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Program and thirty percent of all interviewees indicated that they are, or have previously taken, additional English classes at various institutions. Those respondents who did not study English in Canada were generally immigrants with adequate to high English language abilities.

Other than English classes, sixty percent of all interviewees have, or are taking further education in Canada. Technical/trade courses, as well as high school upgrading/equivalency courses, were the most prevalent areas of study. Computers, science and math were the primary areas of specialization of respondents studying above a high school level. Interviewees stated that the main reason for obtaining additional education was the need to improve their skills in order to achieve acceptable employment in Canada. Interviewees not pursuing further education sited 'inadequate English' and 'presently working' as primary reasons for not returning to school.

The majority of the immigrants/refugees reported that they had attended an employment program that was primarily provided by the settlement agencies. Only fourteen (14) respondents indicated that there was a workplace component within the employment program. Upon completion of the workplace term, eight of the fourteen acquired employment, of which four are still employed in the same position.

**Employment: In Canada**

Interviewees indicated that the main barrier to employment in Canada was a lack of Canadian work experience. Although interviewees recognized that adequate English skills were also important, their immediate responses to employment barriers included: a lack of Canadian work experience, over-qualified for jobs, degree/training not recognized and inability to obtain interviews.

Considering that the majority of immigrants and refugees are new to Saskatchewan, the employment rate (43%) of all interviewees is admirable. However, respondents are presently working in entry-level jobs and in areas not related to their past education or experience. These interviewees reported that they are over-qualified for their present jobs. The majority of these respondents also indicated that they are actively looking for a job or a new job and are looking in areas that better reflect their past education and experience. The interviewees who are not presently looking for a job/new job, but plan to seek employment with the next year, reported that they will try and find entry-level jobs with good working conditions.

**Volunteer Work: In Canada**

The majority of the interviewees (68%) have worked on a volunteer basis in Canada. The major themes of these non-paying jobs were teaching, childcare, healthcare and helping other refugees.

**Recognition of Prior Learning**

Interviewees did not have any knowledge of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) and all indicated they have not previously heard of the process, methodologies or terms. After an explanation of the intent of RPL, a few interviewees indicated that they might benefit from RPL/PLAR, many interviewees could not differentiate between RPL and the professional accreditation/licensing processes and some interviewees could not grasp the intent of RPL or terminology used.

Although ninety-eight percent of all interviewees had resumes, the research showed that comprehensive documentation of prior learning/experiences was limited. Interviewees also indicated that although they had references from past employers, these references were primarily from Canadian employers of past/present entry-level jobs and interviewees had little, or no ability to obtain references from employers outside Canada. Documentation of past/present volunteer work or skills/abilities were almost non-existent. Also, interviewees did not have prior knowledge about portfolios.

The majority of interviewees felt they had skills that were being overlooked by employers, but they could not indicate if they had skills that were being overlooked by educational institutions. The results seem to indicate that many more immigrants/refugees have employment application experience as compared to assessment experience within educational institutions. As well, ninety-five percent of all interviewees were willing to undertake RPL processes within a workplace, whereas sixty percent were willing to demonstrate their knowledge and skills for credit in an educational institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of the research project was to determine if newcomers to Saskatchewan would benefit from Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The following recommendations were based on survey results and the recognized need for additional immigrant/refugee programming, information and assistance.

### 1. Need for RPL Education/Orientation

Newcomers to Saskatchewan require education and orientation on Recognition of Prior Learning and this information should be provided to them in a clear, concise manner with terminology edited to meet the comprehension level of the newcomer. Examples of *current* RPL practices, programs and costs among Saskatchewan educational institutes should be outlined so that immigrants and refugees do not conclude that all educational institutions, licensing boards and employers assess learning/experiences through RPL methods. In addition, a clear distinction must be made of the differences between RPL and professional accreditation/licensing processes. It is also necessary to develop RPL expertise within the settlement agencies so that RPL strategies can be incorporated into the services provided to clients. How RPL is ultimately viewed by newcomers or settlement agency staff will depend on the existing RPL success rates, the number of educational institutions using RPL, and the number of employers willing to look at RPL as a basis for future employment.

### 2. Need to Implement RPL Pilot Project in the Workplace

There is a need to implement RPL in the workplace. Not only did interviewees indicate the necessity for Canadian work experience, they also identified their need for employer contacts, for training in the workplace and a chance to prove their skills. Due to the high number of interviewees with international post-secondary degrees, it will be necessary to find employers within specialized areas. Employers will need to be involved in the training and assessment process and will also require some assurance that they will benefit from the experience.

### 3. Need to Enhance Intake/Documentation Procedures within Settlement Agencies

Since each of the settlement agencies have employment programs, or provide employment assistance to immigrants and refugees, it will be beneficial for SAISIA to develop a generic intake form that includes a checklist process for gathering all necessary information. The checklist should outline all appropriate informational material that will assist in the process of finding meaningful employment for SAISIA's clients. Along with current immigrant and refugee information, additional client materials should include: an outline of demonstrable skills, an inventory of skills/abilities, education, experience, skill gaps, profile stories and client needs. In order to enhance accessibility and maintenance of client files, it will be beneficial if employment information is stored in a computerized database. This will allow for an effective connection between refugee/immigrant clients and job opportunities and can also provide useful information for developing and implementing program interventions.

#### 4. Need to Provide Additional Information to Immigrants

*\*Enhance Web Site Information*

Prior to arrival to Canada, it is necessary to assure that potential immigrant applicants are aware of the need to acquire and bring all documents relating to prior learning and experience. In addition, information outlining the employment and accreditation reality as well as current services available should be provided to potential immigrants prior to, and upon, arrival in Saskatchewan. Enhanced web site information can assist with the dissemination of this information.

*\*Develop Central Location*

To alleviate frustration and provide accurate information to all immigrants and refugees, it is recommended that a 'central location' be established in order to provide accurate information on, and assistance with, assessment, accreditation and licensing procedures. The staff at this 'central location' can act as liaisons with newcomers and the educational/licensing/employer communities.

#### 5. Need for Additional Financial Support

Since meaningful employment is the ultimate goal of all newcomers, it is necessary to allocate adequate finances to improve and enhance settlement and employment programs. The above recommendations can only be implemented if mechanisms are established to support these programs.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The RPL Steering Committee agreed that the following actions shall be undertaken to implement the recommendations of this Report.

The RPL Steering Committee will work in partnership with the Saskatchewan Association of Immigrant Settlement and Integration Agencies (SAISIA) and other stakeholders, to develop strategies for the implementation of the recommendations of this Report. In this respect, the RPL Steering Committee and SAISIA *shall*:

1. Develop and implement a communication strategy to ensure communication of the results of the study is distributed to all key stakeholders;
2. Identify capacity within the sector to implement the recommendations of the Report and mechanisms for addressing identified gaps;
3. Identify mechanisms for the delivery of orientation services to immigrants and refugees on RPL and accreditation processes in Saskatchewan and for the development of appropriate orientation materials as needed. Under a grant from the Department of Government Relations and Aboriginal Affairs (GRAA), SAISIA has already begun work on identifying gaps in orientation services to newcomers. This work can serve as a first step toward addressing immigrants and refugees need for better information and orientation on RPL and accreditation processes in the province;
4. Identify mechanisms to develop and implement an RPL Pilot Project in the Workplace;
5. Identify mechanisms to develop and implement enhanced intake assessment and referral processes in the sector. Under the grant from GRAA, SAISIA is developing a standardized intake assessment and referral process for immigrant settlement agencies in the province; and
6. Identify mechanisms to enhance information available to potential immigrants and refugees abroad and in Saskatchewan, on RPL and accreditation processes in province.