Recognition of Prior Learning
in Regulated Professions: Environmental Scan

Report Submitted to:

**College of Dietitians of Ontario, and
Internationally Educated Dietitians' Pre-registration Program**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is grounded in the need and the opportunities for improved access to the profession of dietetics in Canada. It aims to identify potential enhancements and modifications to existing systems of applicant assessment within educational, training and regulatory bodies with a special focus on less traditional entrants; from adult learners seeking professional career transition or re-entry to the profession, to internationally educated dietitians seeking entry to the profession in Canada.

This document explores a variety of experiences and methods already used in Canada and around the world for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The examples showcased in this report are related to processes offered to applicants within regulated healthcare professions who are entering education, training and/or certification through alternative pathways, as this specific population of applicants requires greater flexibility in assessment methodologies than mainstream applicants for whom credentialing processes often suffice.

The findings of this environmental scan indicate that, as of yet, there is no single best practice or formula for selecting the most appropriate PRL assessment process for educational, training or certifying organizations. Although much has been published on the subject, in reality there is no unified repository of RPL tools, or even a sweeping agreement on which method serves best any given purpose. Nonetheless, a steadily growing number of educational, training and regulatory organizations around the world are moving away from relying solely on credentialing processes to recognizing prior learning based on ample empirical experience and reported satisfaction with these processes.

The proposed approach to the assessment of entrants to the profession of dietetics in Canada was inspired by the strengths of major RPL-based assessment strategies; the mandates of educational, training and regulatory bodies; and, the philosophical frameworks of transferability and fairness-related legislation. Our recommendations endeavour to be fully applicable to dietetics educational, training and regulatory organizations across Canada. The proposed model is based on a centralized, unified approach that can provide multiple advantages to participating organizations such as economies of scale, sustainability, fairness, full professional transferability and opportunities for joint funding should the professional partners choose to pursue it.

This exploratory phase is meant to introduce an opportunity for educators, training organizations and regulators in other provinces across Canada to collaborate towards a common goal based on common interests and common foundations of the knowledge, skills and judgements/competencies required for entry into dietetics practice.

2. THE RESEARCH TASK

2.1. About This Document

This document is grounded in the need and the opportunities for improved access to the profession of dietetics in Canada. It aims to identify potential enhancements and modifications to existing systems of applicant assessment within educational, training and regulatory bodies by exploring multiple experiences and methods already used in Canada and around the world. This document addresses some of the major assessment-related systemic barriers currently faced by individuals seeking entry to the profession; from recent Canadian-educated graduates seeking entry to practicum/internship, through adult learners seeking professional career transition or re-entry to the profession, to internationally educated dietitians seeking entry to the profession in Canada. The identification of potential approaches and solutions to existing barriers is expected to create opportunities for gradual, profession-wide evolution in assessment processes across organizations Canada-wide and, in turn, in the overall access to the profession of dietetics.

This research has been initiated based on the deep commitment of the College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO) and the Internationally Educated Dietitians Pre-registration Program (IDPP) to the improvement of existing credentialing practices as they apply to intentionally educated dietitians as well as all other individuals seeking entry to the profession.

The goal of this document is to initiate a profession-wide movement towards effective and sustainable mechanisms required to evaluate and validate applicants' current knowledge and skills/competencies. This will be achieved through:

- exploring existing practices of RPL in Canada and around the world;
- identifying best practices in this area that have the potential to significantly reduce current systemic barriers and are applicable to the profession; and,
- recommending next steps towards the development of an improved and sustainable RPL process.

2.2. Context and Background

This research was spearheaded by three organizations: the College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO), the Internationally Educated Dietitians Pre-registration Program (IDPP) and Fusion Global Education (FGE). It was supported by many other organizations including, but not limited to Dietitians of Canada and Ryerson

University's School of Nutrition and G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education.

2.2.1. About the organizations spearheading the research

- **College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO)**: CDO is the provincial regulator for the profession of dietetics. To date, it is responsible for regulating the largest provincial roster of Registered Dietitians (RDs) and for managing the largest annual number of applications for registration, both of Canadian and internationally educated individuals. CDO has been an avid supporter of the IDPP program since its launch in 2005, taking an active part in the program from steering, design and development, through advocacy and referral, to barrier-reducing policy revisions and ongoing support. CDO is highly committed to transformational processes that hold the promise for the growth of the profession of dietetics in Ontario and in Canada.

- **Internationally Educated Dietitians Pre-registration Program (IDPP)**: Funded by the Government of Ontario and delivered through Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education, this program launched in 2005 and is currently serving its seventh cohort of internationally educated dietitians (IEDs) bridging to registration in Ontario. In its six years of its operation, the IDPP has developed and piloted a highly experiential, competency based assessment methods and bridging processes[1]. The program continues to seek ways to enhance and expand these approaches in ways that can better serve IEDs and, potentially, Canadian educated professionals seeking entry to the profession through alternative pathways.

- **Fusion Global Education (FGE)**: FGE is an independent research and consulting company focusing on talent integration. FGE was founded by Nava Israel, the author of this report. Nava has immigrated to Canada in 2001 as an IED and was successfully registered as a dietitian in Ontario. Once funding was made available, Nava was hired by Ryerson University to develop and manage the IDPP program, utilizing professional best practices and her own experience in bridging to practice. Since then, Nava has been consulting on and actively developing bridging processes and tools for the assessment of prior learning, both generic and profession-specific (e.g., dietetics,

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[1] See detailed information about the IDPP program in section 4.4.3.4 of this report

physiotherapy, occupational therapy, social work, information technology and accounting). Nava's involvement in this project is based on a combination of her professional and personal commitment to the improvement of talent integration in general and in the profession of dietetics in particular.

2.2.2. What has already been done

Improving and evolving assessment approaches and methodologies is a process that can benefit many types of educating and qualifying organizations as well as many types of entrants to the profession. However, one of the major driving forces for change in recent years has been the need to create more equitable, accessible and fair entry processes for internationally educated applicants.

Throughout the six years of partnership with the IDPP, CDO has gained ample learning and insights into the challenges and barriers many individuals face demonstrating qualifications for entry to the profession. CDO also of the difficulties of the regulatory body to correctly and reliably assess applicants' level of professional knowledge and competence when relying on credentialing processes. This learning process has also shed light on the existing barriers faced by other individuals who are attempting to enter the profession through a variety of alternative, less conventional pathways.

Based on the IDPP successful progression beyond the initial pilot phase with demonstrated positive and effective outcomes, CDO has evolved its policies by modifying documentation requirements thus acknowledging the IDPP and its rigor of assessment as well as taking under consideration the approval of the program in as an equivalent to other Canadian accredited practical training programs. Through ongoing collaboration, multiple elements were revised and developed to better serve IDPP candidates, the bridging program itself and the regulatory body. Some of the major innovative components of assessment and recognition developed or supported by CDO and/or by the IDPP program in recent years include the following:

I.   CDO has proposed to amend the Ontario registration regulation to include Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) processes as one of the acceptable registration routes. This acknowledges limitations of current credentialing systems that apply to many applicants and opens the door for innovative, progressive assessment

methods.

II.   IDPP has developed well defined, highly experiential learning experiences and assessment methods to allow the enhancement and demonstration of competency by IDPP program candidates. This approach intends to create a more controlled, standardized, and transparent assessment environment and therefore greater likelihood for consistent and valid outcomes. It also aims to ensure the assessment of sufficient professional scope and depth of IDPP candidates.

III.   IDPP has developed and piloted and CDO has approved a comprehensive assessment of language and professional communication which combines a written examination and a profession-specific, day-long experiential assessment delivered by the IDPP. This approach allows CDO to expand the requirement for external, generic tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) to a more comprehensive, profession-specific and therefore more relevant assessment of applicants' communication skills.

IV.   In partnership with Ryerson's School of Nutrition, IDPP has developed, piloted and implemented a comprehensive, experiential, competency-based bridging curriculum for IEDs. This curriculum covers essential areas of professional knowledge and practice in the Canadian context of the profession.

V.   CDO and DC had established referral mechanisms to the IDPP for internationally educated applicants both through individual advisement and via website instructions and links. This approach aims to save IEDs' time in the search for appropriate supports. Beyond the operational purpose, it demonstrates DC's and CDO's support and approval of the bridging program, which builds trust and confidence in the process both on the part of international professionals and on the part of the profession in Ontario.

VI.   IDPP has developed a structured referral system and Ryerson's School of Nutrition for complementary coursework that isn't covered through the IDPP curriculum as per CDO requirements and/or candidate's individual needs. This partnership allows IDPP candidates to reach into the day school curriculum without having to go through the full-fledged, cumbersome registration process of a day student.

VII. CDO has approved a revised documentation method for the competency-based portfolio as it applies to IDPP candidates. This revision has significantly shortened and simplified the narrations from the original required format and has therefore lowered barriers both for IEDs and for CDO registration committee members.

VIII. IDPP, in partnership with Dietitians of Canada (DC), is supporting a structured training for preceptors/placement advisor, designed and delivered by IDPP. This initiative is intended to have a direct impact on the quality of mentoring and supervision provided to IDPP candidates by members of the profession, as well as an indirect impact on the buy-in and the willingness of professionals in the field to support the much needed training for aspiring dietitians, both Canadian and internationally educated.

IX. CDO is participating in ongoing discussions on IDPP program sustainability, this document and its expected outcomes being one of many potential strategies.

Despite the many CDO and IDPP initiatives in the area of assessment and access to the profession, much is left to be accomplished both on the provincial and the national level. CDO and IDPP desire to support and act as a catalyst for the exploration and development of improved assessment processes, with a special focus on IEDs, individuals returning to practice after an absence, people with degrees and learning experiences other than foods and nutrition or those who graduated from non-accredited food and nutrition programs. Improvement in the assessment process and methodology could apply to educational, training and regulatory bodies serving individuals studying, training and qualifying for dietetics. This exploratory phase is meant to introduce an opportunity for educators, training organizations and regulators in other provinces across Canada to collaborate towards a common goal based on common interests and common foundations of the knowledge, skills and judgements/competencies required for entry into dietetics practice.

2.3. The Challenge

Two major transformations in societal trends are changing the face of our profession and therefore the entry routes we need to offer our applicants.

The first shift or evolution relates to the growing number of adult learners. The introduction of "lifelong learning" and the increasing societal openness to career mobility and career change created a growing population of adult learners who seek to either enhance their existing knowledge and skills or re-train for a new career. In the profession of dietetics these adult learners would often be individuals returning to practice, individuals who were educated in non-accredited food and nutrition programs or individuals who were educated in other related fields and wish to enter the profession using the shortest re-training path possible.

The other shift is related to Canadian immigration trends and policies. Canada is known to be one of the most welcoming nations to immigrants, diversity and inclusiveness being one of the most fundamental values Canadians pride themselves with. Fundamental Canadian values, combined with globalization and the growing shortage of skilled professionals in the last decade, drove the Canadian government to transform the immigration framework from "absorptive capacity" to "human capital". Immigrants are no longer "accepted if they arrive" but are rather sought after in the pre-immigration stage as part of an economic growth strategy. This strategy emphasizes the selection of highly skilled immigrants based on their individual value to the economy (Goldberg, 2007).

Despite evident advantages of incoming educated, motivated and experienced individuals into the profession, be those Canadian or internationally educated, entry to education, training and registration, is still known to be a major barrier for adult learners.

Regulators face a particularly challenging situation based on their mandate to protect the public from charlatans, at worst, and incompetents at best. Whereas in the past they could control the education and training, the internships and the examination of entrants, they are now faced with a different applicant – someone who claims to be already educated and trained, either partially or fully.

Adams (2007) and Donaldson (2007) describe some the concerns related to the integration of international talent:

> *"As the number of foreign-trained professionals in Canada increases, professional bodies are faced with an eclectic array of practitioners with training that may differ substantially from our own. There is no guarantee that they possess the skills, background and approach deemed essential by practitioners in Canada. Standards remain a concern."*
>
> (Adams, 2007)

> *"(T)ransferability depends on the similarity between a migrant's country of origin and (the host nation) as regards (to) labour market requirements, social and cultural conditions, and language... The low value attached to pre-migration work experience does not necessarily imply discrimination. The skills some immigrants bring... may (genuinely) not be as useful to employers as similar skills acquired in (the host country). Some skills are firm-specific, and for that reason lost with change of job. Others, such as knowledge of professional practices and regulations, can be country-specific and therefore lost through migration..."*
>
> Donaldson (2007)

Both regulators and educational bodies traditionally relying on credentialing processes face multiple challenges in relation to entrants of a less conventional nature. The following are some of the major elements that contribute to these challenges:

a) **The lack of worldwide standardization of the dietetics profession,** which contributes to substantial differences in professional knowledge base, scope, practice, culture and ethical frameworks from one jurisdiction to another. These differences need to be captured and quantified, and critical gaps need to be identified. A document-based credentialing process would rarely provide educators with the level of detail they require to identify gaps (related to both scope and depth of knowledge and to the depth of individual critical analysis), nor will it provide training organizations and regulators with reliable information on an individual's current level of professional competency within the local context of practice. Consequently, educators, training bodies and regulators are challenged with determining assets and gaps, and therefore struggle with assigning relevant and effective learning,

training or bridging plans for these applicants.

b) **The reliance on regulatory legislation and higher education frameworks that were originally developed to serve the majority of their clients**, who are Canadian educated individuals, who have applied for or have just graduated from an accredited program. The credentialing system was developed based on the the assumption that it is reasonable to expect those who do not follow the common path to find their own ways to adjust since, at the time, they were few and far between.

c) **The need to serve adult learners** – As discussed earlier, either Canadian or internationally educated, adult learners bring a wealth of knowledge, experience and transferrable skills that can and should be recognized by regulators and educators. Nonetheless, such recognition requires a much finer assessment approach than the credentialing processes normally used by these organizations.

d) **The increasing pace by which professional knowledge evolves and expands**. This trend demands continuous updating of content and professional standards both by regulators and educators to prevent professional obsolesce. It also makes it nearly impossible for decision makers to have to rely on documented knowledge and skills that have been acquired many years ago.

e) **The challenge of providing Canadian supervised experience** in a healthcare environment that is limited in its capacity and/or ambivalent in its support for educating dietitians. This is true for all dietetics educational models in Canada where graduates compete over limited spaces of internship programs. If not successful, some of these graduates attempt to secure their own placements. Securing placements is very difficult for them, and even more so for IEDs and individuals returning to practice who might struggle with language, culture or currency of practice/education and who are therefore the least competitive. In this regard, educational and training bodies face a dual challenge using a credentialing-based selection system. One challenge is the reliance on applicants' grades, which aren't always reflective of individuals' overall capacity to practice. The other challenge is the use of a uniform training structure, content and duration, thus risking a hit-and-miss with some of the applicants who may need a longer, a shorter or a differently-focused learning and/or supervised experience.

2.4. Drivers for Change and Potential Approaches

To better illustrate specific challenges of existing credentialing systems, sample cases and insights were collected through interviews with Carolyn Lordon, Registration Program Manager, College of Dietitians of Ontario and Lori Buscher, Program Manager, Internationally Educated Dietitians' Pre-registration Program (IDPP) (see Appendix A).

The major disadvantages/weaknesses of the credentialing system are summarized in Table 1. See Appendix B for a detailed discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the credentialing process for educational, training and regulatory bodies.

Table 1: Major Disadvantages of the Credentialing System

	Entry to education	Entry to training	Registration
Professional Knowledge	• Can't verify existing knowledge • Can't identify current specific gaps and strengths • Can't allow/offer individualized learning plan	• Can't verify existing level of professional knowledge; compromises prioritization of candidates	• Can't verify existing knowledge • Can't identify current specific gaps and strengths • Required learning plan is based on assumed vs. verified knowledge gaps
Professional Communication	• Can't verify professional communication skills (mostly critical for advanced courses)	• Can't verify professional communication skills (and other soft predictors of success in training)	• Can't verify current professional communication skills
Professional Competency	N/A	• Can't verify prior experience and/or existing level of competency • Can't identify specific competency gaps and strengths • can't individualize training plan	• Can't verify prior experience and/or existing level of professional competency • Can't identify specific competency gaps • Required training plan is based on assumed vs. verified competency gaps.

These cases along with empirical insights provide clear evidence that the credentialing tools the profession is currently bound to are blunt and ineffective. This alone should compel the profession to act towards more refined and flexible assessment mechanisms. Additionally, we face a myriad of legislative, financial, professional and societal drivers that support such evolution. The following list includes some of the major drivers for change:

a) **Complying with legislation** - Along with immigration trends, the regulatory landscape in Canada has changed markedly over the past five years. The first legal implication is the introduction of provincial Fairness legislation related specifically to registration practices in certain jurisdictions, Ontario being one of them. This legislation requires that credential assessment processes employed by regulators adhere to the principles such as fairness, timeliness, transparency, consistency and objectivity. The second is the more recent changes to Chapter 7 of the "Internal Agreement on Trade" (IAT), which requires that any professional licensed/registered in one of Canada's jurisdictions (including the internationally educated cohort), be registered in another province in an equivalent class of registration without any additional material requirement. At present, the credentialing system is both unaccommodating to a timely and fair access of IEDs to the profession and decentralized, with regulators setting entry-to-practice conditions inconsistent with other provinces. The lack of an adaptive and unified registration system for IEDs may result in failure to meet requirements for both fairness and mobility. It could also open the system for 'registration shopping' where applicants seek the easiest access to registration, potentially reducing the level of professionalism generally.

b) **Gaining economic advantages** – The creation of a centralized approach to the assessment of applicants for registration across all provinces and territories could offer clear economic advantages where provinces and territories wouldn't have to separately invest in an end-to-end development and implementation of assessment materials and methods– a major cost saver, especially for the smaller provinces. This could potentially be applied not only to regulatory bodies but also to higher education and training organizations, creating the economic benefits gained from full transferability.

c) **Enabling access to the profession for internationally educated individuals –** Modifying systems from credentialing to assessment-based access may significantly reduce IEDs' existing barriers for education, training and registration in Canada through:

- accessing centralized online assessment components in the pre-arrival stage, therefore shortening overall time to registration;
- identifying specific knowledge gaps and other bridging needs related to language, cultural differences and professional practice early in the application process, therefore setting realistic expectations and allowing IEDs to better allocate time and financial resources for bridging; and,
- determining the required duration, scope and focus of supervised placements based on IEDs' demonstrated competencies therefore enhancing learning experiences and avoiding redundancies.

Applying a fair and effective process of entry to the profession, will not only increase the proportion of culturally and ethnically diverse dietitians available to the public, but also expand and enrich our professional repertoire. Cultural diversity has always been a celebrated feature of Canadian society, but not necessarily a well served one. Cultural and ethnic diversity must be as prevalent among dietitians as it is among their clients in order to enhance overall quality of service to all.

d) **Expanding access to the profession for Canadian educated individuals** – The very same modifications that would serve IEDs, would serve locally educated and/or trained individuals by better identifying their knowledge gaps, their professional and personal readiness for practicum and their competence to practice. The move from credentialing to assessment of prior learning, therefore, holds the potential for:

- shorter and more relevant education/learning plans for individuals who need to close specific knowledge gaps (e.g. educated in a different profession or in non-accredited program);
- shorter placements for those who demonstrate sufficient existing/transferrable skills, subsequently opening more internship opportunities for other applicants;
- enhanced learning experiences within each placement through customized learning plans; and,
- a more timely and effective process of re-entry to the profession.

Through this document we hope to demonstrate that utilizing the strengths of a methodology known as **Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition** (PLAR), or the more recently branded term - **Recognition of Prior Learning** (RPL), has the potential to offer effective tools to identify an individuals' existing knowledge, skills and professional capacity to practice.

In conclusion, time and experience has shown that the existing credentialing process widely used by educational, training and registration bodies might not be fully transparent, consistent and timely and also, most materially, isn't always successful in assessing actual gaps and/or readiness for education, training and/or practice. It is therefore failing to serve the needs of many applicants who are attempting to access the profession, the needs of educators who are attempting to provide the most useful and relevant education to its clients, the needs of training organizations who are trying to provide the most useful and relevant training, and the needs of regulatory bodies who are trying to protect the public.

This report integrates researched evidence with empirical data in the attempt to help the profession of dietetics progress towards more effective entry processes.

3. ABOUT RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

Historically grounded in the work of institutions for higher education, RPL has expanded around the world into the realm of entry to regulated professions and employment. RPL/PLAR has been a key innovative component in Canada's lifelong learning agenda; it emphasizes the notion that creditable learning is both measurable and independent of its source. Some of the formal definitions used for PLAR/RPL are as follows:

According to the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2007):

> *Prior learning assessment and recognition defines processes that allow individuals to identify, document, have assessed and gain recognition for their prior learning. The learning may be formal, informal, non-formal or experiential. The context of the learning is not key to the process as the focus is on the learning.*

In their Recognition for Learning Community, The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA, 2010) points out that PLAR "*looks at learning, not just experience*" and defines this as:

> *"..the acquisition of:*
> - *Skills*
> - *Knowledge*
> - *Attitudes such as self-reliance, collaboration, concern for quality*"
> *"...what's important is whether the knowledge or skills people have learned up to the present time are relevant to a particular educational credential, specific workplace training requirements, or a trade or occupational standard."*

The College of Nurses of Ontario provides a definition of PLAR in their Report, A Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) Model for Nursing Baccalaureate Equivalency (2006):

> *"PLAR is based on a belief/value system that supports opportunities for individuals to have all relevant learning recognized and counted towards a qualification. It is consistent with other strategies that support diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning.*

> *Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes learning (knowledge, skills, and judgment) that cannot be fully recognized through the traditional mechanisms of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, and accreditation. Prior learning may be acquired through academic study, professional practice and/or other formal and informal learning activities. To be recognized, prior learning must be appropriate to the context in which it is accepted and have an adequate balance between theory and practical application."*

The Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials *(CICIC, 2010*) defines PLAR as:

> "*PLAR is the process that helps adults to demonstrate and obtain recognition for learning that they acquire outside of formal education settings. PLAR focuses on what adults know and can do."*

The Canadian Council on Learning (*Amichand et al, 2007*) defines PLAR as:

> *"Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) is a process through which the skills and knowledge that an individual acquires outside of formal educational institutions are formally recognized. School boards, colleges and universities use PLAR to award academic credit for skills and knowledge learned in the workplace, during independent study, or through other means such as volunteering. Professional regulatory bodies use PLAR to assess the knowledge and skills of foreign trained professionals for Canadian licensing and certification. Employers can use PLAR to identify applicants' skills and reward the knowledge and skills of their workers for placement, transfer and promotions."*

Although there are many definitions for PLAR/RPL, the key elements include the identification of what an individual has learned that is relevant to some specific purpose; in this case - entry to the dietetics profession. Regardless of the assessment methods, the PLAR/RPL assessment must be rigorous enough to guarantee to academic institutions, training organizations, regulatory bodies and employers that applicants offer sufficient professional knowledge and competence, be they Canadian or internationally educated (Riffell, 2006). In addition, PLAR/RPL can help applicants, employers, regulatory bodies, training bodies and academic institutions to determine if, and which, additional training or education is required.

Terminology in the area of PLAR can be confusing. According to Riffell (2006), in Canada there are three assessment processes associated with assessment and recognition of international credentials branded by three distinct titles:

- **Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR**), which assesses formal and informal learning,
- **Foreign Credential Recognition (FCR)** which assesses foreign credentials to determine its equivalency to established Canadian standards, and
- **Qualification Recognition (QR)** which assesses foreign credentials and competence in the field usually through competency-based assessments, bridge-to-work experience, mentorship, etc.

Despite the distinctions among these processes, confusion is growing in the education and regulatory/professional sectors due to the lack of consistency in definition and applications of these assessment processes. For example, many Canadian colleges, occupational bodies and settlement agencies use processes they name "PLAR". However, universities may be conducting reflections-based narratives on prior learning experiences under the title of PLAR courses; colleges may be evaluating holistic learning through a variety of assessment tools (written or practical tests, demonstrations, interviews, etc.) under the PLAR title; settlement agencies may use a similarly titled process to showcase informal learning of clients through portfolios; and, regulatory bodies may conduct a traditional document-based credentialing process under the title of PLAR.

> *The three basic principles of RPL are:*
> - *RPL <u>is not</u> about listing and recognition of work experience;*
> - *RPL <u>is</u> about the testing and acknowledgement of knowledge and skills that have been acquired to date.*
> - *The acknowledgement of current knowledge and skills requires verifiable, quantifiable evidence.*

To avoid confusion, for the purposes of this report we will use the term **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** to describe a system which assesses applicants' knowledge and professional competency for the purposes of entry to educational institutions, training programs and eventually to registration as a dietitian in Ontario. As such, the RPL system <u>incorporates</u> all three assessment components: PLAR (includes PLAR assessment tools, portfolios, and workplace credit reviews), FCR and QR.

Generally speaking, a successful RPL process needs to include the following components[2]:

a) **Fairness -** Provide standards of entry to the profession that are substantially equivalent to that required of all other entrants. These standards must be equitable for all applicants. Specifically, organizations practicing RPL are expected to:
- assess current professional knowledge and competence by providing a variety of authentic, credible assessment methods;
- ensure applicants have the opportunity to present a variety of sufficient, acceptable evidence of learning to prove competence in the field sought;
- ensure that assessment processes are performed fairly without any form of racial, religious or sexual discrimination;
- accept that knowledge must be equivalent but not identical; the experience should be comparable in breadth, depth, sophistication and complexity;
- ensure that validated prior learning results in accelerated achievement of formal acknowledgement;
- provide alternatives to mandatory postgraduate training programs;
- ensure authenticity of documentation for the learning presented, if documentation is used as an optional assessment tool; and
- provide a mechanism of appeal.

b) **Transparency** - Enable applicants to see and understand the criteria used and the methods employed to process applications so that there is no perception of hidden agenda or motivations. Specifically, regulators practicing RPL are expected to:
- ensure that clear program competency statements are provided to the learner as the framework for evaluation;
- provide key sources of information (e.g., Canada-wide portal, national website, brochure, trained staff);
- include complete, accurate and up-to-date information in all information sources;
- provide access to adequate information about, and orientation to, the process;

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[2] Adapted from CICIC (2010), Office of the Ontario Fairness Commissioner (2010), Dietitians of Canada (2007), Riffell (2006), Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology in BC (1999) and Canadian Labour Force Development Board report (1997).

- describe all RPL components in plain language for purpose, steps and uses;
- produce assessment reports that provide clear explanation of, and reasoning for, outcomes;
- provide pre-screening/self-assessment tools as part of a preparation process.

c) **Consistency and quality assurance -** Ensure that all criteria and requirements are always the same, or at least equivalent, for all candidates. Specifically, organizations practicing RPL are expected to:
- establish standard procedures for components of the RPL system;
- train all personnel involved in RPL (assessors, applicant advisers, facilitators of portfolio development) in the appropriate skills and knowledge relevant to their roles and responsibilities in the process;
- Ensure that all evaluators/attesters come from an appropriate range of professional/occupational backgrounds and possess appropriate training and experience to assess learning;
- create and consistently use standardized assessment tools;
- ensure that personnel involved with RPL activities follow procedures in a timely, equitable, consistent and reliable manner;
- carry out periodic review of the RPL system's policy and procedures using feedback from all stakeholders; and,
- record the basis of all RPL decisions for future reference.

d) **Accessibility –** Making every effort to provide physical and financial accessibility to the certification process. Specifically, regulators practicing RPL are expected to:
- use innovative strategies to support financial accessibility to the RPL system, and
- use innovative strategies to support physical accessibility to the RPL system (e.g., enable potential immigrants to complete most of the steps for registration before they arrive in Canada).

e) **Client responsiveness -** Making every effort to meet the needs of all applicants, including those with diverse and non-traditional learning backgrounds, or limited understanding of local regulatory standards and practices. Specifically, organizations practicing RPL are expected to:
- acknowledge that learning occurs in many different contexts and in many ways;

- acknowledge that evidence of learning can be demonstrated in a variety of ways; provide a number of ways to carry out an assessment with individuals having the opportunity to choose how their assessment will be done;
- provide assessment outcomes within a reasonable timeframe;
- provide assessment outcome reports that are helpful and instrumental in the development of a feasible learning path towards registration;
- offer post-assessment counselling about the path into the profession;
- seek feedback from all stakeholders;
- make referrals to more appropriate services when needed; and,
- allocate adequate resources to ensure the RPL system is responsive to changing needs of applicants.

f) **Transferability –** Recognition resulting from RPL should be fully transferable and portable within and between organizations and jurisdictions.

4. RPL IN PRACTICE: AN INTERNATIONAL SCAN

This environmental scan focuses on RPL assessment strategies in the attempt to identify best practices in the area. The vast majority of these examples are related to applicants who are entering education, training and/or certification through non-conventional pathways, as this specific population of applicants requires greater flexibility in assessment methodologies than mainstream applicants for whom credentialing processes often suffice. These may include entry pathways for migrant professionals and for locally-educated adult learners/applicants re-entering the profession or changing careers.

It is important to note that this environmental scan is **<u>not</u>** a compendium or inventory of assessment practices around the world or even within Canada. Rather it is a sampling of practices aimed to explore different approaches. Examples were selected to cover a range of the more interesting and innovative processes. The perimeter of the scan was limited to RPL-related practices in healthcare professions, mostly dietetics and nursing, to ensure relevance and applicability. These include examples of:

- certification-related RPL in dietetics and nursing in the USA as it applies to international applicants;
- certification-related RPL in dietetics and nursing in Australia as it applies to international applicants;
- certification-related RPL in dietetics and nursing in the UK and the European Union member countries as it applies to international applicants; and,
- RPL processes related to entry to educational, training and regulated healthcare professions in Canada and the Provinces as it applies to both local and international applicants.

In collecting this information a variety of sources were used; from research findings to intergovernmental reports; from the advice given on their web sites to telephone interviews with officials in various countries and jurisdictions to confirm the actual procedures being used when it was unclear. Where possible, original terms and phrasing were reproduced, others were modified for clarity. Process diagrams were created to provide context to each of the RPL methods used and make easier comparison of different bodies in different countries.

4.1. The USA

"There are over 100,000 foreign-trained nurses practicing in the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' 2004 National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses. Of these, 50% were educated in the Philippines, 20% were educated in Canada, and a much smaller percent were educated in a variety of other countries (For example, 2.3% were educated in Nigeria.)"

Recruiting Trends, Kennedy Information, 2008

The USA has a highly developed health industry which accounts for 15.3% of GDP - compared to 10% for Canada and 3.8% for the Philippines – virtually the top spender in the world (*The Economist 2010*). It attracts many overseas professionals with high wages and excellent facilities and has special arrangements with certain countries to accept trained professionals. Incoming professionals must register to work in an individual state but cooperative arrangements are in existence at a national level. For example, the NCSNB (National Council of State Nursing Boards) has an agreed entry examination for nurses, NCLEX that applies to all states. On the other hand, each state can inhibit movement of health professionals by creating minor rules that have to be observed and vary from state to state.

Of interest in the USA approach to registration is that while it can be seen to be more relaxed in acceptance of previous training it also has sophisticated examination systems that attempt to test current knowledge and skills. These interactive, computer based and proctored tests produce different questions for candidates based on the last response and aim to go beyond mere rote learning.

4.1.1. Nurses

Each USA state has a nursing board. Each nursing board has its own set of regulations for overseas-trained nurses. To work in the USA as an RN, one has to be licensed by the relevant state board of nursing. However there are some common elements. To become a licensed nurse in the USA, most states have two main requirements:

1. Approval of the Commission on Graduates of Foreign Nursing Schools (CGFNS) *followed by,*
2. National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN)

Chart 1 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in USA.

Chart 1: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in USA

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│   Application to become Registered Nurse in the USA:      │
│      Candidates must apply to the state Nursing Boards    │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                            │
                            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                      Credentials                          │
│  Candidates submit documents to confirm training and      │
│                      experience                           │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                            │
          ┌─────────────────┴──────────────────┐
          ▼                                     ▼
┌───────────────────────┐        ┌───────────────────────────┐
│  CGFNS Qualifying Exam │        │  Language Proficiency Exam │
│  (Computer based;      │        │                           │
│  offered worldwide)    │        │                           │
└───────────────────────┘        └───────────────────────────┘
          └─────────────────┬──────────────────┘
                            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│               NCLEX-RN Examination                        │
│               (CAT) computer based exam                   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                            │
                            ▼
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                   State Licence as RN                     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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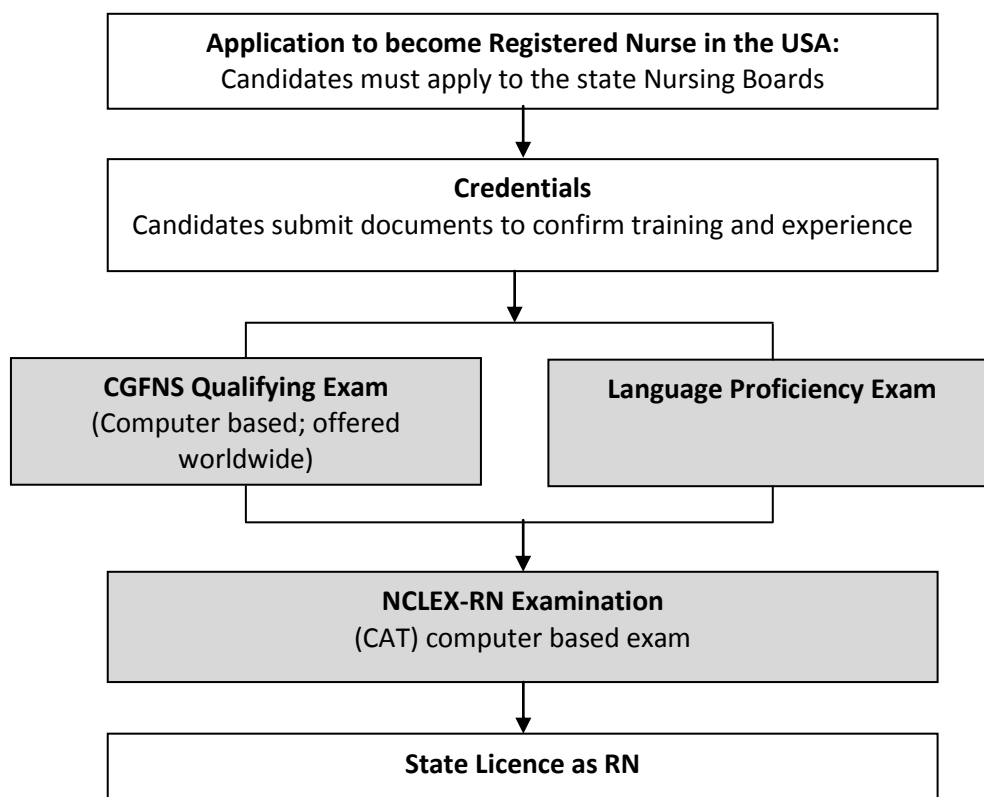
CGFNS - The CGFNS Certification Program is designed for first-level, general nurses educated and licensed outside of the United States who wish to assess their chances of passing the U.S. registered nurse licensing examination. CGFNS International is an immigration-neutral, non-profit organization, globally recognized as an authority on credential evaluation of the education, registration and licensure of nurses, health care and other professionals worldwide. The Certification Program is a three-part program, comprised of a credentials review, a one-day qualifying exam of nursing knowledge, and an English language proficiency exam. Upon successful completion of all three elements of the program, the applicant is awarded a CGFNS Certificate.

<u>CGFNS Qualifying Exam</u>: The exam tests knowledge and understanding of nursing as it is taught and practiced in the United States today, using objective, multiple-choice and alternate-item type questions designed by experts to help predict the likelihood of passing the NCLEX-RN. The actual exam is divided into two parts with a total of 260 questions. The qualifying exam measures the applicant's knowledge and is based on what nurses must know and do when they practice nursing in the United States. The qualifying exam is held four times a year in over 40 countries in the world. This exam carries fees that contain the fee for the credential review.

The CGFNS qualifying examination is a paper and pencil examination. It contains all multiple choice questions and is given in two parts. Test-takers have a total of four hours to complete the examination with a lunch break in the middle. Results are sent approximately five to six weeks after taking the CGFNS qualifying examination. Beyond the numerical score and a passing score for their examination outcome reports provide test takers a diagnostic profile with information on how the candidate performed in four different subject areas, or Client Needs categories: safe and effective care environment, health promotion and maintenance, psychosocial integrity, and physiological integrity. Score reports can also be viewed online on the CGFNS website.

Beyond general information on their website, the CGFNS issued two publications for candidates that can be bought on Amazon.com. One of the books introduces international nurses to the US health system while the other gives detailed instructions and advice as to how to complete the Qualifying Exam.

A new Internet-based CGFNS Qualifying Exam® will be launched in March 2011. It will be given during a five-day period in March, July, September and November in over 469 locations. Unlike the paper-based exam, the Internet-based exam is a combined, single test of approximately three hours. CGFNS has selected *Kryterion* as its test delivery vendor to administer the Internet-based examination. Kryterion is a full-service test development and delivery company that provides online testing technology integrating item banking, test delivery and real time reports. Kryterion is also the market leader in live Online Proctoring, which utilizes remote video monitoring to observe test takers where they live, learn or work[3].

NCLEX-RN - The NCLEX examinations are developed and owned by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing, Inc. (NCSBN). NCSBN administers these

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[3] Further details can be found online at http://www.kryteriononline.com/

examinations on behalf of its member boards, which consist of the boards of nursing in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories.

To qualify as a nurse in the USA each board of nursing requires a candidate for licensure to pass the appropriate NCLEX examination, NCLEX-RN for registered nurses and the NCLEX-PN for vocational/practical nurses. NCLEX examinations are designed to test the knowledge, skills and abilities essential to the safe and effective practice of nursing at the entry-level. NCLEX examinations are provided in a computerized adaptive testing (CAT) format[4] and are presently administered by Pearson VUE in their network of Pearson Professional Centers (PPC) internationally.

An NCLEX-RN examination can be anywhere from 75 to 265 items. Of these items, 15 are pre-test items that are not scored. Regardless of the number of items administered, the time limit for this examination is six hours. The test is intended to be a technically sophisticated test of the candidates' knowledge and skills and especially of their critical thinking and to be sufficient to enable judgement as to the suitability of the candidate for registering as an RN.

The NCLEX tests are some of the most sophisticated in the health professions but even the complex construction and statistical analysis have limitations. They assert a 95% Confidence level and claim to know the difficulty level of every question – but these are statistical statements and are only true within the statistical definition. For example, they give a p-value (percentage of candidates correctly answering the item) that governs whether an item will be accepted into the item pool. Since the NCLEX is an adaptive exam, items in different difficulty levels are required to build the item pool for candidates with a wide range of nursing ability and who will draw on different items and take different routes through the exam.   Students who have to retake the exam will not encounter the same questions as the master item pool is sufficiently large to allow sub pools to obviate this happening.

The average number of questions administered to each candidate in 2009 was 115 on NCLEX-RN and 121 on NCLEX-PN. For the RN the average time taken was 2.5 hours while 2% of candidates ran out of time. The candidate has theoretically 50% chance of answering each item correctly. As the candidate cannot go to the next question until they have answered the last question, each question should be attempted to allow them to proceed. The questions being administered are selected based on the answers to the previous questions and the exam ends when it can be determined that a candidate's performance is either above or below the passing

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[4] See more information on the CAT method in section 4 of this document.

standard, regardless of the number of items answered or the amount of testing time elapsed.

The NCLEX-RN is a heavily researched exam and a starting point for studying the research can be found on the NCSBN website: https://www.ncsbn.org/index.htm This site gives many references to studies related to this exam. Of initial interest is a set of FAQ's which answer some of the basic questions.

Following success at the NCLEX-RN the candidate has to be licensed by an individual state. Licensing, however, is governed by the states and is subject to many unique conditions.

The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. Global access to the assessments which allows internationally educated applicants to gain access to the profession in the pre-landing stage or, alternatively, gain a powerful reality check that will inform their decision to immigrate or pursue professional qualification in the US.
2. A staged approach, by which each assessment functions as a check-point for the following. This method allows applicants to plan and execute required professional development following each of the stages.
3. These assessment tools are subject to a highly rigorous validation process.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL.
2. The process doesn't include the assessment of professional communication or response to real-time, interactive professional scenarios.
3. The CAT assessment is a fairly high maintenance tool that requires continuous updates (utilizing the non-graded questions). It is easily justifiable for large populations of test-takers; less so for small professions.
4. The CAT assessment tool focuses mostly on establishing pass/fail rates and is not as powerful a tool in providing a good diagnostic of specific gaps.

4.1.2. Dietetics

The entry to dietetics profession in the USA is regulated through a triumvirate of organizations. These are:

- American Dietetics Association - The ADA is the professional organization for food and nutritional professionals with over 65,000 members. The ADA is a credentialing, but not a regulatory body.
- The Commission on Accreditation for Dietetics Education (CADE) is the accrediting body for ADA and it sets standards for dietetics education. Programs accredited and approved by CADE meet the educational requirements approved by CDR – see below. Note: The CDR and CADE have separate governing bodies from the ADA.
- Commission on Dietetic Registration - This body – CDR – is the credentialing agency for the ADA and is a member of the National Commission for Certifying Agencies.

Similarly to Nursing, the *Registration Examination for Dietitians* is offered in a CAT format as follows:

- Development and delivery: CDR's testing agency, ACT, has developed their own testing network to administer the examinations at over 225 approved test sites nationwide, located in universities and community colleges. In preparation for the implementation of computer based testing for the entry-level registration examinations, CDR's testing agency, ACT, conducted simulation studies. These were designed to validate that the questions would provide the information required to make a valid pass/fail decision on a computer based examination.

- Examination format: Computer adaptive testing (CAT) is one specific type of computer based testing. An adaptive test is commonly shorter than a traditional paper-and-pencil test. CAT also results in more measurement efficiency as it administers questions that provide the most important information about the participant's competence. Each participant is given a minimum of 125 questions out of which 100 are scored questions and 25 are pre-test questions. The maximum number of questions possible is 145. The exam varies in length.

- Question selection: In addition to monitoring the participant's performance, the computer also monitors the difficulty level of the questions administered. If the participant receives an examination that is slightly more difficult, fewer questions need to be answered correctly to pass the examination. Conversely, if the participant receives a slightly easier examination, more questions must be answered correctly to pass the examination. This process ensures that participant are neither rewarded nor penalized because they took an easier or more difficult examination. The scores of pre-testing questions aren't included in an applicant's report; these are being piloted through the exam to show how well items perform before they are used in the scored portion of any future examination. The pre-test questions are integrated in the exam and can't be distinguished from those that are scored.

- Scoring system: the examination is scored on a scale of 1–50. The scaled score required to pass the examination is always 25. However, the number of questions the participant must answer correctly to obtain the scaled score of 25 varies from one examination to another because each examination includes a different set of questions. However, the participant must complete a minimum of 125 questions to pass the exam. The CAT format evaluates the participant's performance compared to the passing standard for that particular examination. Some questions may be slightly easier or more difficult than others.

- Outcome report: participants receive score results onscreen upon completion as well as a printed score report. The score report provides the participant's scaled score required to pass the examination.

The main advantage of this assessment process is the rigor of the validation process.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a full credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL.
2. There is no staged assessment process and therefore no way for applicants to prepare or gauge their realistic level of knowledge or competency prior to taking the registration exam.
3. The process doesn't include the assessment of professional communication or response to real-time, interactive professional scenarios.

4. The CAT assessment is a fairly high maintenance tool that requires continuous updates (utilizing the non-graded questions). It is easily justifiable for large populations of test-takers; less so for small professions.
5. The CAT assessment tool focuses mostly on establishing pass/fail rates and is not as powerful a tool in providing a good diagnostic of specific gaps.

4.2. Australia

Australia has many similarities to Canada as it also has a federal constitution with many powers held by the states or territories including healthcare management. However, in Australia the federal government has a much greater ability to take action, especially as it relates to internationally educated applicants, than can occur in Canada. Australia has an immigration category called General Skilled Migration (GSM) which has special condition for those who have an occupation on the Skilled Occupation List (SOL). For these occupations credentialing can normally take place pre-arrival. Skills assessment for this purpose is undertaken by the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia through the Australian Nursing & Midwifery Council (ANMC).

The AHPRA is responsible for the registration and accreditation of 10 health professions across Australia; dietetics is not one of them. AHPRA's operations are governed by the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law Act 2009, which came into effect on 1 July 2010. This law means that for the first time in Australia, these health professions are regulated by nationally consistent legislation. AHPRA supports the 10 National Boards that are responsible for regulating these health professions. The primary role of the Boards is to protect the public and they set standards and policies that all registered health practitioners must meet. However, the only assessment pathway offered by AHPRA is credentialing-based.

4.2.1. Nursing

The Australian Nursing & Midwifery Council (ANMC) is the independent accrediting authority for nursing and midwifery under the national scheme. The assessment of internationally educated nurses includes two RPL-based components:

Language Competency Requirements - Applicants from countries with a first language other than English are required to take two English Language test; the first is a test of their English language competence and the second is an occupational language test.

Competency Based Assessment Programs/Migrants Bridging Program (CBAP) **-** Applicants who have had their qualifications and skills assessed and gaps identified are required to undertake a Competency Based Assessment Program.
The CBAP, also known as Bridging Courses, is intended to introduce students into the unique elements of Australian practice, assess their practical skills against the Australian list of competencies and assure the assessors that the student can undertake safe practice. The courses last from six to twelve months (based on identified gaps).

Chart 2 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in Australia.

The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. The process includes the assessment of profession-specific language.
2. The competency assessment process is integrated with a bridging-like process; individuals are trained within the local context which is extremely valuable in inducting the migrants to Australian culture and practice post-bridging.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL.
2. Bridging needs are identified based on document-based credentials vs. demonstration of current knowledge and competency. This may result in gaps, inaccuracies and/or irrelevancies in the bridging plan.

Chart 2: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in Australia

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│      Application for Registration with the AHPRA  │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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English Language Proficiency; generic and profession-specific

Assessed for Equivalence of Education and Practice to Australian

If Applicant is from New Zealand, directly to Registration

If rejected: must take full program for local candidates

If problematic: referred to Nursing Board (ANMC) for clarification; If approved - to CBAP

If acceptable but with conditions: meet conditions then to CBAP

If acceptable: to CBAP

Competency Based Assessment Programs (Bridging Programs)

Candidates Registered as RN`s in Australia

4.2.2. Dietetics

Dietitians in Australia are expected to have qualifications that meet the eligibility requirements for membership of the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) and accreditation as an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD). The APD Program is conducted by DAA as a means of self-regulation by the profession to obtain and maintain high levels of professional practice. The assessment and recognition of dietetic qualifications in Australia is the responsibility of the DAA. As of February 1, 2011 the procedure involves two stages. The first stage is a credentialing review and a language assessment (either a generic test or Occupational English Test (OET) in Dietetics). This is an assessment of the candidates' ability to meet four conditions to move to Stage 2, to sit the DAA Professional Examination in Dietetics (Dietetics Association of Australia, 2010).

The second stage is a two-part examination consisting of written case studies and oral components. The purpose of the examination is to assess the competence of overseas-educated Dietitians to practice dietetics in Australia. Dietitians who pass both the oral and the written components of the examination will be eligible to apply for membership in DAA and to become a provisional APD.

The examination in dietetics includes:
1. A three hour written part that includes three case studies, one for each major area of practice (clinical, community/public health and food service). Based on a conversation with Eleanor Beck, Manager, Accreditation, Recognition and Education Services, Dietitians' Association of Australia (DAA), this format is proving to be challenging for assessors in terms of standardizing scoring as it relies solely on open ended case analysis. This is the main reason this assessment is now being re-developed into a multiple choice format.
2. A 45-minute oral examination that consists of a single simulation with a standardized patient. This interaction can be facilitated based on the applicant's need.
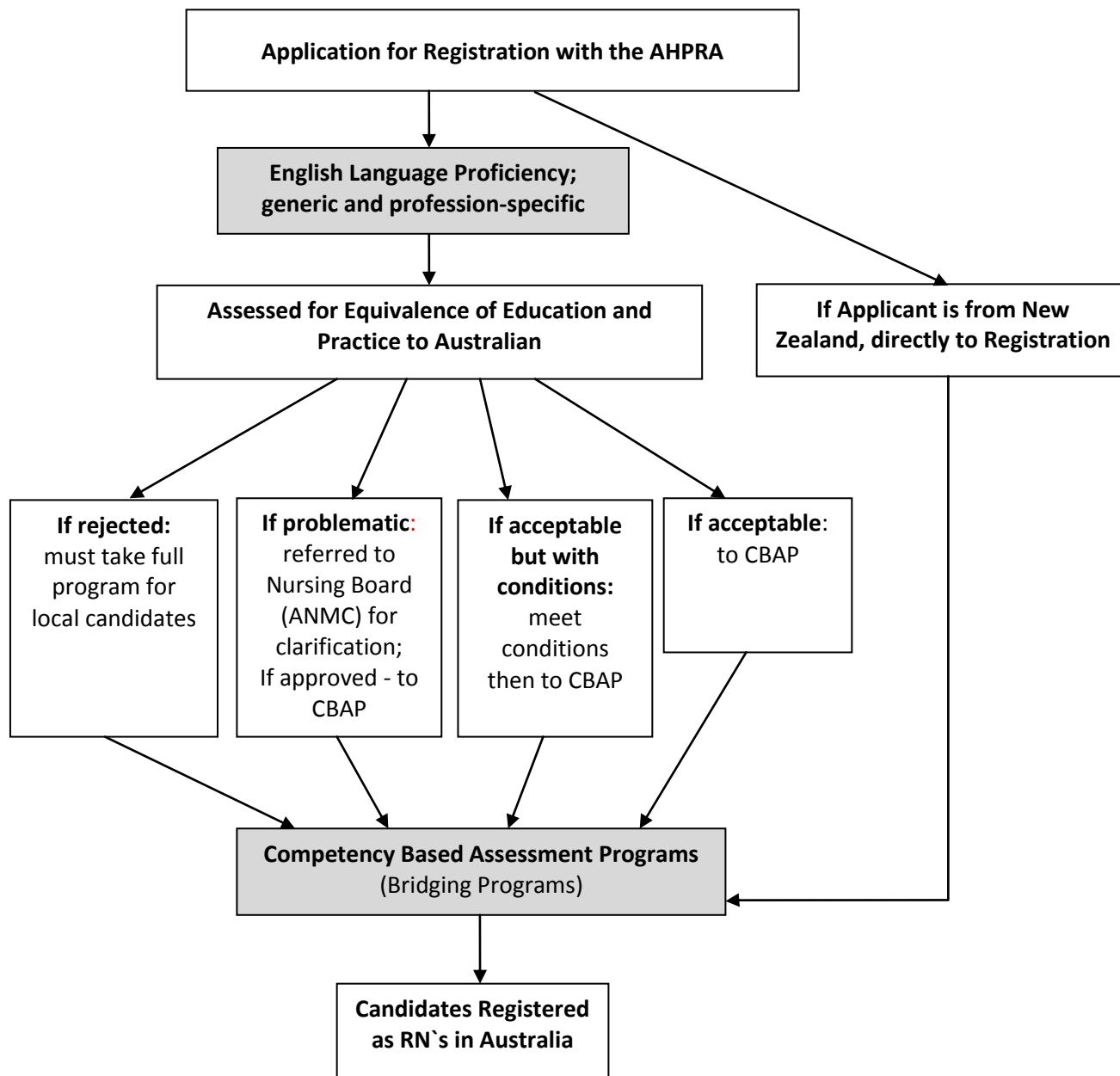
The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. The process provides an option for the assessment of profession-specific language.
2. The examination in dietetics provides an informative feedback to participants in terms of identifying specific gaps in the assessed areas.

3. Compared to the many months long assessment/bridging used by the nurses, this appears to be a simple process that uses an examination to test candidates' competence to practice in the Australian setting.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:

1. Applicants are still required to go through a credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL. Based on our conversation with Eleanor, it appears that many of the IEDs who have the required professional credentials still fail to pass these assessments.
2. This assessment seems to include very few components and is therefore likely to be limited in scope. This assessment process is currently under review with a consideration to add a component of written communication.
3. This process doesn't offer the often much needed bridging process to ensure success in the final assessment or in the profession.

Chart 3 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Dietitians in Australia.

Chart 3: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Dietitians in Australia

Application for Registration with Dietitians of Australia (DAA)

English Language Proficiency
(either generic or profession-specific)

Assessment for Comparability of Education
(credentialing process)

If Applicant is from New Zealand, directly to Registration

If rejected: must take full program for local candidates

If acceptable: eligible to take Examination in Dietetics

Examination in Dietetics:
- Three Hour Written Exam (case studies)
- 45 Minute Oral Exam (simulation)

Candidate Registered as APDs for Australia

4.3. United Kingdom

Two facts are important about the UK situation:

1. The UK has a centralized Health Service so that it does not have the problems the USA, Australia and Canada of regional variations. All registrants are registered by the Health Professionals Council;
2. The UK is part of the European Union and has to comply with cross Europe regulation. Workers mobility is guaranteed with only verification of credentials before registration. Those from outside the European Economic area (EEA) and Switzerland have different conditions.

The UK has a Health Professionals Council (HPC) that regulates 15 health professions, dietitians being one of them. Applicants from countries in the EU, EEA and Switzerland are covered by labour mobility regulations.

Again, as in most other cases, the initial assessment is based on a credentialing process. Registrant Assessors are the key individuals in this system and they work in pairs. They consider each application on an individual basis and look at a number of elements – initially comparing the level and the content of the training course with reference to the Standards of Proficiency which are similar to Competencies. If they identify gaps they look to see if these have been made up through post qualification training and post qualification experience. Sometimes documentation can be contradictory or inconsistent. The assessors then may ask for one set of further verification or a more detailed explanation.

Considering the overall limitations of a credentialing-based assessment, this process has been developed to be one of the more effective and flexible ones by using well trained and qualified, dedicated Assessors to the problem, allowing them to compare outcomes and discuss and test their opinions with a fellow Assessor. This both increases the professionalism of the process and also reduces the potential problem of subjectivity. The recognition of applicants' work experience combined with the fact these Assessors are dealing with sufficient numbers to develop a good understanding of typical problems and 'case law', this seems to be one of the better methods of working on such a large scale.

Registrant Assessors are aware their decisions influence the possible career paths of applicants, and they aim to provide specific feedback concerning each applicant thus increasing transparency. However, it must be remembered that Assessors can only base their decisions on the information provided by the applicant, their referees, their training institutions and any education, training or experience noted in the original application.

There are **several possible outcomes** to the assessment process.
- Acceptance to the Register.
- Rejection due to insufficient basic levels of training and qualifications.
- Rejection but with opportunities to join the Register following further training, experience or adaptation.
- Request further verification or invitation to attend a Test of Competence based on the professions' Standards of Proficiency (separate for each profession).

It should be noted that although the Test of Competence is fundamentally an RPL-based process, in reality its outcomes aren't used for a RPL-based learning planning; the Test of Competency is a pure pass/fail process that doesn't allow for the partial recognition of existing competency or the identification of specific gaps and therefore doesn't allow for individualized education or bridging. According to a conversation with one of the representatives of the HPC in December 2010, few applicants take up the challenge of a Test of Competence. The reason provided by the representative was that the applicants recognize that if they fail they would have to take the full program that novice UK students would have to take – an expensive and time consuming option.

In addition, some individual professions require the completion of Log Books and extended practical, local experience before applicants can join the register. Although the applications follow similar routes there are some profession specific variations.

4.3.1. Nursing

The integration of overseas nurses in the UK by a period of supervised practice has undergone significant change beginning 2005. The process by which overseas nurses are prepared for the professional register is now prescribed by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). This has been prompted by inconsistencies that have existed across the NHS and private sectors in respect of the NMC requirements for supervised practice. Following a credentialing process of educational background,

applicants who meet educational standards are required to take all or part of the Overseas Nurses Programme (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2010). The core component of the programme is 20 days of protected learning time (which everyone must undertake) plus, where appropriate, a period of supervised practice. It is interesting to note that the NMC approved a small business, JSC Training, on behalf of Manchester Metropolitan University, to lead the overseas nursing programme (ONP). It is now offered by JSC Training through approved educational institutions throughout the UK.

The programme has two elements: theory and practice. There is a strong focus on the integration of theory and practice and participants undertake both elements simultaneously, on a full time basis. The protected learning time contains study specifically relevant to the practice of nursing in the UK (e.g., the structure of the UK health care system, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code of Professional Conduct and personal accountability of a registered nurse). The programme contains competencies designed to ensure fitness for practice in the UK. Through this programme, applicants achieve competencies within the field in which they are qualified to practise (adult, mental health, learning disabilities or children's nursing).

Program stages and components include the following[5]:

1. <u>Prerequisites and admission</u> – Applicants are required to secure a work permit/visa prior to commencement of the programme and produce a current NMC decision letter, which confirms the applicant's suitability to undertake the Overseas Nursing Programme. Applicants from countries where English is not the first spoken language, are required to undertake the IELTS (language test) and achieve the Academic Standard at 7.0 or above, prior to admission onto the programme. All overseas students must have achieved mandatory training in their home countries prior to commencement. This should include CPR, Moving and Handling, Health and Safety, infection control and food hygiene. Evidence of study skills including word processing and emailing access is required upon entry.

2. <u>Program structure</u> - The length of the programme and period of supervised practice varies greatly depending on the applicant's previous training, experience, and competence. Applicants who have had educational and

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[5] Retrieved on January 2, 2011 from Overseas Nursing Programme website:
http://www.jsctraining.co.uk/onp_programme.htm

practice experience in their home country that closely matches UK requirements for entry to the Register, are only required to take the 20 protected learning days as a bridging process. Those who require supervised placements, get them as part of the programme. While the minimum period for supervised practice is determined by the NMC decision letter, the programme itself offers a minimum of 16 weeks and a maximum of two years depending on personal circumstances. This approach enables internationally educated nurses to acquire the competencies required for professional registration at a pace that meets individual needs and abilities. Student groups in the delivery centres are no greater than 12 for the facilitated sessions at any one time.

The delivery of the programme incorporates a number of modes:

- *Twenty mandatory (protected) learning days* offered throughout the programme. Participants must attend ten days of facilitated learning at a local delivery centre organized by the programme leader plus ten days of self directed learning. The sessions are led by centre tutors (JSC Associates) and supported by a range of professionals. A theoretical learning log is recorded by the participants to ensure the 20 protected learning days have been achieved throughout the programme. This component of the programme is additional to the clinical practice (i.e. not counted as part of the minimum 16 weeks).

- *Clinical placement* - The programme must be taken on a continuous full time basis with a named mentor throughout that offers a minimum of two full days a week of direct supervised clinical practice. Assessment of competence is performed by the mentor utilizing the prescribed NMC competencies for entry to the register. The clinical placement setting provides study areas as outlined in the educational audit documents for each service provider. Individual support may be face to face or via electronic support. Mentors are required to satisfy the NMC requirements for Mentorship. JSC Training provides one-day mentorship update and development workshop annually. Mentors are then continuously supported through the JSC Quality Monitoring Strategy. Each participant is also supported by a designated JSC facilitator/case manager.

3. <u>Learning Resources</u> - Participants are registered as external students with Manchester Metropolitan University and have access to a range of e-learning facilities. Resource boxes containing reference materials are offered onsite and a range of open learning materials are used to support learning activities.

Additionally, participants are encouraged to join the Royal College of Nursing to facilitate access to the library and resource centres.

On successful completion of the Overseas Nurses Programme, applicants are being entered on to the NMC Register as a nurse.

Chart 4 illustrates the RPL-based components (shaded boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in the UK.

Chart 4: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in the UK[6]
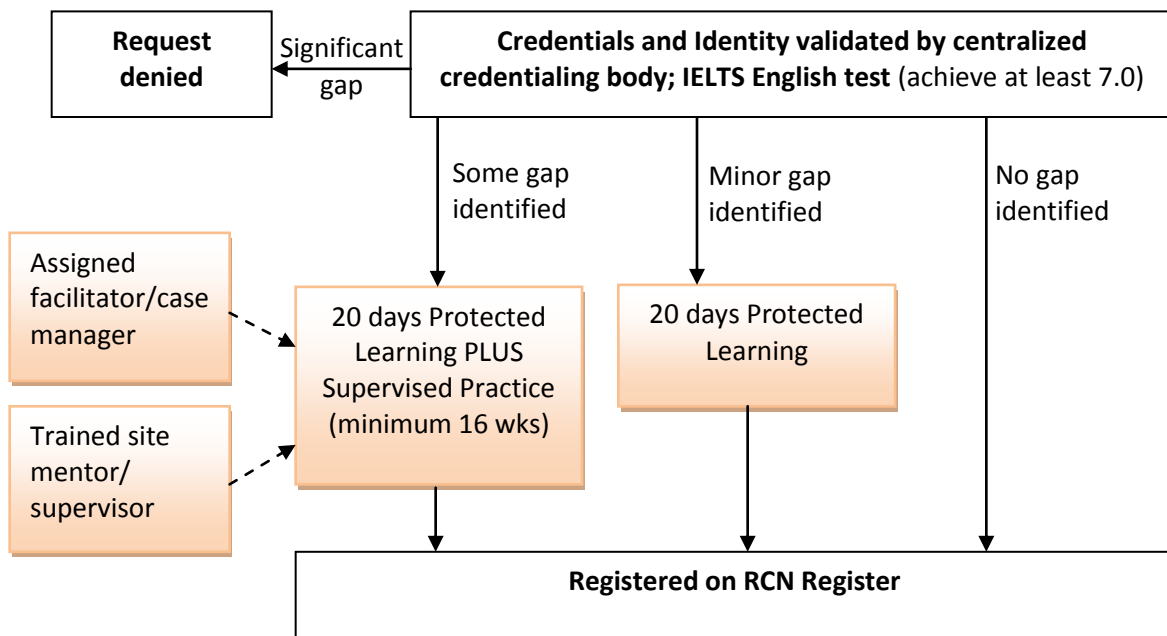
The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are provided with two options for bridging: a short and a long option based on identified gaps.
2. This method provides training and bridging supports on top of assessment and therefore provides realistic chances of successful integration in the profession.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL. Therefore the determination of whether an applicant would go through the short or the long path may therefore be inaccurate or irrelevant to existing strengths and gaps.
2. Participants in the short path aren't assessed for applied competencies or professional communication skills.

4.4. Canada

4.4.1. The use of RPL by universities

There isn't a sweeping trend of incorporating RPL/PLAR assessment in Canadian universities although there are at least several that have successfully adopted RPL-based processes. For the purpose of this environmental scan we have chosen to feature the use of RPL/PLAR in Athabasca University (AU). Portfolio assessment is offered to adult learners through the Centre for Learning Accreditation at Athabasca University as a method of evaluating learning for AU degrees or certificates[7].

The main conceptual elements related to AU PLAR include the following (Athabasca University 2011):
- Demonstrating knowledge or informed data related to a program.
- Knowing and being able to apply theories and concepts used in that program.
- Capacity to analyze using data, theories, and concepts.
- Communication style in transmitting the above with clarity, conciseness, and precision.
- Knowing how to synthesize disparate, parallel, or common materials and/or practices.
- Showing openness to debate, discussion, dispute, or proof.

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[7] It is important to note that PLAR is a separate process at AU from credit transfer.

- Sometimes showing how data or ideas may be ordered, scaled, prioritized, or categorized

Eligibility: individuals who are enrolled in an AU and have completed their transfer of credit from other institutions. The process carries fees (roughly equivalent to a three-credit course) additional to the General Application fee and/or the transcript evaluation fee.

The Centre for Learning Accreditation offers applicants two portfolio routes:
1. **Program-based portfolio route**- This route uses Learning Summary forms to identify and credit knowledge and skills in the applicant's field. The credits applicants earn may then be applied to the degree of their choice. This route includes the development of a comprehensive portfolio driven by a list of criteria set by each of the programs. Once submitted, portfolio materials are assessed by experts including academic faculty in the program for which the applicant is seeking credit. The portfolio is assessed using a rubric with criteria selected by each of the departments. Examples for assessment criteria: Knowledge, theory/concept, critical thinking, clarity in writing, logic of argument, integration of knowledge from other disciplines, understanding the source and development of body of knowledge, original thinking, academic self development, related/relevant practical experience, breadth of learning as related to degree goals etc.

2. **Course-based portfolio route**, using a competency-based portfolio package that helps applicants translate experiences into competencies and align their learning with the specific learning outcomes of the course. In this route, applicants fill out Competency Worksheets. Each worksheet refers to a selected course competency/learning outcome based on a list provided to the applicant by the university. Each Competency Worksheet includes a selected learning outcome and learning statement (defined for that specific course) and it requires the applicant to create a narrative on the origin of learning (where and how learning happened) and provide supporting documentation (e.g. letters from employers, presentations, publications, documents of completion, references).

Timeframe: Portfolio preparation takes anywhere between three and six months, depending on how much time and effort participants can devote to it. The assessment of a submitted portfolio takes between three and four months. In the

interim, participants are encouraged to take courses they do not expect to be accredited for.

Another example for the use of a PLAR/RPL process upon entry to educational programs is the process used in Ontario by **CARE for Nurses**, delivered by the nursing program at Ryerson University in partnership with the nursing program at George Brown College. This process was developed to serve a double purpose:

1. Help qualified nurses, who are now required to complete their education to an undergraduate degree in nursing, to recognize current knowledge and skills, to identify gaps and assign required learning for a degree.
2. Provide internationally educated nurses with an alternative to the credentialing process

This process has been developed for online delivery to enable full accessibility to applicants in and outside of Canada. The PLAR tool includes two stages/components:

Stage 1: Self Assessment Inventory – this part provides applicants with the full list of professional competencies as required by the profession in Ontario. Each of the competencies is self-assessed by the participant on a given scale of proficiency (novice to expert). Once the level is selected, the participant is required to list/provide the type(s) of evidence he/she can produce for each of the competencies. This stage is free and non-facilitated. It serves applicants through enabling a self-exploration process of potential need for further professional training.

Stage 2: Portfolio building and validation. This stage is facilitated by a mentor/facilitator and it carries course fees. Once the portfolio is completed, it is submitted to faculty members who are assigned to assess portfolio content and evidence. Assessors interview the applicant and may choose to refer for further validation through additional documentation and/or challenge exams. The outcome of this process is a list of credits (if awarded) and an individualized learning plan.

The main advantages of this assessment process are:

1. Applicants are provided with the option to be accredited for courses or parts of the degree program based on prior learning.
2. The process is fully facilitated and supported.
3. The process encourages reflection and introspection which are essential qualities for learners and professionals.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Requires organizational infrastructure that can support and facilitate this process.
2. Time consuming for both applicants and facilitators.
3. The assessment itself relies partially on an applicant's narration skills (might disadvantage IEDs) and document-based evidence.
4. It doesn't include a demonstration based assessment of actual knowledge or skills.

Interestingly, a study was recently conducted CARE for Nurses in the attempt to benchmark entry-level standards and validate the PLAR process.[8] The tool that was developed for this purpose can potentially be transformed into a RPL assessment tool. The study included the following components:
   a. 60 multiple-choice questions selected randomly from a pool of 172 questions from the nursing registration exam,
   b. eight open-ended case studies (narrative clinical vignettes), and
   c. one open-ended research vignette.

Participants in the study included registered Canadian and internationally educated nurses who were asked to complete the portfolio online in their free time. Research outcomes showed that it took participants between 12 and 24 hours to complete the full portfolio process. Statistical validation could not be drawn from this research as the participation and portfolio completion rates were low.

One of the major recommendations provided by the research team was the need to develop and test one assessment component at a time vs. the full process all at once, especially when the piloted population has little incentive to invest time in the process. In this case, even though participants were compensated ($250 each), since they were already registered there was nothing meaningful to lose by dropping out or to gain by completing the pilot (as compared with the chance to be accredited or registered).

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[8] Research results reported by Elaine Santa Mina, Associate Professor and Associate Director of the Post-Diploma Program at the School of Nursing, Ryerson University, at the 2010 CAPLA International Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) conference.

4.4.2. The use of RPL by training organizations

As in the case of universities, there isn't a sweeping trend of incorporating RPL assessment in Canadian professional training organizations. The example we chose to use is that of Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) that developed and is applying the RPL-based process of Competency Development Profile (CDP) as a decision making and planning tool for applicants' dietetics internship/practicum. The CDP is a tool used by the university to document competency development within the dietetics internship program, as part of MSVU's Applied Human Nutrition undergraduate studies and the Master of Science Applied Human Nutrition.

This tool can assist an applicant for internship in the documentation and verification of their learning. The corresponding evaluation criteria give the applicant the opportunity to account for any relevant learning that had actually occurred. Applicants complete one CDP sheet for each competency statement they wish to profile/narrate. The profiles enable applicants and reviewers to make decisions regarding competency attainment (Lordly 2007). This process may be used by an intern/student who has already been accepted into an internship/practicum program or by a potential applicant with extensive work experience who may be accepted as an additional intern/student in an already established program.

The applicant's acceptance letter contains a PLAR package that introduces the concept, contains a program policy and procedures and material that educates the intern/student on program competency requirements, how these are evaluated and other terminology required to document learning i.e. transferability of skills. A successful PLAR is, at minimum, expected to yield a credit of four weeks of experience. If, upon initial assessment, Prior Learning is determined not to be substantive or relevant, a formal assessment is not recommended.

The process itself is supported by a facilitator, the Designate, who supervises and provides feedback to the applicant as he/she is completing the documentation process. Each CDP sheet includes the following information:

- Information provided by the institution:
  o Competency Statement: reflects the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and judgments necessary for minimal level of practice for Dietitians.
  o Critical Behaviors: behaviors the applicant should demonstrate to support required competency development. In some instances critical behaviors have been identified by DC, in other cases the

internship may identify additional behaviors specific to the area in which the applicant is documenting performance.

- o Corresponding Evaluation Criteria: criteria the applicant could potentially use to verify that learning has occurred and the competency area this learning has developed.
- Information provided by the applicant:
  - o Learning Activities: the part where the applicants document what they did that they feel would contribute to competency development (e.g., chair a meeting, give a presentation, workshop or other oral report, manage or direct, publish, perform job duties). Applicants must document specific activities that have been completed by them and that demonstrate how these activities result in competency development. Each of the documented activities must be verified by someone who oversaw or supervised the activity and can attest to completion of the activity by the applicant and to their level of demonstrated competency. A *general* guideline is that the activity must have been completed within the previous three year timeframe.

At the end of the process, a typical portfolio includes but is not limited to:
- resume,
- completed CDP pages for all DC competencies,
- completed program evaluations that have been signed off by a dietitian or other individual,
- work samples i.e. written work, presentation summaries,
- memberships,
- qualifications,
- letters of reference, etc.

The portfolio assessment process is conducted by a Review Committee that evaluates the submission to determine if the documentation is sufficient to be given PLAR credit and therefore shorten the duration of the applicant's program. The intern attends the meeting (in person or via teleconference) to give a short oral presentation of the portfolio and to address any questions that may have resulted from the review process. The Review Committee may provide three types of outcomes to the applicant:
- The portfolio is accepted and credit is awarded
- Clarification/further documentation is required pending credit award
- The portfolio is rejected. The intern can appeal.

If the submission is successful, the Dietetic Internship/Practicum Coordinator will determine the amount of program time to be credited and convey to the intern/student the competencies credited and the impact of this on revising the program outline. The internship is then customized to meet intern's competency needs.

Chart 5: RPL Framework Using Narrative-Based Portfolio in MSVU[9]

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┌─────────────┐     ┌─────────────┐     ┌─────────────┐
│ Reflection  │ ──► │ Meaning of  │ ──► │  Portfolio  │
│ on prior    │     │ prior       │     │ documentation│
│ learning    │     │ learning    │     │             │
└─────────────┘     └─────────────┘     └─────────────┘
       ▲       ▲                              │
┌──────────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────┐
│ Guidance                 │     │ Validation  │
│ (Internship Coordinator; │     │             │
│  Faculty supervisors)    │     │             │
└──────────────────────────┘     └─────────────┘
                                   │           │
              ┌────────────────────────────┐   │
              │ University assessment       │   │   ┌─────────────┐
              │ (2 faculty + 2 external     │   └──►│ Candidate   │
              │  members)                   │       │ satisfaction│
              └────────────────────────────┘       └─────────────┘
                          │                               │
              ┌────────────────────────────┐              │
              │ Credit awarded             │              │
              └────────────────────────────┘              │
                          │                               │
              ┌────────────────────────────┐              │
              │ Program orientation        │              │
              └────────────────────────────┘              │
                          │                               │
              ┌────────────────────────────┐              │
              │ Internship program          │              │
              │ participation               │              │
              └────────────────────────────┘              │
                          │                               │
              ┌────────────────────────────┐       ┌─────────────┐
              │ Registration Exam          │       │ Employer    │
              └────────────────────────────┘       │ feedback    │
                                                    └─────────────┘
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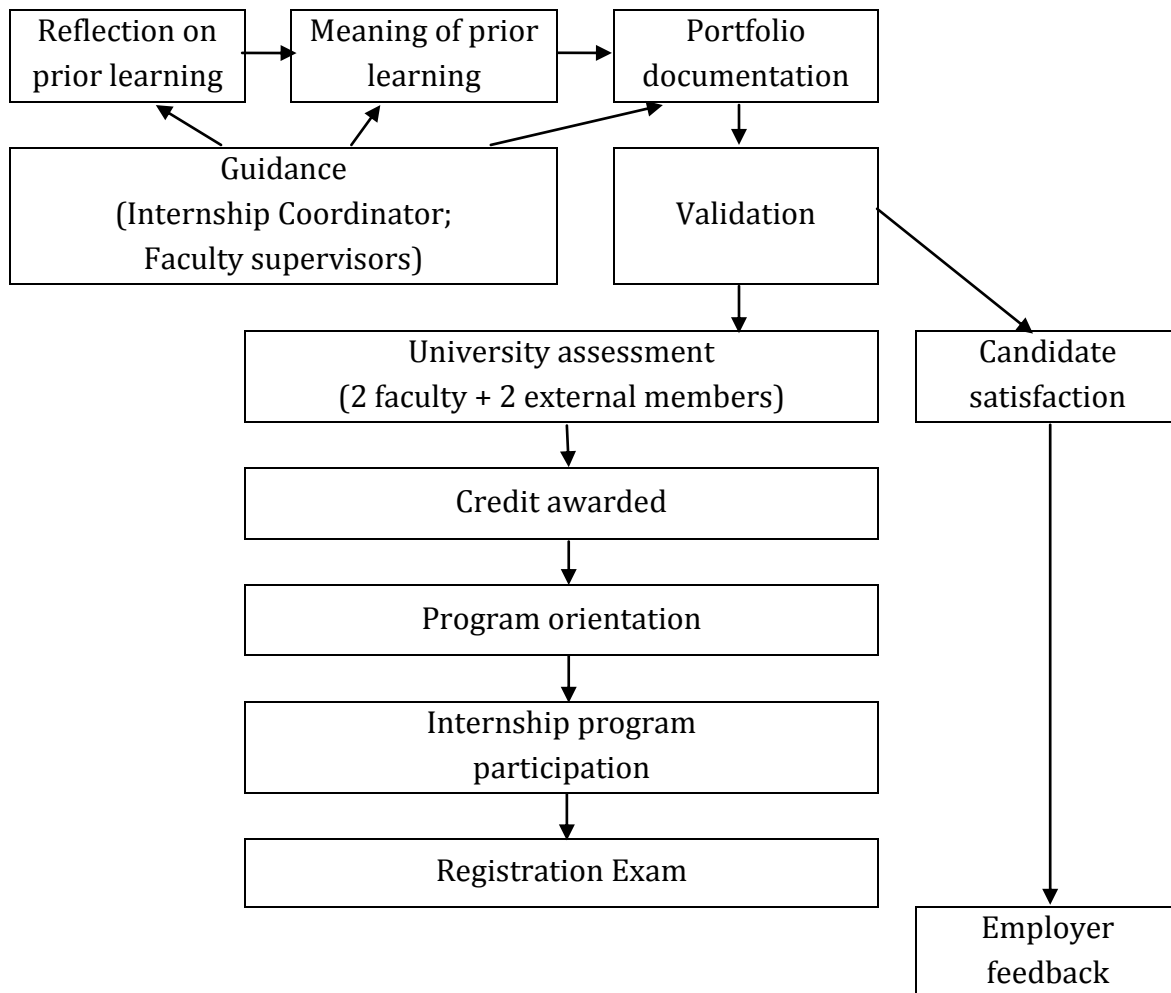
[9] Adapted from Lordly (2007)

The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are provided with the option to be accredited for parts of the practical training based on prior learning.
2. The process is fully facilitated and supported.
3. The process encourages reflection and introspection which are essential qualities for professionals.
4. The organization should be able to offer more placements based on shortened practicum times of some of the participants.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Requires organizational infrastructure that can support and facilitate this process.
2. Time consuming for both applicants and facilitators.
3. The assessment itself relies partially on an applicant's narration skills and document-based evidence; these requirement might significantly disadvantage IEDs.
4. The process doesn't include a demonstration based assessment of actual knowledge, communication skills or competency.

4.4.3. The use of RPL by regulatory bodies

In Canada, responsibility for healthcare and the regulation of health professionals is firmly with the provinces and territories.   Following a review of the many professions and provinces, certain examples have been picked out as interesting.

4.4.3.1. Nursing in Alberta

There are three steps in the registration process offered by the Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) for an internationally educated nurse (IEN) to become a Registered Nurse in Alberta. The first is the usual credentialing process of education and professional qualifications. When CRNBC is unable to determine, from paper documentation alone, an applicant's ability to meet entry-level nursing competencies in Alberta, they require the applicant to complete a *Substantially Equivalent Competency (SEC) assessment*. This assessment, which is free of charge to participants, occurs on two sites of IEN Assessment Centres of Mount Royal University (Calgary and Edmonton); it lasts five days of eight hours each (IEN Assessment Service of British Columbia, 2011). This method of assessment has been developed by Mount Royal University and it is intended, to some degree, to meet the same assessment-related goals as a supervised internship.

The SEC assessment is designed to assess an applicant's professional knowledge, skills and abilities. Based on the outcomes of the credentialing process, an applicant may be asked to have an assessment in any (or all) of the professional areas.

The SEC uses the following four strategies to evaluate the competencies of registered nurses:

- <u>Written Diagnostic Exam</u>: includes both multiple choice and short answer questions that aim to test the general nursing knowledge required of professional nurses in Alberta. The medical surgical exam is six hours long; each focused diagnostic exam is three hours long.

- <u>Triple Jump Assessment</u>: problem solving and critical thinking skills are tested using an assessment interview called the Triple Jump. In the interview, candidates are presented with a brief client situation and are asked to generate hypotheses about client and nursing issues and concerns; identify relevant data; develop a management plan; and, self-evaluate. The triple jump process is designed to assess knowledge, problem-solving, critical thinking, organizational, client assessment and self-evaluation skills, as well as self-directed learning abilities.

- <u>Clinical Judgment Assessment</u>: evaluates the ability to make sound clinical judgments in situations that are complex and have no "simple" answers. These clinical judgment situations will assess the ability to think deliberately and critically through a nursing situation, apply essential and relevant knowledge, consider possibilities and options and take reasoned, reflective and insightful decisions and actions.

- <u>Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE)</u>: used to assess professional knowledge and skills including nurse-client relationships; critical thinking and clinical judgment skills; health assessment and nursing skills; ethical decision making skills; pharmacology and pathophysiology; and, rapidly changing patient situations. This assessment is conducted in a lab setting, where participants role-play the nurse and demonstrate their abilities in the care of a patient.

- <u>Self evaluation</u>: participants have the opportunity to provide a self-assessment of how they have met the professional standards during nursing

practice in their country of origin using the Self Assessment of CRNBC's Nursing Professional Standards.

At the end of the SEC assessment process, CARNA notifies the applicant whether or not they are eligible to proceed with meeting the requirements for registration as a registered nurse in Alberta. The possible assessment decisions are:

1. The applicant is currently eligible to write the CRNE and eligible to hold temporary registration, allowing them to work as a graduate nurse while completing the remaining requirements for registration.
2. Eligibility for registration is deferred. The applicant must successfully complete additional nursing education to address any competency gaps found.
3. The application is refused and the applicant is not eligible for registration. This decision is made when extensive competency gaps are identified during the review of application documentation or as established through the results of a SEC assessment.

Chart 6 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in Alberta.
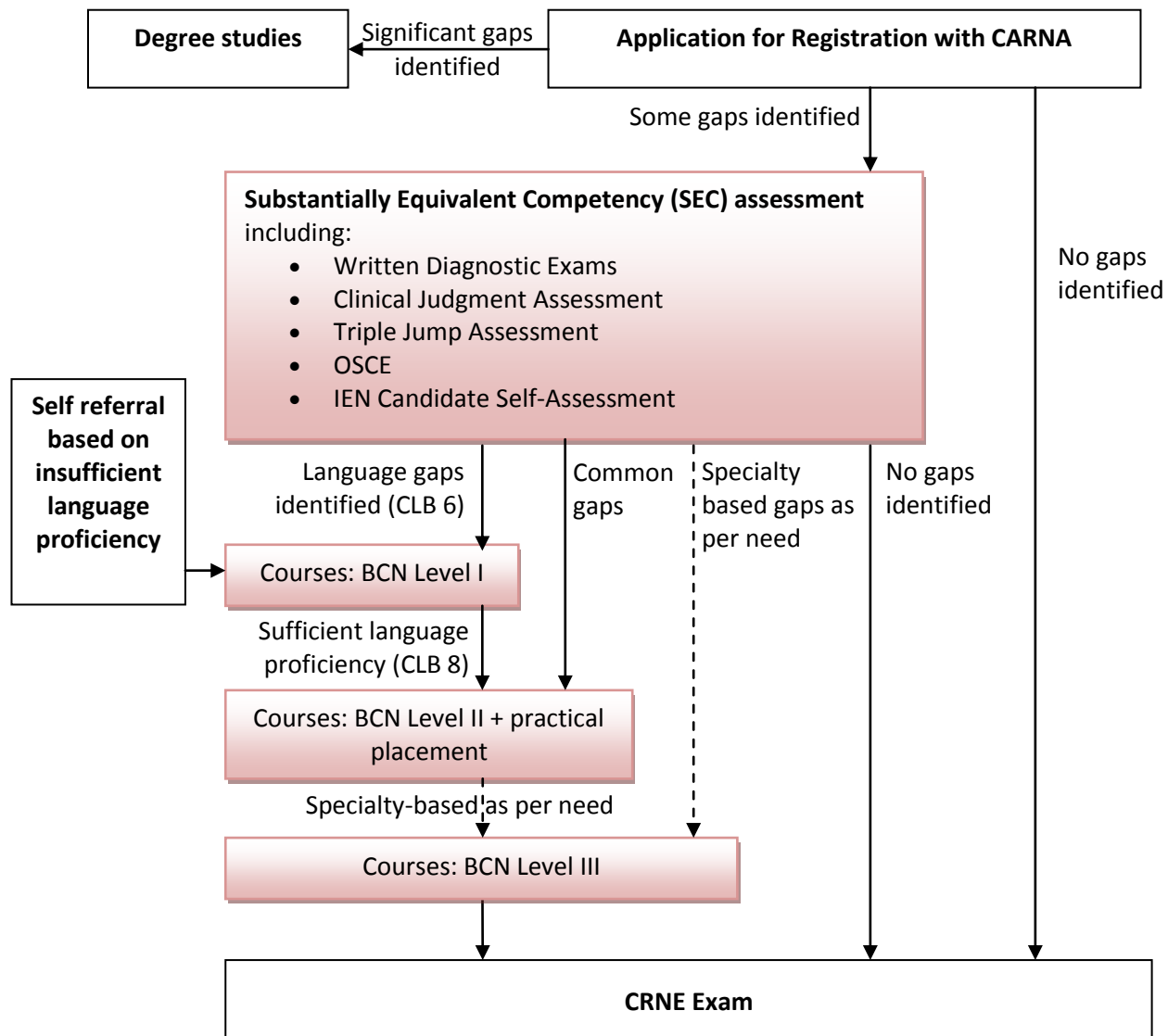
The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. These assessment tools are highly comprehensive in scope and depth.
2. Assessment tools utilize multiple assessment strategies and therefore are more likely to compensate for an applicant's challenge with one strategy or another.
3. Actual, current knowledge and competencies are being assessed.
4. This assessment provides a powerful diagnostic of strengths and gaps that is able to inform the bridging process, if needed.
5. The assessments are offered for free to participants.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a credentialing process prior to accessing the RPL.
2. Applicants are required to dedicate a full-time week to the process.
3. Requires infrastructures and multiple delivery resources.

Chart 6: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Nurses in Alberta

Degree studies ← Significant gaps identified — **Application for Registration with CARNA**

Some gaps identified

No gaps identified

Substantially Equivalent Competency (SEC) assessment including:
- Written Diagnostic Exams
- Clinical Judgment Assessment
- Triple Jump Assessment
- OSCE
- IEN Candidate Self-Assessment

Self referral based on insufficient language proficiency

Language gaps identified (CLB 6)

Common gaps

Specialty based gaps as per need

No gaps identified

Courses: BCN Level I

Sufficient language proficiency (CLB 8)

Courses: BCN Level II + practical placement

Specialty-based as per need

Courses: BCN Level III

CRNE Exam

4.4.3.2. Dentistry in Ontario

The Dentists' registration process is interesting in that it combines alternate routes which meet the need to safeguard the Canadian public without being excessively onerous to those who are already professionally competent. The Equivalency Process provides an alternate route to certification as a dentist in Canada for graduates of non-accredited dental programs and is also integrated with the admission process for the Qualifying and Degree Completion Programs. The Equivalency Process is comprised of three Assessments. Successful completion of the Assessments allows individuals to apply to take the registration written and OSCE Examinations. Canadian Faculties of Dentistry also use results of select Assessments in the admission process for Qualifying and Degree Completion Programs[10]. The Equivalency Process includes three elements:

1. The <u>Self-test of Fundamental Knowledge</u> is a web-based, multiple choice test that consists of 100 multiple-choice type questions. Applicants are given the choice to take it prior to the Assessment of Fundamental Knowledge to better prepare for it and to set expectations of the types and the level of questions that will be asked in the proctored exam.
2. <u>The Assessment of Fundamental Knowledge</u> is a multiple choice style assessment. It consists of two test books, each with 150 multiple-choice type questions. Each book is given in a three hour session. The sessions are held in the morning and afternoon of one day. Applicants can self-test using an online exam in preparation for the proctored examination.
3. During the two day <u>Assessment of Clinical Skills,</u> participants are evaluated on their performance of simulated dental procedures on supplied manikins in a clinical setting. In order to participate in the Assessment of Clinical Skills, applicants must have received a minimum test equated score of 75 or higher on the Assessment of Fundamental Knowledge.
4. The <u>Assessment of Clinical Judgement</u> is a written assessment taken over one day. The Assessment consists of three test books. In order to participate in the Assessment of Clinical Judgement, individuals must have received a test equated score of 75 or higher on the Assessment of Fundamental Knowledge.
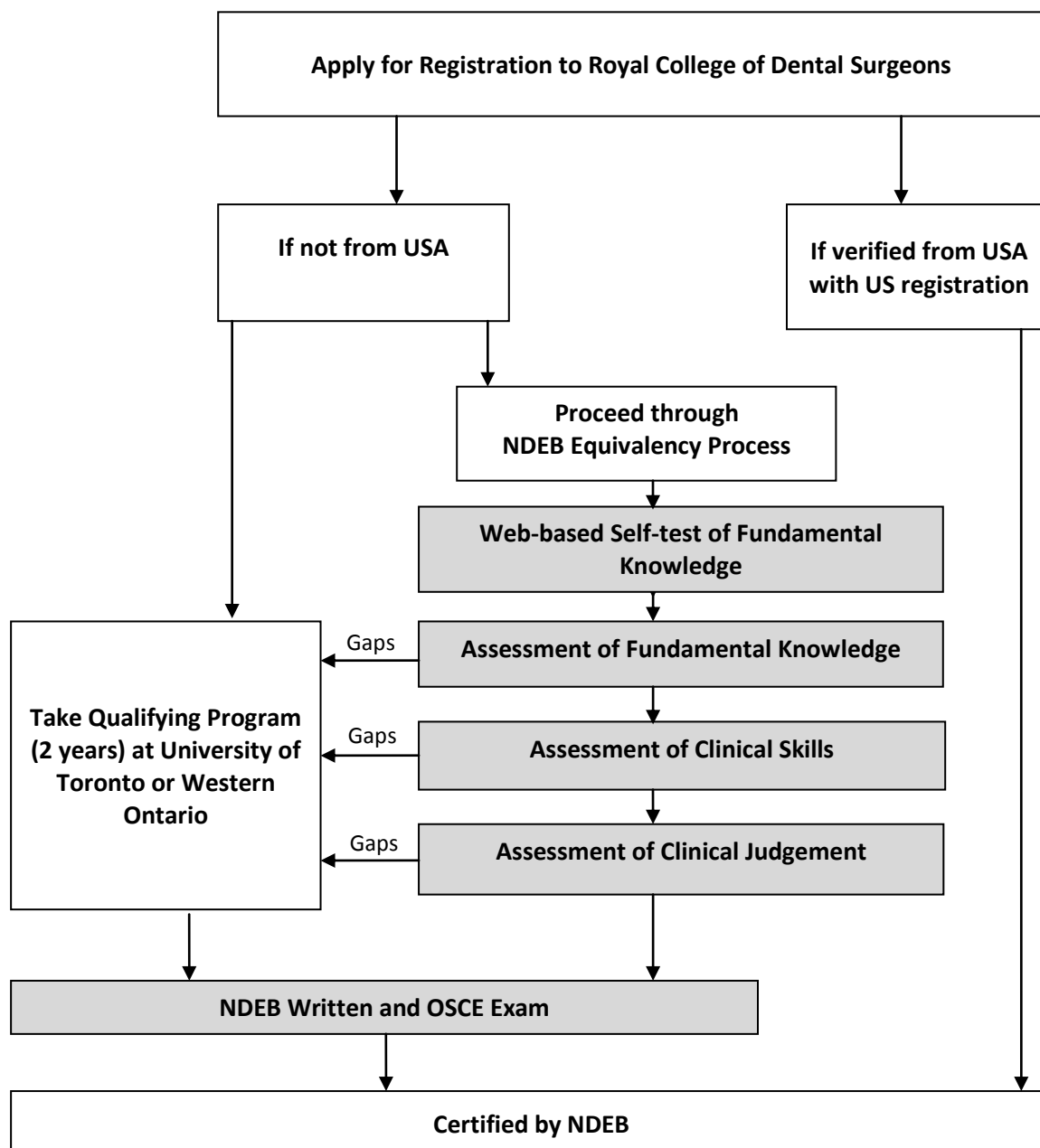
Once applicants have successfully completed the Equivalency Route, they are permitted to write the registration NDEB Written and OSCE Exam.

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[10] Retrieved from the National Dental Examining Board of Canada website on January 1, 2011:
http://www.ndeb.ca/en/non_accredited/non_accredited_graduates.html

Chart 7 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the processing of Internationally Educated Dentists in Ontario.

Chart 7: RPL-Based Components as Part of the Processing of Internationally Educated Dentists in Ontario

```
                    ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
                    │   Apply for Registration to Royal College of     │
                    │              Dental Surgeons                     │
                    └──────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          │                              │
                          ▼                              ▼
              ┌────────────────────┐          ┌────────────────────┐
              │   If not from USA  │          │  If verified from  │
              │                    │          │  USA with US       │
              │                    │          │  registration      │
              └────────────────────┘          └────────────────────┘
                    │                                    │
                    ▼                                    │
              ┌────────────────────┐                     │
              │   Proceed through  │                     │
              │   NDEB Equivalency │                     │
              │   Process          │                     │
              └────────────────────┘                     │
                          │                              │
                          ▼                              │
              ┌────────────────────────────────┐         │
              │  Web-based Self-test of         │         │
              │  Fundamental Knowledge          │         │
              └────────────────────────────────┘         │
                          │                              │
    ┌───────────────┐ Gaps ▼                             │
    │ Take          │◄──┌────────────────────────────────┐│
    │ Qualifying    │   │ Assessment of Fundamental      ││
    │ Program       │   │ Knowledge                      ││
    │ (2 years) at  │   └────────────────────────────────┘│
    │ University of │ Gaps │                              │
    │ Toronto or    │◄──┌────────────────────────────────┐│
    │ Western       │   │ Assessment of Clinical Skills  ││
    │ Ontario       │   └────────────────────────────────┘│
    │               │ Gaps │                              │
    │               │◄──┌────────────────────────────────┐│
    │               │   │ Assessment of Clinical         ││
    │               │   │ Judgement                      ││
    └───────────────┘   └────────────────────────────────┘│
            │                         │                    │
            ▼                         ▼                    │
    ┌──────────────────────────────────────────┐          │
    │      NDEB Written and OSCE Exam           │          │
    └──────────────────────────────────────────┘          │
            │                                              │
            ▼                                              ▼
    ┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
    │              Certified by NDEB                        │
    └──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. Provides a self-testing option by which applicants can gauge their level of knowledge and better prepare prior to formal application.
2. Uses a staged approach where each assessment is a check-point for the following one. Saves assessment time and fees for individuals who need to close gaps.
3. Assessment tools are highly comprehensive in scope and depth.
4. Assessment tools utilize multiple assessment strategies and therefore are more likely to compensate for an applicant's weakness related to one strategy or another.
5. Actual, current knowledge and competencies are being assessed.
6. This assessment provides a powerful diagnostic of strengths and gaps and therefore enables a better planning of gap-closing.

The main disadvantage of this assessment process is that the applicants have a single option of bridging based on the outcomes – the two year program, whether they need all of it or not. In this regard, the diagnostic power of the RPL process is lost on a non-flexible bridging process.

4.4.3.3. Dietetics in British Columbia

The Competence Self-Assessment Process (CSAP) pilot was developed by the College of Dietitians of British Columbia (CDBC) Registration Committee and a consultant through the Essential Competencies Registration Project. The project was made possible thanks to funding by the BC Government between 2007 and 2009.

> *The new registration assessment process was approved for piloting by the Registration Committee on March 27, 2009. It is available to internationally-educated dietitians, USA dietitians who graduated from a non-accredited program and former dietitians returning to practice, who are registering with the CDBC for the first time. This new process allows applicants to compare their combined dietetic education, practical training and work experience to recognized standards of current Canadian dietetic practice. The process includes a verification of competence in all areas of dietetic practice and self-directed learning to bridge any gaps in knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to meet the CDBC registration requirements.*
>
> (CDBC 2011)

The CSAP is a free service provided to eligible applicants by CDBC. Eligibility is determined through a comprehensive credential assessment of the applicant's academic degree(s); a process similar to other provinces. Applicants who have been identified to have substantial education and/or training gaps do not qualify for the pilot. The CSAP includes the following components:

1. <u>Enrolment</u> – Eligible applicants are invited to register for the CSAP by accessing the online survey software and completing the CSA questionnaire.
2. <u>Self assessment phase</u> – Participants are filling out a self assessment of their competencies (the CSA portion). Responses and inputs are emailed automatically to the CDBC.
5. <u>Verification phase</u> – After completing the CSA, participants receive links to the Competence Self-verification (CSV) case studies. Each case study requires the participant to submit responses/answers. Once the answers are submitted, they re-appear on the screen along with the answer key. Participants are advised to compare their answers to the answer key and indicate if their answer was correct or incorrect. A "Notes" section is available at the end of each question where participants can choose to correct their answer and indicate topics/areas of practice they would like to review.
6. <u>Submission phase</u> - Participants' answers, corrections and notes are emailed automatically to the CDBC. A report of the participant's results is made available automatically.
7. <u>Results</u> - Once the CSA and CSV are complete, participants are instructed to contact the Deputy Registrar, to schedule a meeting date. During the meeting with the Deputy Registrar, an applicant's CSA and CSV results are discussed. If an applicant's CSA and CSV results indicate the need for theoretical/practical training upgrading, they will need to develop a Self-directed Learning (SDL) plan. A template for SDL and a list of available educational resources are offered through the CDBC. The goal of the SDL is to help applicants prepare to write the CDRE and bridge gaps in knowledge, skills and abilities required for employment in BC.
8. <u>Re-taking assessment</u> - Once the applicant's SDL is complete, he/she may test their new knowledge and skills by re-taking the CSV. Applicants are also asked to complete the CSAP Satisfaction Survey.

The current stage of the pilot: Development and migration to online format have been completed. A pilot project of the process and tools commenced, using a

"blinded" process to compare applicant determined requirements with those the Committee might have recommended (CDBC 2010).

The main advantage of this assessment process is that it provides applicants with a self-testing option by which they can gauge their level of knowledge and competence (to a certain extent) and better prepare for the registration exam.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. Applicants are still required to go through a full credentialing process. This method adds to the mainstream process but doesn't replace any of the credentialing components.
2. Participants aren't assessed for professional communication skills or hands-on demonstrated competency in simulated/real life situations.

4.4.3.4. Dietetics in Ontario

The Internationally Educated Dietitians Pre-registration Program (IDPP) is offered through Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education. This program has been designed to give internationally educated food and nutrition professionals information, advice, referral to career opportunities, language testing and training, and, for those who are qualified, preparation for registration with the College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO) and Dietitians of Canada (DC). The IDPP features two main services:
- assessment and counselling for internationally educated food and nutrition professionals who are exploring their education and work options (i.e. not eligible for registration with CDO or participation in the IDPP) and,
- a pre-registration program designed to help internationally educated dietitians prepare for registration and practice in Ontario.

The bridging program itself is <u>not</u> a re-education or re-training program.

> *It [the program] familiarizes internationally educated dietitians with the policies and practices of dietetics in Ontario so that they are prepared to seek registration with the College of Dietitians of Ontario (CDO) – the professional regulatory body in Ontario – and become a member of Dietitians of Canada (DC). If you are an internationally educated dietitian (<u>with recent professional experience</u>) who wants to practice as a dietitian in Ontario… Our program will provide opportunities to do the following:*

- *increase your understanding of how dietetics is practiced in Ontario*
- *gain valuable local experience in the field of dietetics*
- *offer you mentorship*

IDPP website (2011)

The IDPP bridging program includes several components:

1. <u>Screening</u> – Applicants to the program undergo a three-stage screening process that determines their admission to the program:
   - Stage 1:
     - document screening to establish general eligibility, and
     - language proficiency testing, performed through two language tests:
       - Ryerson Test of English Proficiency (RTEP) or equivalent (no exemptions). The minimum test score for admission in the IDPP is a "B" on RTEP, 237 on the computer-based test (or 92-93 on the internet-based test) TOEFL or 6.5 on IELTS.
       - Canadian Language Benchmarking Placement Test (CLBPT) with minimum test score of 8 across all categories. The test is administered through YMCA LINC Assessment Centres throughout the Greater Toronto Area.

     The IDPP provides no exemptions from these tests based on the combined requirements of Ryerson University for entry to courses and the IDPP program funder (MCI) for the use a government benchmarked test. The other reason for using both is the fact that RTEP doesn't include the speaking component. It also helps the program to cross-reference outcomes, which aren't always consistent with each other.

     Applicants who fail to demonstrate the minimum required language proficiency are referred to language training (e.g. Ryerson's ESL/EAL or other available training at the appropriate academic level).

   - Stage 2: Pre-registration Interviews and PRE-assessment Days – Only qualifying applicants are invited to an interview with IDPP staff and to PRE-Assessment Days. The interview is a process that allows the program to get better acquainted with applicants and help determine specific professional assets, personal readiness for the program as well as communication and language skills. The PRE-assessment Days integrate practical scenarios (e.g., case studies, simulations, teamwork)

which provide applicants with an opportunity to demonstrate a range of competencies and fundamental professional knowledge. Throughout the PRE-day applicants are assessed by a team of RDs using a competency-based framework (rubrics).

- Stage 3: review of each of the individual portfolios (including submitted documents, results on language testing, structured interview and demonstrated competencies from the PRE-assessment day) by the members of IDPP Management Committee and selection of qualifying candidates. IDPP Management Committee includes a representative from DC; a representative from Ryerson's School of Nutrition; an IED; and, program management staff.

2. <u>On-campus component :</u>
   - <u>Orientation</u> – a prerequisite for all other IDPP courses; an intensive onsite entry-level course (Orientation to the IDPP, 84 hours) in which candidates are introduced to, and briefly explore, the academic environment and dietetics practice in Canada. Candidates examine professional standards and the various roles of dietitians in the health and health care systems, and explore individual bridging needs and assessment of readiness for the IDPP.
   - <u>Six program courses</u> and other assigned mandatory activities (e.g. workshops, site visits). This component provides opportunities for participants to build upon knowledge and skills required to practice dietetics in Canada. The courses include the following:
     - Intercultural Communication and Dietetics Practice
     - Integrated Foods and Nutrition
     - Dietetics Practice in Canada I
     - Dietetics Practice in Canada II
     - Project Proposal Development
     - Dietetics Practicum (PLA and Portfolio Formation)

3. <u>Supervised practicum</u> - Once participants have successfully completed their coursework, they must successfully complete a full-time supervised practicum (minimum total of 12 weeks in two different practice settings) and an administrative project to cover all three mandatory areas of professional practice. The placements are secured by the IDPP program. The practicum is designed to help participants obtain hands-on experience in Canadian dietetic professional practice; become acquainted with Canadian dietetic

professional guidelines, resources, and practice procedures; demonstrate competence for entry to dietetics practice; and, document the successful completion of the practicum in order to meet CDO requirements. Supervisory Registered Dietitians attest to learners' successful performance on the full range of professional competencies throughout the practicum component. Unsuccessful participants are offered remediation relevant to their area(s) of challenge. Remediation mostly consists of a combination of a learning plan and additional placement up to a total of 16 weeks.

Successful graduates of the IDPP submit their portfolio of attested competencies to CDO. Once their portfolio has been approved by the Registration Committee, they are allowed to write the CDRE.

Chart 8 illustrates the RPL-based components (greyed boxes) as part of the professional bridging of Internationally Educated Dietitians in Ontario.

The main advantages of this assessment process are:
1. Uses a comprehensive, experiential entry assessment for screening applicants; saves time for applicants who need a far more extensive bridging than offered in the program (by avoiding wasting a year on the wrong bridging process). Also informs further referral/remedial needs.
2. Uses a staged approach where the assessment of each program component is a check-point for the following one.
3. Assessment tools are highly comprehensive in scope and depth.
4. Assessment tools utilize multiple assessment strategies and therefore are more likely to compensate for an applicant's weakness related to one strategy or another.
5. Actual, current knowledge and competencies are being assessed over a period of time; provides a powerful diagnostic of strengths and gaps over a period of time.
6. Provides extensive bridging and training on top of assessment.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process:
1. Currently the program offers a single option of bridging with no opportunities for individualizing the program to identified gaps.
2. The program carries substantial fees for participants.
3. Currently offered onsite therefore provides limited access.
4. Resource intensive program that requires substantial infrastructures and external funding supports.

Chart 8: RPL-Based Components in the Professional Bridging of Internationally Educated Dietitians in Ontario (IDPP Program)

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Application (including documentation of education,│
│ training and work experience)                     │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        │
                        ▼
┌──────────────────────────────┐   NO   ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Applicant has been assessed  │───────▶│ Documents screened by IDPP   │
│ by CDO; education and        │        │ management for general       │
│ experience conducive to      │        │ comparability                │
│ bridging                     │        └──────────────────────────────┘
└──────────────────────────────┘                    │
            │ YES                                    ▼
            │                         ┌──────────────────────────────┐
┌───────────────┐  NO  ┌──────────────────────┐  │ Evident gap: Application      │
│ Referral to   │◀─────│ Language tests        │  │ put on hold pending CDO       │
│ courses       │      │ (RTEP/IELTS/TOEFL and │  │ credential assessment         │
└───────────────┘      │ CLBPT)                │  └──────────────────────────────┘
       Passed          └──────────────────────┘             │
            │                    │ YES                       ▼
            ▼                    ▼                 ┌──────────────────────────────┐
┌───────────────┐  Failed ┌──────────────────────┐│ Minor educational gap         │
│ Recommendations│◀───────│ Entry Assessment      │◀┘                              │
│ for remediation│───────▶│ (Interview, case      │ └──────────────────────────────┘
│ and/or referrals│       │ scenarios, simulation │
│ to other       │        │ with client, teamwork)│
│ programs       │        └──────────────────────┘
└───────────────┘                 │ Compatible
                                  ▼
                   ┌──────────────────────────────┐
             Failed │ Onsite courses:              │
          ◀────────│  • Orientation course         │
┌───────────────┐  │  • Six content and practice   │
│ Individualized │  │    courses                    │
│ remedial plan  │  └──────────────────────────────┘
└───────────────┘           │ Passed
          ◀────────         ▼
            Failed ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                   │ Supervised practicum          │
                   │ (12-16 weeks)                 │
                   └──────────────────────────────┘
                            │ Passed
                            ▼
                   ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                   │ Signed-off portfolio of       │
                   │ competencies submitted to CDO │
                   └──────────────────────────────┘
                            │ Approved
                            ▼
                   ┌──────────────────────────────┐
                   │ Temporary licence awarded;    │
                   │ Write the registration exam   │
                   └──────────────────────────────┘
```

4.5. Summary

This environmental scan shows that there are many ways of assessing the suitability of an applicant for education, training and registration. RPL assessment methods range from self assessment, to computer based examination, to OSCEs and bridging programs. There is no single, standardized way of assessing an individual's prior learning, training and experience. Each country and, in some cases, each state or province, and each profession within it may have distinctive requirements and methods to assess applicants' qualifications and compatibility. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the RPL-based assessment methods used in and outside of Canada by the organizations selected for this environmental scan.

Table 2: RPL-based Assessment Methods Outside of Canada (for IEPs)

RPL-based Assessment Methods	USA		Australia		UK
	Nurses	**Dietitians**	**Nurses**	**Dietitians**	**Nurses**
Generic language exam	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Profession-specific or occupational language exam			✓		
"Entry" Knowledge exam	✓				
"Exit" Knowledge exam	✓				
CAT exam (registration)	✓	✓			
Case-study based /Clinical Judgment Assessment				✓	
OSCE-based competency assessment				✓	
Bridging-based assessment			✓		✓

Table 3: RPL-based Assessment Methods in Canada (IEPs)

RPL-based Assessment Methods	Education: AU (AL)	Education: CARE for Nurses (ON)	Training: MSVU (NS)	IEPs: Nursing (AL)	IEPs: Dentistry(ON)	IEPs: Dietetics (BC)	IEPs: Dietetics (ON)
Generic language exam	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Profession-specific or occupational language exam							✓
Knowledge self-test					✓	✓	
Knowledge exam				✓	✓		
CAT exam (registration)							
Portfolio-based assessment	✓		✓				
Case-study based /Clinical Judgment Assessment				✓	✓		
Triple Jump competency assessment				✓			
OSCE-based competency assessment				✓	✓		
Bridging-based assessment							✓

5. DISCUSSION

As of yet, there is no single best practice or formula for selecting the most appropriate assessment process for educational, training or certifying organizations. Although much has been published on RPL, in reality there is no unified repository of RPL tools, or even a clear agreement on which method best serves a given purpose. Even the evidence related to the validity and reliability of RPL assessment methods is scarce and is mostly empirical. Nonetheless, educational, training and regulatory organizations around the world are moving away from relying solely on credentialing processes to recognizing prior learning. This trend is either driven by organizational philosophical frameworks that recognize the strengths of RPL processes or by their recognition of the severe limitations of existing credentialing processes and the need to try other strategies, or both.

5.1. Credentialing vs. RPL/PLAR

Generally speaking, if one has to identify the single, most significant difference between the document-based accreditation process and the RPL-based model, it would be the focus on applicants' past experience vs. their present skills, respectively. This core difference impacts the framing of the questions educating, training and regulating bodies seek to answer about their applicants and, therefore, the methods used for the assessment process.

In the document-based accreditation model, assessors focus on examining an applicant's past which, theoretically, should reflect on their present capacity. They operate under the base assumption that an individual's ability to practice competently and safely can be fully examined through documents produced at some point in time by bodies that used common standards and were accredited to provide education, training or registration. Based on this assumption, the questions these organizations seek to answer are related solely to the documents provided by applicants. Therefore, in a traditional accreditation model, all the efforts and resources are spent on document-proofing processes.

In the RPL-based method, organizations focus on assessing an applicant's present knowledge, competencies and/or capacity to practice, under the assumption that it is irrelevant where, when and how professional knowledge and competency have been obtained, so long as they exist. Anchored in this assumption, educating, training and regulatory bodies using the RPL-based assessment model seek to answer questions related solely to an individual's current professional knowledge and competency to practice. Therefore in a RPL-based model all the efforts and resources are spent on the demonstration and the confirmation of applicants'

current knowledge and competency. Scrutinizing documentation may well be part of the process but only if it helps answer the here-and-now questions.

Each of these processes has its own strengths and weaknesses. Each of them works better for one group of clients than for another. The traditional, document-based credentialing process is currently being used by the majority of educational, training and regulatory bodies in Canada and around the world. The main advantage/strength of the document-based model is that when credentials bear great similarities to the mainstream, accredited education in the field (such as other accredited programs from Canadian provinces and the US), document comparison and analysis is a fairly straightforward process that

> *In a credentialing process, organizations focus on applicants' past formal education and training, leading to assessment methods that answer the following questions:*
> - *Has the applicant graduated?*
> - *Is the applicant's degree substantially equivalent to a Canadian degree?*
> - *Is the documented course content substantially equivalent to the one required in Canada?*
> - *Does the applicant meet the minimum requirement for language proficiency?*
> - *Is the format of the applicant's professional certification process substantially equivalent to the one required in Canada?*

can be handled by staff with a basic level of training on the subject. So long as these conditions are maintained, the credentialing process is manageable, fair, timely, efficient and financially sustainable.

However, once credentials do not meet these basic conditions, which is the case with the vast majority of immigrant professionals and other adult applicants, this model becomes extremely complex and onerous, to the point where many regulatory bodies choose to outsource this component to one extent or another. There are, however, multiple weaknesses to the credentialing process, especially when dealing with non-traditional, adult entrants. Although educational, training and regulatory bodies make every effort to assess equivalency in knowledge attainment and fitness to be trained or practice the profession, document-based credentialing methods prove to be blunt and unsuitable tools, especially when it comes to applicants who are trying to access registration from a variety of alternative educational and training pathways.

As opposed to the credentialing process, RPL is better suited to serve mature individuals with knowledge and skills gained from several years of work and on-the-job training. According to Aarts et al (2003), the primary source of an individual's prior learning is the workplace. Learning was found to be proportionate to the number of years an individual has been employed and the number of positions he/she has held. Women report many more sources of prior learning than men, including higher rates of independent learning, seminars, conferences, workshops, and volunteer work.

The use of PLAR in Canadian colleges and some universities is slowly growing and research conducted in this area demonstrates the credibility of PLAR, being a sound academic practice, a contributor to quality of life, and an effective tool for human resource development (Aarts et al 2003, Lordly 2007). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010),

> *"Recognition plays an important role in a number of countries by providing validation of competences to facilitate entry to further formal learning. This often involves exemption from certain coursework or parts of a formal study programme. This approach lets people complete formal education more quickly, efficiently and cheaply by not having to enrol in courses for which they have already mastered the content. Allowing people to fast-track through formal education by making the most of their nonformal and informal learning can also create a virtuous circle by making it more attractive for people to engage in self-directed learning."*
>
> (OECD, 2010, page 7)

Specifically, recognition of an applicant's prior learning generates four major types of benefits (OECD, 2010):
1. **Economic benefits -** Recognition can reduce both direct and opportunity costs[11] that are associated with formal learning. This is achieved by shortening the time required to acquire qualifications, especially when it relates to experienced professionals. It also allows human capital to be infused into the economy more productively by giving people access to jobs that better match their true skills.

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[11] Opportunity cost - The cost of a missed opportunity and/or the loss of the benefits that could be received from that opportunity.

2. **Educational benefits -** Recognition helps to underpin lifelong learning by helping professionals learn about themselves and develop their career within a lifelong learning framework.
3. **Social benefits -** Recognition provides a way to improve equity and strengthen access to meaningful employment for disadvantaged minority groups such as immigrants; women in particular.
4. **Psychological boost to individuals** by making them aware of their capabilities as well as offering external validation of their worth.

These advantages reflect the use of a myriad of assessment methods designed to capture and recognize an individual's current knowledge, abilities and competencies. The more self-reflective components of RPL, such as the narrative-based portfolio (mostly termed as PLAR by universities and training bodies), require that individuals reflect on past experiences and consider how those contribute to their competency development.

In an RPL-based assessment, organizations focus on applicants' current knowledge and competence, leading to assessment methods that answer the following questions: At this point in time…

- *Does this applicant have sufficient professional knowledge?*
- *Can this applicant communicate competently and professionally?*
- *Is this applicant sufficiently competent in all required areas of professional practice?*

According to Day (2001), Aarts et al (2003) Lordly (2007) and Dietitians of Canada (2007), learners who participated in RPL/PLAR processes consistently reported several key benefits to prior learning assessment and recognition. It saves them time; it saves them money; it improves their self-confidence and strengthens their capacity to deal proactively with the many transitions in their lives by affirming their self worth; it enhances self valuing of own prior learning; it increases their motivation to complete their studies; and, it inducts them into the professional framework of lifelong learning.

There are multiple advantages in using RPL-based assessment methods for regulatory bodies as well. The very concept of being able to validate current levels of professional knowledge and competency is fully aligned with the mandate of regulators to protect the public from unqualified practitioners. It provides the opportunity for adult applicants to demonstrate their current professional capacity,

especially in cases where documents aren't accessible, transferrable or reflective of the applicant's present situation.

Nonetheless, RPL has its challenges. A recent scan conducted by OECD (2010) on recognition practices of non-formal and informal learning in 22 European countries, revealed a wide variety of policies and practices from rigorous to the precarious. According to this report, RPL-based assessment outcomes can and should be strengthened by improving particular aspects of the recognition process. The assessment process itself is critical and must demonstrably deliver valid, transparent and consistent results. In order to achieve the required level of quality, rigorous quality assurance procedures must be put in place along with careful application of assessment techniques.

Many of the educational and training organizations using RPL/PLAR rely mainly on narrative-based portfolio assessments, although the value of these may be limited in certain cases, especially when it comes to high-stake outcomes (e.g. awarding a degree or a professional certification vs. partial credits). Instead, or in addition, OECD recommends that countries/organizations could draw more extensively on the methods used in formal learning environments, including selective testing. Another aspect of quality assurance is the competency and specialization of all evaluators involved in the process.

In general, barriers to RPL can be categorized as follows:

a) **Individual barriers**: Individuals going through a PLAR process may face three major types of barriers (Aarts et al 2003, Lordly 2007):
   - Situational barriers - circumstances that have a negative impact on the lives of adult learners, such as language barriers, lack of financial resources, lack of physical access, lack of availability due to other responsibilities (e.g. family responsibilities, survival jobs), and lack of personal support systems, all of which are common circumstances for IEDs and other adult learners.
   - Institutional barriers - day-to-day operating procedures related to the education/training provider, such as limited course offerings/ practicum placements, rigid class/internship schedules etc.
   - Dispositional barriers – a variety of psychological barriers such as a learner's lack of self-confidence and self-esteem (Topping, 1996), concerns about age and classroom environments, and perceptions that RPL processes are too difficult, complex and time-consuming (Kent,

1996, Lordly 2007). Some individuals have initial misconceptions thinking, for example, that experience alone will be sufficient evidence to award credit. Still others realize that they do not have sufficient knowledge and/or skills to be successful in an assessment.

b) **Institutional barriers** include:
   - low awareness of PLAR among administrators and poor attitudes by faculty/training program leaders (Aarts et al, 1999, Raulf, 1992, Thomas, 2001, Lordly 2003, Lordly 2007);
   - inconsistent policies and their application (OECD 2010);
   - RPL availability limited to specific programs or a percentage of a program;
   - faculty/preceptor/regulator concerns about personal workloads (often requiring intensive facilitation and support) and about the integrity of the RPL process; and,
   - the challenge of connecting assessment outcomes to courses, which may contribute to the organizational perception of process futility. Realistically speaking, it is difficult for an educational institution to address identified gaps in a "surgical precision" given the current course-based structure which doesn't allow for a modularized approach. Although we don't expect universities to re-organize their whole instructional system, it is important to remember that there are other ways of learning and filling knowledge gaps.

c) **Financial barriers** - Although recognition of applicants' prior learning offers a range of benefits, recognition processes also involve costs. Leaders and decision makers within dietetics need to carefully examine costs and benefits when looking at options for extending and/or replacing recognition processes. Document-based credentialing typically has lower costs for the assessing organization as it falls under the mainstream practice and infrastructure. RPL processes, on the other hand, are likely to have higher development and ongoing operation costs. The question the profession may wish to answer at this point is "what is the cost of adhering to existing practices vs. the cost of integrating RPL assessment strategies?" The definition of 'cost' in this case should be as broad as possible, taking into consideration human capital, compliance with legal frameworks, the future of the profession etc. In any case, the expected benefits will only accrue if recognition procedures and practices put in place are of the highest quality and consistency. Otherwise, misleading information about the professional

knowledge and competency of applicants could generate additional economic costs.

d) **Procedural/methodological barriers** - The challenge for policy makers is to find the right balance by developing RPL assessment processes that generate notable benefits both to applicants and to the profession at large. In his article, Andersson (2006) discusses the issue of RPL validity and relevance. The concept of validity refers to the truth or, rather, ensuring a reasonable level of truth. According to Hammersley (1981), *"...the amount of proof needed for validity depends on the plausibility/credibility of the results, the centrality of the results and the type of claim made. Relevance is related both to the context of [the assessment] and to the context of practice (the context in which the [assessment] is conducted)."* In our context, the question is how much, and what type, of proof is needed if the results are to be trusted? The answer to this question is likely to have impact, for example, on methods used (Alison Evans Consulting 2008). The level of required validity may vary based on whether assessment outcomes are related to admission to an educational/training program, or to receiving credit, advanced standing or professional certification. Less proof could be required in RPL for admission, as the applicant will still be assessed a number of times during the educational/training program itself. In RPL for credit or registration, more proof will be required as the risk of entering the profession without having adequate knowledge/competence is higher.

5.2. Potential Strategies for Assessment of Prior Learning

A powerful RPL-based assessment processes and finely tuned assessment tools are pivotal to the creation of a fair entry to education, training and certification process for all applicants. It must demonstrably deliver valid, transparent and consistent results. The three major areas that require assessment are professional knowledge, professional communication and professional competency. The following are some of the RPL methods commonly used for the assessment of knowledge, communication and competency, along with their strengths and weaknesses.

a) **Language Test -** The process of testing an individual's mastery of the four language domains: speaking, listening, reading and writing. A language test normally includes written and oral components. Test materials are usually generic unless it has been designed to test profession-specific language. A well structured language test is one that has an adequate level and scope as per

professional standards; uses reliable and consistent marking tools; and, produces transparent, constructive and helpful outcome reports. This assessment can be administered either through an onsite test (a combination of paper-based and face to face/recorded elements) or through an online tool.

- *Strengths*:
  - High accessibility to a variety of benchmarked language assessment tools such as TOEFL and IELTS.
  - Most of the publically accessible tests are using incremental levels of academic language, and are therefore generally relevant for use for entry to academic institutions.

- *Weaknesses*:
  - Traditional language tests seldom have the ability to assess applicants' professional communication competency, which is at the heart of professional practice, especially in an extensively client-facing profession such as dietetics. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness among employers, professional and regulatory bodies regarding the limitation of Language Proficiency assessment *per se*. Chart 9 illustrates the layers of language and communication in the context of overall professional competence. In this model, every inner sphere enables the following. Language proficiency is undoubtedly an essential skill that enables the competent application of all other, more advanced skills. However, a generic assessment limited to basic linguistic components (reading, writing, speaking and listening), is a poor predictor of one's ability to communicate at a professional level as the latter requires a much more extensive demonstration of competence within a profession-specific environment. In other words, while the assessment of language proficiency does not breach the basic principles of fairness, transparency, access etc., it doesn't necessarily serve the need of training and regulatory bodies to assess an applicant's readiness for supervised training or for professional practice.
  - Profession-specific testing requires professional and financial resources for initial development and for ongoing version updates.

Chart 9: Tiers of Professional Competence
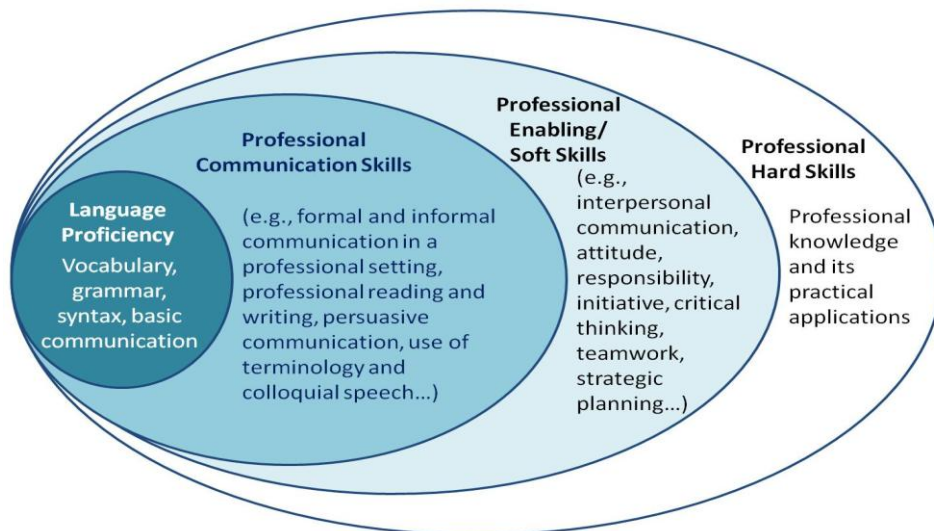
b) **Assessment of Professional Communication -** Employers across sectors and professions clearly identify language and professional communication as a major barrier to employment or career mobility for internationally educated professionals, often regardless of the individual's qualifications and education (Public Policy Forum, 2004). This type of test enables the assessment of language in its broadest sense, focusing on the advanced communication skills and reaching well into the enabling/soft skills tier as per Chart 9. A well structured professional communication test is occupation-specific, has a profession-adequate level and scope, language assessment is fully integrated within professional scenarios and activities, is highly interactive and experiential, uses reliable and consistent marking tools and produces transparent, constructive and helpful outcome reports. This type of assessment can be delivered either onsite or online.

- *Strengths:*
  - If well designed and validated, this test can be a powerful predictor of success within training programs and a good indicator for regulators of an applicant's communication-related professional competency.
  - An online tool can be:
    - highly accessible to applicants both within and outside of Canada; testing sites will offer access to a computer and a proctor, and

- § delivered through a centralized system to create national standardization and economies of scale.
    - o Can replace the need for a separate language test.
    - o Can be used as a screening tool by training organizations, applying it with both Canadian and internationally educated applicants.
- *Weakness*:
    - o Requires professional and financial resources for initial development and for ongoing version updates.
    - o Requires trained assessors.

c) **Self-Assessment of knowledge and/or competency –** A process by which individuals are asked to assess their own knowledge, abilities and competencies through reflecting on their own life and/or professional experiences. A well designed self assessment process provides participants with a given scale of proficiency and with some level of external support (e.g. examples that illustrate different competencies and required levels of performance, a mentor/facilitator that supports the reflection and interpretation process). This assessment can be administered either through a paper-based workbook or an online tool.

- *Strengths:*
    - o Self driven and self paced process.
    - o If well designed, can be a highly useful process for applicants who need to be informed on required competencies, areas and scope of practice, required depth of knowledge etc.; creates transparency.
    - o Enhances reflective abilities; in some cases introduces the critical concept to the participant of self-reflection for the first time.
    - o May support personal reflection on the selected career path and its alternatives.
    - o Doesn't require frequent updating or maintenance process.
    - o An online version can be offered to IEDs in the pre-arrival stage.
- *Weaknesses*:
    - o A subjective process that may not provide realistic or valid outcomes; doesn't provide educators or regulators with validated information.
    - o Doesn't provide the individual with realistic feedback, therefore might not be very useful for personal and professional planning.
    - o Mainly used as individual preparation for a more standardized assessment process.
    - o Facilitated process can be resource intensive.

d) **Self-testing of knowledge and/or competency –** A process that allows applicants to test their own knowledge and competencies by using an examination process that provides objective test results. Administered mostly as an online tool. A well designed self-test provides participants with relevant materials that cover the full scope of the measured component at the level required by educators/regulators; it uses multiple testing formats (e.g., multiple choice, open ended case studies); and, it addresses incremental levels of knowledge, analysis and application. Self-test outcomes are normally made available only to the test-taker, not to the administering body, although exceptions exist (as in the case of the Competence Self-Assessment Process (CSAP) administered by CDBC). Self testing can be administered either through a paper-based workbook or an online tool. The main difference between an examination and a self-test is that the latter isn't a proctored process.

- *Strengths:*
    - A highly informative process; provides individuals with realistic feedback on their actual level of knowledge and/or competencies and therefore contributes to both transparency and professional development planning.
    - An online version can be delivered through a centralized system to create economies of scale and can be offered to IEDs in the pre-arrival stage.
- *Weaknesses*:
    - Doesn't provide regulators with validated information; mainly used as individual preparation for a subsequent objective, proctored examination/assessment/training.
    - Requires some level of updating or maintenance.
    - If includes open-ended components, requires qualified assessors.

e) **Challenge/Knowledge Examination -** A similar process to the self-test, with the only difference being that it is administered in a fully proctored format (identity verified, exam invigilated) and the outcomes are made available both to the administering body and to the test-taker. The exam can be administered either through a paper-based or an online tool.

- *Strengths:*
    - Standardized, validated and objective examination should provide a valid and reliable assessment of applicant's current knowledge.
    - A well designed knowledge exam integrates the assessment of higher skills, such as critical thinking, and can therefore assess beyond basic informational knowledge.

- o A centralized delivery model can create national standardization, be relatively low-resource for administering organizations and more accessible and affordable for test-takers.
- o Can be offered to IEDs in the pre-arrival stage.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - o Examination development process can be highly expertise and resource intensive.
  - o It is difficult to assess the full scope and depth of professional knowledge through a single exam. Topics and levels of knowledge application need to be carefully selected to be representative of the overall knowledge a professional requires.
  - o Multiple versions and a powerful information security system are required to ensure the integrity of the exam, both requiring financial resources.

f) **Portfolio Preparation -** The term "Portfolio" can be used to describe very different practices and purposes. It may generally stand for the following three processes:

1. A documented Self Assessment process (as described above).
2. An assembly of documented evidence of own education, training and experience as part of a document-based assessment process. Although strengths can be identified in a single document repository, especially if it is web-based (e.g., assisting both the applicant and the regulator/educator in keeping a systematic submission process), it isn't an RPL-based but rather a credentialing methodology.
3. A collection of narratives that describe an individual's prior learning through formal, non-formal and informal pathways. Each narrative addresses specific knowledge/competencies. A complete portfolio consists of the full range of knowledge statements/competencies with corresponding narratives demonstrating the ways this knowledge/competency has been acquired and demonstrated. Optimally, each of the competency-related narrations is validated (e.g., through letters from previous employers, applicant's publications or sample products, written or oral challenge exam). Narrative-based portfolio process requires at least some level of mentoring or facilitation and is often offered as a course.

Strength and weakness analysis will address only the latter process (#3) as a "portfolio preparation" process.

- *Strengths:*
  - Individuals are supported through the process and empowered to:
    - reflect upon and showcase their achievements, abilities and competencies in a structured, clear and logical way;
    - be supported by evidence from others, including colleagues, peers and supervisors; and,
    - enjoy freedom of expression (Day, 2001).
  - Participants benefit from personal and professional growth of confidence and self esteem (Lordly 2007)
  - Empowered learners are more motivated and overall show higher success rates in education and training environments.
  - Applicants are able to save a significant amount of time and money by having their learning/training requirements reduced.
  - Education and training organizations are able to accredit applicants for multiple learning/training components (e.g., courses, practicum sections) and/or offer more effective, individualized learning plans and pathways.
  - Organizations are able to save valuable training/placement time and, in turn, open up placements for a greater number of applicants.
  - Universities are presented the opportunity to engage in innovative programming, to bring non-traditional learners to campus and to better utilize existing resources (Lordly 2007)

- *Weaknesses*:
  - This tool is particularly powerful when used with adult learners who bring a wealth of professional and personal experience, but may not offer much for younger, inexperienced applicants, IEDs included.
  - Depending on the level of validation, might not provide regulators with sufficient assurances of competency levels. Since professional certification is a more high-stake process than awarding education credits, it is mainly used by educational institutions for entry or by bridging programs (e.g. IDPP program) as exit documentation.
  - Requires extensive time investment both on the applicant and the mentor/facilitator part; human resource intensive on the part of the facilitating organization; time intensive on the part of the applicant.
  - Requires advanced language and critical communication skills on the part of the applicant to enable a well narrated portfolio. In this regard, international professionals may be significantly disadvantaged.

- o More suitable for independent, self-directed learners. International professionals who come from highly directive, expert-driven environments may be unfamiliar with this learning environment/framework and therefore might be significantly disadvantaged.
- o Some applicants find the process overwhelming, conceptually demanding and lacking assurance of recognition at the end of the process; they might therefore consider it to be a waste of time and money (Lordly, 2007)
- o Requires a variety of methods for proof of competency, many of which are document-based. These introduce some of the challenges of the credentialing process, especially for internationally educated individuals.
- o Requires highly qualified, trained, experienced and available assessors (a comprehensive portfolio is often a staggeringly lengthy document).
- o Even in a well narrated portfolio, there still is the difficulty of objective and consistent determination of overall knowledge and competence.
- o Concerns on the part of universities/qualifying organizations include potential loss of revenue (by reducing the number of courses taken by applicants), the lack of capacity to provide individualized support to applicants; and, concerns about the validity of the process that might "let through" individuals who aren't really qualified (Lordly, 2007).

g) **Standardized, Simulated Assessment Events -** The process of testing applicants through oral or performed events, in person or through online/filmed scenarios. This assessment method is used extensively in the testing of clinical skills and competencies of healthcare professionals as a part of an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). A well designed assessment will cover a range of areas of practice, a range of assessed competencies, as well as validated performance standards. The rating tool can be a combination of competency-based process ratings (e.g., rapport, interpersonal communication, client-centred approach, critical thinking) with content-specific binary checklists (Park et al, 2004).
- *Strengths:*
  - o Assessment scenarios are likely to be more reliable than paper-based questions as they are designed to imitate real-life professional situations.

- o The use of standardized scenarios allows direct and consistent assessment of the applicant's skills and professional competencies within the local cultural context.
- o Case assessments can provide a longitudinal experience and enable applicants to follow patients "over time" even in a compressed time frame of examination (e.g., through the use of information cards that refer to a cascading case, the use of intermittent oral testing on the situation at hand, by addressing specific parts within a scenario etc.)
- o Allows applicants to demonstrate competency in a low risk environment (mainly as related to the risk of inappropriate counselling with real patients and clients).
- o The assessment of applicants using simulated environments reduces the need for lengthy internship/practicum placements that are hard to come by.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - o The development process of standardized simulated events can be highly expertise and resource intensive.
  - o It is difficult to assess the full scope and depth of professional competency through a single simulated event. Such assessments would normally require several well planned assessment days.
  - o Multiple versions and a powerful information security system are required to ensure the integrity of the assessments.

h) **Registration-Like Exam -** Providing applicants with a battery of exams designed similarly to the registration exam (e.g. the CDRE). This method is used for practise, not for assessment purposes.
- *Strength*:
  - o Any type of pre-test exposure to the format and the potential content of the exam can be helpful by reducing anxiety and enabling better preparation.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - o Requires a substantial pool of retired registration questions/exams and/or the development of new registration-like exams for practise purposes which are highly resource intensive.
  - o Practising with demo-exams may not be very helpful as a learning process, especially for applicants requiring substantial bridging to practice. It will mostly be useful for individuals who are already prepared or have completed a bridging process and are now improving on their test-writing skills.

i) **Structured Interview -** The process of using an identical set of questions that are asked to each and every applicant in a face to face interview within a pre-determined timeframe. A structured interview can be conducted by a single or by a panel or interviewers. Questions should be unbiased/non-discriminatory, framed in simple and clear language and address topics that are highly relevant to the purpose of the interview. Normally such interviews are designed to probe applicant's interpersonal and critical communication skills, critical thinking skills, attitude, motivation and personal readiness for an upcoming process (e.g., internship, bridging program). Similarly to a job interview, a well structured interview will include informational, analytical and situational/behavioural questions.

- *Strengths*:
  - Applicants are given a chance to demonstrate their qualities and competitive edge, especially when competing over limited offerings.
  - A well structured interview will allow some degree of validation of documented work experience (when relevant), interpersonal communication skills, professional breadth and depth and motivation.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - An in-depth interview is time consuming and requires preparation time and human resources.
  - Most types of structured interviews are highly culture-driven processes and are therefore likely to disadvantage IEDs in a competitive process (e.g. application for internship).
  - Being a good interviewee is often similar to being a successful student in academia. As it is a skill in itself and therefore might not necessarily reflect an applicant's aptitude and suitability to the applied process/position.
  - Provides a weak insight into procedural knowledge such as rules or problem-solving strategies.

j) **Supervised Practical Experience –** Assessment through a formalized learning/training program in which applicants are trained, supervised and assessed by mentors/preceptors. Supervised practical experience may vary anywhere from 10 to 45 full-time weeks based on the specific program and/or the needs of the applicant. Assessment of competencies may be done throughout or via exit assessment.

- *Strength*:
  - Real-life experience that leads to real-life performance and demonstration of professional knowledge, communication and overall competency.
  - Provides sufficient time to assess applicant's consistency of competent performance in a variety of situations and settings.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - In the absence of powerful RPL processes, it is difficult to correctly estimate the required duration of the placement, or the practice areas and competencies to be covered throughout. Placements might end up being too short, too long or irrelevant. A powerful pre-placement assessment can mitigate this disadvantage.
  - Low availability of placements creates a competitive environment where IEDs or Canadian applicants coming from alternative professional/educational pathways stand little chance of securing supervised practical experience.
  - Many IEDs require at least some degree of facilitated bridging and orientation to the Canadian practice environment and culture before entering a supervised placement. If such preparation/bridging isn't offered, the placement might end up being an unsuccessful and even traumatizing process both for the IED and the organization.

k) **Bridging-Based Assessment –** Assessment through a formalized learning program in which IEDs (and potentially Canadian educated applicants) are familiarized with local and recent professional standards and practices. A bridging program normally provides both academic knowledge and practical skills depending on applicants' needs. It may be of various lengths from a few weeks to over a year. A well structured program includes tutorials that focus on local regulations, professional and cultural practices and use a variety of simulated situations and supervised practical placements that provide sufficient practise opportunities and ample individual feedback. All assessment activities should be conducted or supervised by qualified assessors and be based on professional competencies and knowledge standards.
   - *Strengths*:
     - Helping both the professional and the cultural transition of IEDs in a supportive, low risk environment.
     - May provide options for individualized bridging pathways based on applicants' unique needs.

- o The use of relevant, simulated and real-life experiences enables real-life performance and demonstration of professional knowledge, communication and overall competency.
- o May serve individuals returning to practice who require refreshers and practise in a low risk environment.
- *Weaknesses*:
  - o In the absence of powerful RPL processes, it is difficult to correctly estimate the required duration and content of bridging. Bridging might end up being too short, too long or irrelevant. A powerful pre-placement assessment can mitigate this disadvantage.
  - o Low accessibility if designed as a fully on-site program and if carries unsubsidized tuition fees.
  - o Difficult to justify and sustain a local program in areas/jurisdictions that have very few applicants.
  - o The high competition over placements creates a competitive environment where a bridging program may struggle to secure sufficient placements for its learners. This, in turn, limits the capacity of the program and therefore its sustainability.

l) **Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) –** The process of testing an applicant's knowledge and/or skills through an online examination programmed to estimate the applicant's ability after each item (Cella et al, 2007). That ability-estimate is then used in the automated selection of subsequent items which means that each applicant ends up writing a different exam based on his/her maximal ability. The CAT assessment tool can be applied to language and communication assessments, competency assessments and knowledge exams.

- *Strengths:*
  - o Examinees don't spend time on questions that are too easy or far too difficult for them (these contribute very little to identifying the actual level of knowledge/competency).
  - o The tailored item selection can result in reduced standard errors and greater precision with a much lower number of properly selected items.
  - o With the right item bank and a high applicant ability variance, CAT can be much more efficient than a traditional paper-based test in terms of the time spent on the exam and the validity of results.
  - o A centralized delivery model can create national standardization, be relatively low-resource for administering organizations and more accessible and affordable for test-takers.

- o Can be offered to IEDs in the pre-arrival stage.
- *Weaknesses*:
    - o Examination development process can be highly expertise and resource intensive.
    - o It is difficult to assess the full scope and depth of professional knowledge through a single exam. Topics and levels of knowledge application need to be carefully selected to be representative of the overall knowledge a professional requires.
    - o A powerful information security system is required to ensure the integrity of the exam.

m) **Triple Jump Assessment -** A process that tests the knowledge, problem-solving, critical thinking, organizational, patient assessment and self-evaluation skills, as well as self-directed learning capabilities (O'Neill et al 2007). In healthcare professions it normally includes a short client situation with the candidate asked to generate a problem list/ hypotheses about the client's situation; identify and collect relevant data about the client/family using a variety of methods; revise his/her problem list based on the data; develop an intervention/management care plan; and, complete self-evaluation. The Triple Jump Assessment tool can be applied to both knowledge exams and competency assessments.

- *Strengths*:
    - o Assesses a range of skills and competencies along the continuum of care.
    - o Uses realistic professional situations, therefore relevant to applicant.
    - o Grading is based on the use of standardized, competency-based tools (rubrics).
- *Weaknesses*:
    - o The development process of can be fairly expertise and resource intensive.
    - o It is difficult to assess the full scope and depth of professional competency through a single Triple Jump Assessment. Such assessments should normally be integrated with other assessment events and methods.
    - o Multiple versions and a powerful information security system are required to ensure the integrity of the assessments.

Clearly, there is no single RPL assessment strategy or tool that is all encompassing and that would provide educational, training and regulatory bodies with all the required evidence of an applicant's knowledge, communication and professional competency. However, the combination of several such methods along with rigorous quality assurance procedures, a careful application of assessment techniques and the use of highly competent and specialized assessors can provide a powerful overall assessment.

5.3. Moving Forward

The RPL/PLAR practice has been long researched and widely applied in Europe, Australia, USA, and, to some degree, in Canada, mostly in institutions for higher education. Educators using the RPL assessment process are reporting high levels of satisfaction with the consistency, validity, accessibility and fairness these assessment methods provide both to the organization and to its clients. Based on our environmental scan, although quantitative research in this area is scarce when it comes to regulatory bodies, many have already moved to RPL-based assessments, either as an alternative or as a supplementary accrediting process.

> *We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.*
>
> *Albert Einstein*

One of the obstacles to change is the organizational tendency to operate under the motto of "better the devil you know than the devil you don't". Universities, training bodies and regulators often rather stick with the familiar than attempt the unknown. Nonetheless, while every change from the familiar to the unfamiliar carries its risks and concerns, it is already clear to the leaders of the dietetics profession in Canada, CDO amongst them, that the alternative – relying solely on credentialing processes – holds its own risks and shortcomings. At this point in time, it would seem that the risk professional organizations take by not acting to review and revise existing assessment practices is most likely higher than that of acting, especially considering recent changes in legislation (Fairness Acts and Chapter 7 of the AIT).

Moving forward would require the conception of an evolutionary, transformational vision that will benefit the profession of dietetics in the long run. This transformational vision would greatly benefit from the participation of multiple professional partners. It can be managed through a centralized model and grounded in solid foundations of professional rigor, relevance, validity, accessibility,

transferability, fairness and sustainability. This evolutionary process can happen in a single, centralized "wave" or through a compartmentalized, step-by-step approach.

6. POSSIBLE APPROACHES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This document aims to provide a jumping point to the initiation of a constructive discussion, should the professional partners within dietetics in Canada decide to pursue the development of an RPL-based assessment framework. The recommended approach outlined in this section is merely one of many possible approaches. As such, it is not claimed to be the best or the only approach, but rather a tangible foundation for the initiation of a professional discussion.

In our environmental scan, no two organizations were shown to apply identical frameworks and/or tools, even within the same profession. Although these outcomes aren't providing us with an ultimate best practice or a single preferable tool, it does provide us with a broad menu of possibilities that could inform and guide us in creating preferable frameworks and tools. The most fruitful approach will most likely be such that combines tools; an integrational approach that includes multiple steps to be used at multiple points in time.

The proposed approach is inspired by the strengths of major RPL-based assessment strategies, the mandates of educational, training and regulatory bodies and the philosophical framework of Fairness Acts across Canada. This approach is founded on the following principles:

- The aspiration to create fair and equitable enrolment, admission and/or registration pathways for all applicants, Canadian and internationally educated alike.
- Seeking to create a system that can assess, quantify, validate and recognize an individual's knowledge and competency acquired throughout life in formal, non-formal and informal experiences.
- Seeking to set the level of rigor at the point that no incompetent professionals are mistakenly deemed education/placements/registration and, at the same time, no competent professionals are denied education/placements/registration.
- Aiming to generate diagnostic assessment outcomes that are not only transparent but also helpful to all applicants; outcomes that provide realistic expectations and support effective planning of education, training and registration processes.
- Aiming to create assessment processes that are accessible, transferrable and financially sustainable, irrespective of the size of the province administering it or the number of applicants served annually.

As described in the discussion section of this document, no single assessment method is either all encompassing or flawless. Overall efficacy, validity and reliability are better achieved through a combination of complementary methods and tools.

The considerations for selecting the proposed assessment components and tools are as follows:

1. Due to the resources required for the development of new assessment components (time, expertise, finance) each selected assessment tool should serve at least two out of the three types of organizations involved in the dietetics profession (educational, training and regulatory/professional bodies).
2. Assessment tools should allow for centralized management and delivery system to enable standardization across provinces and enhance economies of scale and therefore sustainability.
3. Assessment tools should be offered in a web-based format as much as possible to allow centralization and increased accessibility to applicants throughout Canada as well as to IEDs in the pre-arrival stage.
4. RPL tools must be diagnostic and informative; each tool should provide applicants with a detailed, clear and transparent feedback.

The proposed RPL tools and potential resources include the following:

a) **Assessment of Professional Communication -** Developing an online, profession-specific, competency based assessment to allow for standardized, centralized and sustainable administration across provinces with a possibility to offer the assessment in the pre-arrival stage. A powerful assessment will provide internationally educated applicants with detailed information on their language proficiency in all four language domains (speaking, listening, reading and writing) as those apply within a professional context, as well as their communication-related professional competency (e.g., critical communication, client-centred communication).

   An online ***National Assessment of Professional Communication in Dietetics*** can create economies of scale for educational, training and regulatory bodies. A slightly modified version of this assessment can be easily developed for Canadian educated applicants who don't require the assessment of language but can still benefit from the professional communication component. This will not require re-development but rather the omission of some of the language-specific questions through a simple code line. One model of a centralized, proctored, online

assessment of profession-specific language and communication is currently being developed by Fusion Global Education in partnership with LEAP for the Canadian Alliance of Physiotherapy Regulators and the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapist. This assessment is expected to be piloted this summer and evaluated by end of 2011.

b) **Narrative-Based Portfolio** – This widely used methodology is already administered by Canadian universities such as Athabasca University and Mount St Vincent University. This method is fully documented and readily available for all other institutions who wish to offer this service to their learners. The main institutional investment upon the adoption of this methodology will be in the development of organizational capacity and buy-in (e.g., training facilitators and assessors, internal marketing and promotion). We recommended exploring the possibility of developing a single facilitated online, dietetics-driven RPL/PLAR course. It can be developed either centrally by the profession (using external or internal funding sources) or by a single university appointed and approved by the profession. The course can be made available to all education and training organizations willing and able to administer it or refer applicants who will pay a standard course fee for participation.

c) **Knowledge Self-Test -** The use of this exam will help applicants gain a realistic view of and feedback on their actual level of knowledge. This is especially valuable for adult learners who may not be fully aware of the current scope and depth of knowledge required for practicing the professions or of their own current capacity and gaps. This tool aims to contribute to both transparency and professional development planning. An online version could be delivered through a centralized system to create economies of scale and offered to applicants in and outside of Canada. One of the existing models that could be explored in this regard is the Competence Self-Assessment Process (CSAP) piloted by CDBC.

d) **Knowledge Examination** – This exam will assess the applicant's range and depth of content to provide educating, training and regulating bodies with satisfactory assurance of knowledge. It should be structured to provide a transparent and powerful feedback to applicants and therefore to allow for the development of effective learning plans. We recommend to integrated several assessment methods as part of this tool such as scenario-based multiple choice questions and a Triple Jump section. An online tool will allow the creation of a *National Assessment of Professional Knowledge in Dietetics*.

e) Assessment of Professional Practice/Competency – This tool will assess the applicant's scope and depth of professional competency. This exam should include a range of content and professional scenarios to allow for a comprehensive assessment, and therefore a satisfactory assurance of competency. At the same time, it should provide a transparent and powerful feedback to allow for the development of effective learning plans and bridging processes. A ***National Assessment of Dietetics Practice*** can be comprised of several demonstration-based methods that will provide a variety of ways for applicants to showcase their competency levels. We recommend the use of a combination of testing methods such as a case-based online testing (online simulated events), Standardized Simulated Events, Triple Jump Assessment and Structured Interviews. At least some of these assessments are conducive to an online, centralized, national delivery model. Face to face components can be administered either through a synchronous online interface (e.g. via Skype or another video-based online tool) or by a local trained assessment team. Both methods have their advantages. While the online interface will allow for economies of scale and accessibility, the use of local assessment team will help create a distributed assessment capacity across the country.

f) Comprehensive Assessment via Bridging – It is recommended to make at least a fundamental level of bridging available to applicants accessing the profession through alternative pathways. This should consist of a longer period of assessment, combined with incremental levels of education and training as per applicants' needs. It is especially useful for IEDs and for applicants returning to practice after many years of absence. One of the existing models that we recommend to explore is the IDPP bridging program offered through Ryerson University's G. Raymond Chang School of Continuing Education. Adaptations to a more modular and distributed delivery model are likely to be required as it is currently designed as a fully face-to-face, onsite program and requires all participants to take all program components.

Table 4 describes the potential uses of each of the tools per type of professional organization.

Table 4: Potential Uses of Recommended Assessment Tools for Dietetics Educational, Training and Regulatory Bodies

	Universities	**Internship/Training Organizations**	**Regulatory bodies**
National Assessment of Professional Communication in Dietetics	**Potentially beneficial:** For applicants whose first language is other than English or French; can replace requirement for language proficiency testing.	**Highly beneficial:** For all applicants as part of the entry screening process.	**Highly beneficial:** For applicants whose first language is other than English or French and for all other applicants accessing via alternative, non-accredited pathways; can replace requirement for language proficiency testing.
Narrative-Based Portfolio	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated, accessing program for refresher, remedial or re-training purposes.	**Potentially beneficial:** For all adult applicants with prior professional experience, (both internationally and Canadian educated). **Highly beneficial** if incorporated with applied demonstration of knowledge/ competency	**Limited benefit:** As an optional self exploratory stage for applicants accessing via alternative, non-accredited pathways; preferably through a university-facilitated process/course due to capacity issues.
National Self-Test of Professional Knowledge in Dietetics	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated wishing to access remedial or re-training purposes as part of expectation setting. Can be supplementary to the Narrative-based Portfolio.	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated.	**Highly beneficial:** For all applicants accessing via alternative, non-accredited pathways, both internationally and Canadian educated as part of an exploratory, expectation-setting stage.

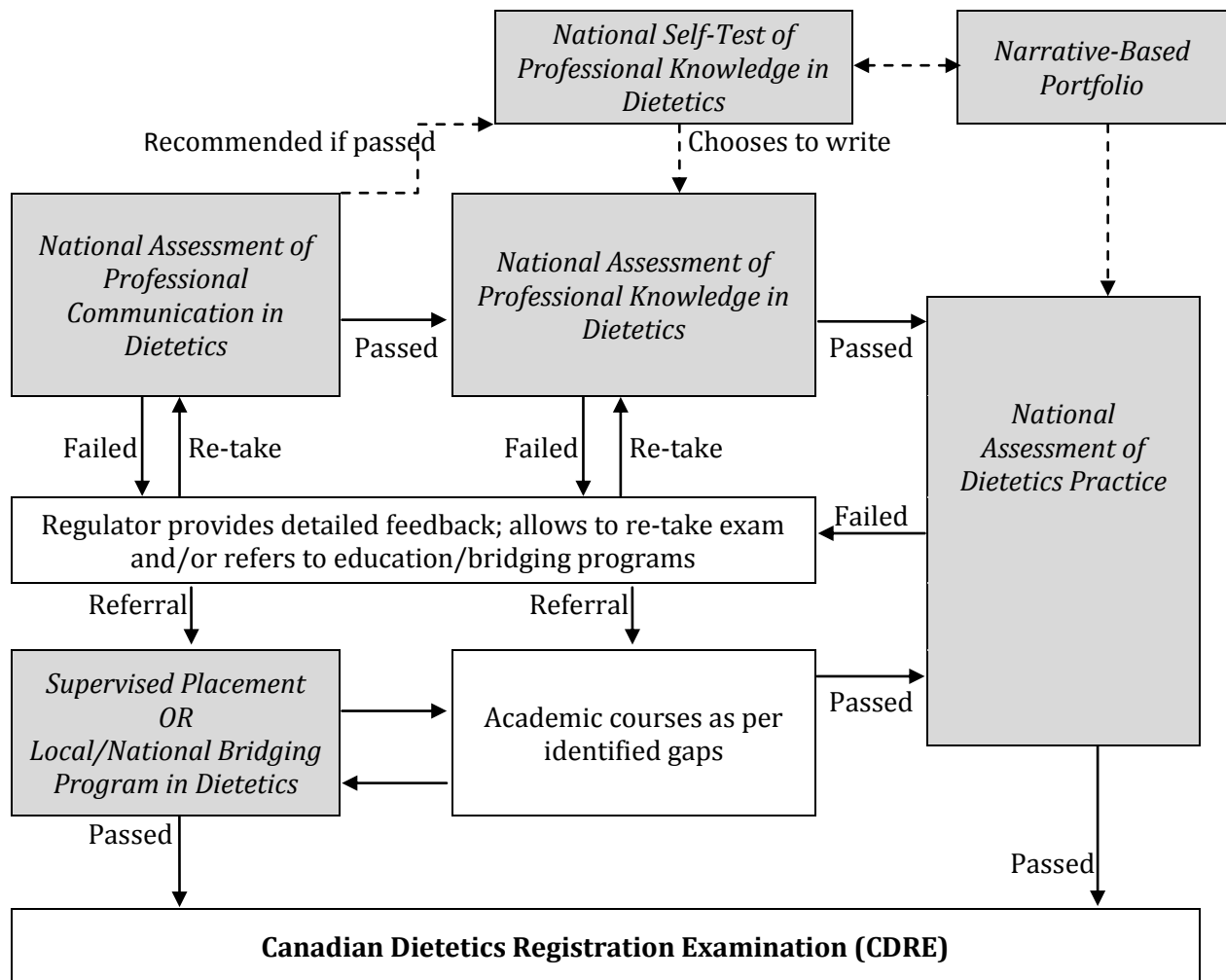| (Table 4 continued)	Universities	Internship/Training Organizations	Regulatory bodies
National Assessment of Professional Knowledge in Dietetics	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated, accessing for remedial or re-training purposes. Either supplementary or as a replacement of the Narrative-based Portfolio.	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated. **Potentially beneficial:** Optional for post-degree applicants with insufficient grade average.	**Highly beneficial:** For all applicants accessing via alternative pathways, both internationally and Canadian educated; an alternative to education-related credentialing process.
National Assessment of Dietetics Practice	**Potentially beneficial:** Can potentially be used by integrated programs as a standardized exit assessment.	**Highly beneficial:** For all adult applicants, internationally and Canadian educated, who bring a range of prior professional experiences; helps determine duration, scope, focus and areas of training.	**Highly beneficial:** For all applicants accessing via alternative pathways, both internationally and Canadian educated; an alternative to professional practice-related credentialing process.
Comprehensive Assessment via Bridging	**Potentially beneficial:** Using assessment outcomes (administered and produced by a bridging program) to determine academic remedial or upgrading needs.	**Potentially beneficial:** Using assessment outcomes (administered and produced by a bridging program) to determine duration, scope, focus and areas of training.	**Highly beneficial:** For all applicants accessing via alternative pathways who require upgrading or bridging (both internationally and Canadian educated); an alternative to knowledge and professional practice-related credentialing process.

It is important to note that assessments and examinations can range from simple to complex; offered in only one location or in a proctored, internet version worldwide. However, the more complex the more expensive assessments get. One of the key factors affecting which options are viable is the size of the profession and the number of applicants served annually. As seen in the case of CGFNS and CDR (nursing and dietetics in the US), a knowledge and professional competency exam can be extremely sophisticated and thoroughly researched. It can use the latest Internet technology and be offered worldwide. However, this range of options is available only because it is cost effective to do so as these organizations serve thousands of applicants annually. Where substantially smaller numbers are expected, such as in the case of dietetics in Canada, a much simpler system is necessitated but the methods can still be sophisticated and effective such is in the case of nursing in Alberta and dentistry in Ontario.

While RPL-based assessment methods provide information on an applicant's strengths and gaps, it is recommended to view RPL as part of a broader framework which considers the full range of activities that enhance an individual's access to a profession. Tools that focus purely on assessment can bring an individual no further than to the point of a reliable identification of professional assets and gaps. Once gaps have been substantiated, a remedial or a bridging process to fill these gaps would be most beneficial; otherwise assessment activities might become a futile exercise for both the applicant and the administering body. This is the main reason why the Comprehensive Assessment via Bridging method was included among the recommended tools for development.

Chart 11 illustrates a more holistic approach to professional registration, should all of the recommended components in this section be developed and implemented. This framework is recommended for entrants who require alternative routes of access to the profession. This recommended framework can also benefit individuals who are in the process of exploring career opportunities as it provides self-exploration and counselling components that could support career redirection.

Chart 11: Recommended RPL-Based Assessment Process

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                          ┌──────────────────────┐            ┌──────────────────┐
                          │ National Self-Test of │◀ ─ ─ ─ ─ ▶│ Narrative-Based  │
                          │ Professional Knowledge│            │    Portfolio     │
                          │   in Dietetics        │            └──────────────────┘
                          └──────────────────────┘
   Recommended if passed ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘   │ Chooses to write
                                        ▼
┌─────────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────────┐                    ┌──────────────────┐
│ National Assessment │    │ National Assessment  │                    │    National      │
│   of Professional   │──▶ │  of Professional     │─── Passed ───────▶ │  Assessment of   │
│  Communication in   │Passed│ Knowledge in        │                   │ Dietetics        │
│     Dietetics       │    │   Dietetics          │                    │  Practice        │
└─────────────────────┘    └──────────────────────┘                    │                  │
    Failed │  ▲ Re-take      Failed │  ▲ Re-take                        │                  │
           ▼  │                     ▼  │                                │                  │
┌───────────────────────────────────────────────┐  Failed              │                  │
│ Regulator provides detailed feedback; allows   │◀─────────────────── │                  │
│ to re-take exam and/or refers to education/    │                      │                  │
│ bridging programs                              │                      │                  │
└───────────────────────────────────────────────┘                      │                  │
   Referral │                Referral │                                 │                  │
           ▼                          ▼                                 │                  │
┌─────────────────────┐    ┌──────────────────────┐  Passed            │                  │
│ Supervised Placement│──▶ │ Academic courses as  │──────────────────▶ │                  │
│         OR          │    │  per identified gaps │                    └──────────────────┘
│ Local/National      │◀── │                      │                          │
│ Bridging Program in │    └──────────────────────┘                          │
│    Dietetics        │                                                      │
└─────────────────────┘                                                      │ Passed
   Passed │                                                                  │
          ▼                                                                  ▼
┌────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│        Canadian Dietetics Registration Examination (CDRE)                        │
└────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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──────▶ Registration-related pathway   - - - -▶ Additional/optional pathways

The recommended assessment and remedial/bridging tools can be adopted in full or in part and developed either through a single centralized funding initiative or a gradual, more compartmentalized approach where individual organizations undertake the development of different components that are then added to a bigger, centralized "quilt" of services accessible to all.

The main advantages of the proposed RPL-based assessment process are:
1. This framework has the full potential to serve all adult learners applying for dietetics studies, training and registration, especially those who are accessing the profession via alternative routes.
2. This framework has the full potential to serve all educating, training and registration bodies; applicants' prior learning and current knowledge and professional competency could be fully recognized for advanced standing in education and training and/or for registration.
3. This process includes the assessment of all three major components required for professional registration: knowledge, communication and competency.
4. A centrally facilitated and supported process will allow economies of scale and full transferability among participating institutions and provinces.
5. A multitude of online components will allow national and international access. Global access will allow IEDs to significantly advance their application process in the pre-landing stage or, alternatively, gain a powerful reality check that will inform their decision to immigrate or pursue professional qualification in Canada.
6. The proposed assessment tools carry the potential to be developed for highly comprehensive scope and depth.
7. The proposed assessment tools utilize multiple assessment strategies and therefore are more likely to compensate for an applicant's weakness in response to one strategy or another.
8. The staged approach, where each assessment is a check-point for the following one, will allow applicants to plan and execute required professional development following each of the stages and therefore save assessment time and fees for individuals who need to first close gaps.
9. This assessment has the potential to provide a powerful diagnostic of strengths and gaps as well as informative feedback to participants in support of personal and professional learning planning.
10. The self-testing option within this assessment framework provides applicants an opportunity to determine their level of knowledge and better prepare prior to formal application.
11. Training organizations may be able to offer more placements based on shortened practicum times of some of their participants.

12. Modular bridging processes have the potential to provide applicants with individualized bridging options based on identified gaps.
13. This process can provide the often much needed bridging and training on top of assessment to ensure success in the final assessment and in professional practice.

The main disadvantages of this assessment process are:
1. This process requires centralized infrastructure that can support its development, implementation and ongoing delivery.
2. This process requires massive development, piloting and implementation process (i.e. funds, human resources and collaborative environment).

One of the central considerations for the development of these tools is the number of partner organizations that end up collaborating on such an initiative. The participation of a high number of partner organizations (i.e. educating training and regulatory bodies with representatives from most or all provinces) may present both benefits and challenges.

The benefits of a broad partnership may include:
- the movement towards a more unified approach to professional standards across Canada;
- the creation of a national, centralized approach that allows for scalability, full transferability and financial economies of scale (while this will benefit all the participating professional organizations and provinces, the smaller ones will be the greatest beneficiaries based on their limited capacity);
- the substantially greater potential for securing sufficient funds for the development phase, as both provincial and federal funders favour proposals/projects that involve multiple partnerships and ensure a broader systemic change;

The challenges of a broad partnership may include:
- the magnitude of collaboration and facilitation required to reach an agreement on a unified vision;
- the need for mobilizing multiple organizations with different interests and agendas in a single, agreed upon direction; and,
- the need to establish a strong infrastructure (i.e., steering/governing body, policies and procedures) that includes multiple representatives to support the process of RPL development and implementation.

In summary:

This document aspires to help initiate and be instrumental in a constructive discussion among the leaders of the profession of dietetics in Canada on the subject of access to the profession. Our recommendations attempt to be fully applicable to educational, training and regulatory organizations across Canada, and focus on the development of RPL-based processes for entrants accessing the profession through alternative pathways. The proposed model is based on a centralized, unified approach that can provide multiple advantages to participating organizations such as economies of scale, fairness and full professional transferability. This collaborative model is also conducive to a joint request for funding which will enable a considerable progression towards enhanced access to dietetics, should the professional partners choose to pursue it.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:
Case Studies and Lessons Learned

The following sample cases and experiences were collected through interviews with Carolyn Lordon, Registration Program Manager, CDO and Lori Buscher, Program Manager, IDPP. These cases and experiences demonstrate some of the challenges and barriers created by the existing document-based accreditation process.

1. Self-managed Competency Portfolio

Applicant A completed her education in Canada but was unable to secure an internship placement. After some additional academic upgrade, she was able to assemble a modular internship by heavily relying on the support of CDO staff. As part of the self-driven internship, *Applicant A* had to create a complete portfolio of demonstrated competencies. Being a self generated process, registration committee members had a difficulty to establish *A's* level of competency despite the ongoing support and advice from CDO staff.

Several challenges are exemplified through this case:
- The challenge of securing an internship placement – this is a common challenge Canadian graduates face based on the shortage of internship placements in Ontario. This shortage is highly taxing not only for graduates but also for the College and the profession at large. Canadian graduates who fail to secure an internship placement are either required to give up on a career they have invested in or find expensive and time-consuming alternate solutions. This challenge is not specific to a credentialing process, but it is augmented by the fact that in a credential-driven environment, placements aren't customized to individual needs.
- The College is required to provide extensive individual supports which are beyond the scope and capacity of its staff members.
- The challenge of relying on a self-driven RPL process which may create:
    - an unknown level of rigor throughout each of the placements;
    - an imbalanced exposure to areas of practice and/or to high-importance high-frequency events/competencies;
    - documentation challenges (e.g., using the same experience to describe an excessive number of competencies; relying on the quality of the narrative to tease out demonstration of competencies);
    - assessment challenges, requiring assessors to make trust-based/subjective vs. methodological/objective decisions; and,

- inconsistency and lack of transparency (depending greatly on individual judgment and therefore on the makeup of the committee at the time of portfolio submission).

In the case of *Applicant A*, a well structured, College/profession driven RPL process could potentially:
- open up additional internship spots by shortening placement times for individuals who demonstrate sufficient competency in specific areas, therefore allowing individuals like *Applicant A* to enter the mainstream, structured professional training, and
- create alternative standardized processes of competency assessment that would not require the exclusive reliance on a self-compiled portfolio, therefore creating transparency and consistency and time economies.

2. **Assessment of general equivalence to a Canadian degree**
   Applicant B is an IED from the Philippines whose credentials were assessed by the Comparative Education Service (CES) of the University of Toronto and deemed equivalent to a three year College diploma. The same applicant was then assessed by World Education Services (WES) and deemed equivalent to a four year Canadian university degree. This is one of several such cases. As yet, there is a significant variability in the assessment methods used by the various credential assessment authorities and the College has no objective method to determine which of these services provides valid outcomes.

   In the case of *Applicant B*, a well structured, College/profession driven RPL process could have verified her scope and depth of professional knowledge without the need to rely on documentation.

3. **Missing course descriptions**
   Applicant C is an IED who has completed her undergraduate degree in 1972 and her master's degree in 1979. Since 1979 she has been teaching nutrition at a university in her country. *Applicant C* was able to provide transcripts but unable to produce course descriptions as they were no longer available. Relying on the document-based assessment method, CDO were forced to search for more creative methods such as finding another applicant from the same university who has graduated a few years later (and therefore had course descriptions) and asking university officials to describe any major differences that may have been between the later and earlier versions of these courses.

In a second case of this sort, *Applicant D* graduated in the former Soviet Union in the 70's; no other graduate from the same university could be found for document comparison. She was asked by the CDO to provide self-attested course descriptions; *Applicant D* decided to drop her application.

In a third case of this sort, *Applicant E* completed his undergraduate and master's degree in the Middle East and his PhD in the US. He had no access to course descriptions from his undergraduate and master's degrees but had full descriptions of his PhD courses. Although the latter provided some coverage, the majority of the mandatory courses had to be figured out through alternate methods. The review of this applicant's file was delayed significantly while CDO staff worked with him to identify and obtain alternative documents to present to the Committee. This type of scenario uses a significant amount of staff time (providing support and direction to the applicant) and results in undesirable delays for the applicant, especially when he may end up being asked to do some additional courses or training once the Committee has reviewed the file.

One of the challenges exemplified through these cases is the College's need to:
- find graduates from a similar university who had graduated within a few years of the applicant in question; and,
- locate someone at the university who speaks English, who is willing to cooperate with a North American organization, and who can provide reliable answers on the content of a curriculum that has been delivered nearly forty years ago;

However, the greatest challenge using the credentialing approach, at least in the cases of these applicants is not so much the complexity of obtaining missing documentation but rather their very relevance. What is the true value of obtaining information on 40-year-old learning, be it vague or surgically-precise? What is the true predictive power of this type of evidence on the Applicant's current level of professional knowledge? Even if all of the above daunting and unlikely processes were able to produce documented evidence of learning content, the College would still have had little confidence in the quality of the information provided.

In the case of *Applicant E* yet another question arises: can the applicant possess enough professional knowledge to successfully complete a PhD degree in nutrition but not enough to be automatically recognized for the content of basic undergraduate level courses?

With all three applicants, a well structured RPL process could potentially:

- save both the Applicants and the College much time and effort spent on pursuing missing documents, and
- help the Applicants demonstrate and the College gain proof of their current level of professional knowledge within a matter of hours.

4. Missing courses/specific content

Applicant F is an IED who has been teaching for years at the same university she has graduated from in her country of origin. In the course-by-course comparison, CDO identified a gap in one of the required courses. Despite the fact that *Applicant F* has actually developed and taught this very course at her university, she was unable to transfer it into a course credit since she never actually took this course as a learner. Being confounded by the document-based policy, the CDO was forced to instruct Applicant E to take this course in order for her to meet academic standards.

The main challenge exemplified through this case is that a document-based process can create not only unreasonable but irrational barriers to registration by virtue of being solely tied to paperwork.

In the case of *Applicant F*, a well structured RPL process could have helped the College gain the required proof of the Applicant's current level of professional knowledge without the need for documented courses.

5. Recognition of learning outside of a university degree

Applicant G is an IED who had spent several years in the attempt to register as a dietitian due to documentation issues. In the interim, she completed a two year college level diploma in food service management and practiced as a food service supervisor. Since the courses were college vs. university level, she was asked by the College to complete multiple courses on food service management.

In the case of *Applicant G*, a well structured RPL process could have helped the College gain the required proof of the Applicant's current level of professional knowledge in this area within a matter of hours and save almost a year of the applicant's time and thousands of dollars of her money spent on redundant courses.

6. **Recognition of language proficiency and professional communication**
   Applicant H is an IED from India who had completed a degree in nutrition in the English language. She was exempted by CDO from a language exam but wasn't accepted in the IDPP program due to significant challenges in professional communication.

   This applicant represents a larger group of IEDs who can demonstrate sufficient language proficiency (grammar, vocabulary, syntax etc.) based on previous academic-based use of the language, but are struggling with the culture-laden communication within the Canadian environment in general and within the professional context in particular.

7. **Recognition of practical training/certification**
   Applicant I is an IED who wasn't trained in a supervised practicum setting but practiced as a dietitian for many years. Based on CDO's credential assessment, she was required to complete a full internship. *Applicant I* enrolled in the IDPP, which it was clearly identified that her level of professional competency would not have required a full internship.

   Applicant J is an IED who was identified as requiring the Canadian Academic and Practical Training (CAPT)[12]. Finding it difficult to secure the placement on her own, she had enrolled in the IDPP. Through the IDPP screening process (PRE-assessment day) she was identified to have too significant of a gap to be resolved through the program. *Applicant J* was recommended to complete further language training and professional education before re-applying for the following IDPP cohort.

   Applicant K is an IED who, similarly to *Applicant J* was identified for CAPT. She was accepted for the IDPP though being a borderline applicant. She struggled throughout the program, had to repeat some of the courses and required an extension of the supervised placement.

   Applicant L is an IED who was also identified for CAPT after getting enrolled in the IDPP. She decided to leave the bridging program based on the assumption that a 10-week practicum was all she really needed, vs. the 12-18 months the IDPP program would require of her. *Applicant L* was able to secure and complete a supervised placement and was deemed eligible to write the CDRE. After failing twice on the exam, she returned to the IDPP. She struggled throughout the program due to significant deskilling and loss of personal confidence. Her process of registration is taking almost three years longer than it would have had she been assessed correctly to begin with.

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[12] CAPT requires an IED to complete one course in Clinical Nutrition and 10 weeks of supervised placement covering all three areas of practice.

It is important to note that based on IDPP cumulative data from the last six intakes, no difference in bridging needs was found between CAPT and none-CAPT candidates. These four applicants are merely example cases that represent a large number of wrongly-assessed applicants for registration. Despite CDO's efforts to apply assessment best practices, the very reliance on document-based credentialing often results in an overestimation or underestimation of an applicant's ability to practice safely. It would seem that the greatest risk here is to the applicants vs. to the public as supervised placements and/or the registration exam are instrumental in the identification of incompetent practitioners. However, the damage caused to "misdiagnosed" applicants can be immeasurable.

8. **Additional insights gained through IDPP**
   - **"Keys to success"** – Beyond actual professional knowledge and experience, it has been clearly identified that many other individual attributes and abilities are essential for safe and competent practice in dietetics. These key elements include:
     - A range of soft skills such as adaptability and flexibility, attitude, self reflection, resilience, critical thinking and analytical skills, interpersonal and social skills
     - Generic hard skills that aren't necessarily related to dietetics *per se* but are essential nonetheless. The two most common types of such skills are the use of technology (e.g., web-based information research and online communication) and basic math literacy (e.g., calculating ratios, percentages, rounding).
     - The level of critical analysis required to complete courses in Canada can be substantially greater than in some other jurisdictions where teaching is based on an expert-driven model by which learners are expected to absorb information and take it for granted. Learners from these environments often struggle with essentials such as information research, analysis, critiquing, and integration.

   None of these skills are measured through the credentialing process, even though they are known to be strong predictors of success in training and professional environment.

Appendix B:

Strengths and Weaknesses of Credentialing Processes Used by Educational, Training and Regulatory Bodies

1. **Credentialing process in the context of educational bodies**
   Most institutions of higher education were originally established to serve a young, local, post-high school population of learners. Based on these criteria two major policies have been established:

   a) Applicants for a degree must produce the appropriate documents proving sufficient academic achievements in their secondary studies.
      – *Strength*: Requires a simple, straightforward, short and scalable screening process.
      – *Weakness*: In reality, there is a growing influx of adult learners such as internationally educated individuals, professionals seeking career change or re-certification (upgrade) after a period of absence. These applicants draw on their life and work experience and can rarely produce valid, documented evidence of learning beyond their original formal education. They are therefore being undervalued and often required to take courses far beyond their genuine needs. In most cases, universities operate through the mechanism of *credit transfer* based on comparability of credits from another educational institution that is considered by the institution at par in terms of its academic level. Credit transfer is usually very limited in scope (normally up to 20%-30% of degree courses).

   b) Applicants for a degree must start their learning pathway from the first year of their chosen degree studies and successfully progress to the final year, at the end of which a degree is awarded by the institution.
      – *Strength*: Based on a meticulously designed, incremental and well tested curriculum that gradually builds a learner's knowledge from the ground up.
      – *Weakness*: Despite it being an advantageous approach for young/inexperienced learners, more often than not, adult learners in transition (either Canadian or internationally educated) require an assortment of courses to close specific gaps. These courses are not necessarily clustered in the same academic year of the degree which means that adult learners need to be able to reach into the curriculum and pull out their own "learning package".

Current policies in most educational institutions lack the ability to offer such an option. In some cases, educational institutions will allow individuals to "reach in" and access courses (mostly as a revenue generating strategy), but will not award a degree upon completion, unless at least 60%-70% of degree courses were completed within the university as they have no mechanism in place to recognize the full spectrum of an individual's acquired knowledge beyond accredited academic courses.

Clearly, adult learners require a more flexible system to assess their existing knowledge; one that takes into consideration the wealth of learning experiences they bring beyond their original, formal education (i.e. recognize non-formal and informal learning). There is a growing number of colleges and universities around the world and in Canada, such as Athabasca University, Mount Royal University and Mount St. Vincent University that are moving away from the above paradigms and adopting more progressive and flexible RPL processes.

2. **Credentialing process in the context of training bodies**
    Similarly to educational institutions, training bodies that provide supervised professional experience were originally formed to serve a young population of learners who have just graduated from local post-secondary, accredited institutions. Moreover, most provinces have limited training capacity to the point where in Ontario, for example, only about half the graduates from accredited food and nutrition programs[13] stand a chance to secure a spot in an accredited training program and therefore access the profession of dietetics. Based on these facts, the assumptions held by training organizations are as follows:
    a) Only the most competitive applicants will be granted placements; the initial cut-off is based on an applicant's academic credentials.
        –   *Strength*: Academic achievements are perceived as a strong predictor of an individual's intellectual capacity and therefore of his/her chances to succeed in the training program and, thereafter, in the profession. This screening method requires a simple, straightforward, short and scalable process.
        –   *Weakness*: Research shows that while general intellectual ability covaries 0.70–0.80 with academic achievement measures, it covaries as low as 0.20–0.60 with work performance[14]. While high grades may indicate mastery of content, what they really demonstrate is that students have the skill set necessary to succeed in the university environment. In fact, some of the more

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[13] This statement refers to programs where training isn't integrated as part of the degree.
[14] Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society, retrieved on January 25, 2011 from
http://www.faqs.org/childhood/In-Ke/Intelligence-Testing.html

successful figures, such as Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein, Richard Branson and Bill Gates were either at the bottom of their class or university drop-outs. Some of the key elements that are more likely to predict success in training/professional environment are prior life experiences, the ability to transfer skills, adaptability and flexibility, attitude, resilience, critical thinking, communication skills and a myriad of other soft skills otherwise known as emotional intelligence (Caruso et al, 2006, Freshman and Rubino, 2002, Cherniss, 1999)

b) All selected applicants bring similar levels of knowledge and experience and are likely to progress in a similar pace and therefore require similar structure, content, level of supervision and duration of training.

– *Strength*: using a pre-designed, standardized training plan that covers all mandatory practice areas ensures the coverage of all required competencies and the approval of the regulatory body. It also enables planning and allocation of organizational human resources well in advance.

– *Weaknesses*: Applicants, especially adult learners, bring varied scope and depth of knowledge and profession-related/transferrable skills. Some may require much shorter or longer placements, others may require more focus on one area of practice and nearly none on other areas based on prior experience, some may require mostly cultural bridging while others may require more or less time practising specific competencies, unrelated to practice areas. A one-fit-all training structure is more likely to contain insufficient, redundant or irrelevant components, especially when it comes to adult learners.

In summary, although education and training organizations have well tested credentialing systems, these might often be unsuitable tools that produce excessive barriers, irrelevancies and redundancies, especially when it comes to international professionals and other adult learners.

3. **Credentialing process in the context of regulatory bodies**

Regulatory legislation was created at a time when, as described in the introduction to this report, most applicants were Canadian educated, newly graduated/trained individuals. At the time, the integration of immigrants was driven mainly by "tolerance" towards immigrants vs. active support for meaningful integration, and adult learners changing careers or using alternate educational pathways were scarce. Merely two decades ago most of the immigrants to Canada were labourers who did not require registration in their professions and the few immigrant professionals were expected to find their own solutions for accessing their profession. At that time "starting from scratch" was perceived as the acceptable path for immigrants as they were not considered to be a valuable asset or "human capital". Similarly, Canadian educated professionals were expected to get their education and training in one of the few accredited programs and remain in their profession until retirement. Based on these realities, assessing applicants for registration through document-based credentials from familiar and locally credible institutions was the most logical and practical approach. The more recently founded regulatory bodies, such as the CDO, followed suit using the more well-established regulators as models for best practices.

The main advantage of the document-based model is that when credentials bear great similarities to the mainstream, accredited Canadian education in the field (such as other accredited programs from Canadian provinces and the US), document comparison and analysis is a fairly straightforward process. So long as these conditions are maintained, the credentialing process is manageable, fair, timely, efficient and financially sustainable. However, once credentials do not meet these basic conditions, which is the case with the vast majority of immigrant professionals and other adult applicants, this model becomes extremely complex and onerous, to the point where many regulatory bodies choose to outsource this component to one extent or another. From a recent report by the Office of the Fairness Commissioner (March 2010):

> *"Registration is complex, costly and time consuming. Steps can and should be taken to make the process less cumbersome. We do not believe the obstacles faced by some applicants are deliberate or mean spirited. We are confident that Ontario regulatory bodies all support and promote fair registration. They demonstrate goodwill and are working proactively to improve their registration practices. Not all applicants encounter unexpected or impassable difficulties. But the common concerns of those who have negative experiences indicate systemic problems that must be addressed."*

The credentialing process used by the majority of the regulatory bodies in Canada, dietetics included, consists of the following components, each of which bearing a multitude of challenges and weaknesses:

a) **Education credentialing**
    The assessment of professional knowledge using the credentialing model is usually conducted in two stages:
    Stage 1: Assessment of general equivalence to a Canadian degree. The questions this stage is attempting to answer are:

    Are there documents to prove education?
    - In some cases, international professionals emigrate from areas of existing or past conflict where it is virtually impossible to obtain original documentation from universities.
    - There is a significant variability in assessment methods, even among recognized credential assessment authorities. This situation results in often significant variability in assessment outcomes for the same applicant; it drives applicants to "shop around" and contributes to systemic inconsistency.

    Are the documents authentic?
    In reality, degree documents can be bought everywhere around the world, including in Canada. If this is the only evidence used, educators, trainers and regulators are in great danger of allowing access to unqualified individuals. Document authentication requires expertise and experience; this type of expertise rarely exists in regulatory bodies. Capacity can be developed through training but will require frequent updates, upgrades and dedicated staff.

    Were the documents issued by recognized/accredited institution(s)?
    - Requires extensive and up to date database on all the institutions around the world that are accredited to issue academic degrees; this type of database rarely exists in regulatory bodies. Capacity can be developed through the development of database and training but will require frequent updates, upgrades and substantial dedicated staff.

    Is the number of hours of education compatible with the minimum required for a Canadian degree? Are there sufficient credits?
    - Requires expertise and database to support the "translation" of credits to hours from transcripts that use varying methods and terminology for

credit/hour count; this type of expertise and database may not exists within regulatory bodies although can be gradually developed.

- Credits are awarded on a pass/fail basis regardless of the academic level achieved. In many cases it is difficult to know how other countries approach marking and there are no simple equations that can calibrate transcripts into a common standard for marking/credit acquisition. International professionals are awarded credits based on regulators' "reasonable doubt" approach, even though Canadian students do not progress to practical education unless they achieve grades much beyond the minimum pass level for credit attainment.

Theoretically speaking, regulators can use a problem-solving approach to these challenges by allowing alternate routes for proof of degrees. Relying on specialized credentialing service providers such as WES can mitigate some of the challenges but realistically speaking, regulators who have not yet adopted the RPL approach, offer few genuine solutions to some of these challenges.

Stage 2: Assessment of program comparability. The question this stage is attempting to answer is: ***Is the content of the degree/program substantially equivalent to a similar accredited degree/program in Canada?***
This stage is usually dealt with by comparing courses to a list of pre-identified courses required in Canada for this profession, or by mapping the overall content of courses against the overall body of knowledge required by the regulatory body. In both cases, effective application of this method requires answers to the following questions:

Are there documents to prove content of education?
Similarly to Stage 1, in some cases, international professionals emigrate from areas of existing or past conflict where it is virtually impossible to obtain original documentation from universities. In other cases course descriptions are no longer available at the institution level.

Are course contents substantially compatible with the list of required courses/content in Canada?
- Course descriptions from other jurisdictions may be:
  - lacking the level of detail required for content analysis;
  - using different terminology from that used in Canada;
  - using similar terminology to that used in Canada but meaning something different; and/or

– missing altogether.
- Learning can happen everywhere and all the time, not only through accredited academic courses. Academic environment is therefore only one of many experiences through which an individual acquires valuable, valid professional knowledge. This is especially true in the case of adult learners.

Are there specific content gaps and, if so, what are they?
In addition to the difficulty to go into detailed comparison based on the above identified challenges, there are two more barriers to identifying content gaps:
- Regulators must create a framework of minimum requirements. This framework is then used as a rigid yardstick though there is no guarantee that it represents the best or the most recent educational model.
- Considering the varied use of terminology, grading systems and content, documents can be infinitely difficult to compare and assess and gaps can either be artificial or undetectable.
- This model gives little consideration to the principles of incremental learning or "critical knowledge" vs. "foundational/scaffolding knowledge". In this model, basic, foundational courses/body of knowledge (e.g. organic chemistry) are equally weighted with advanced courses/body of knowledge (e.g., clinical nutrition). Insisting on the proof of fundamental studies as compared with advanced and applied knowledge does not help answer the question "does the applicant have the vital knowledge for a degree or for safe and effective practice?" Fundamental studies are normally used in academia as a scaffold that supports more advanced types of knowledge. Seasoned practitioners are seldom (if ever) required to demonstrate knowledge of fundamental courses. Requiring those of adult learners is often unreasonable and unhelpful. This approach might create a situation where highly competent individuals are required to complete basic courses that provide insignificant or no contribution to their capacity to practice the profession.

How are content gaps communicated to applicants?
When the missing body of knowledge/content can be easily identified as whole courses (e.g. no content on food service management), the recommendation for gap-closing is a straight forward one (e.g., take course on food service management). However, when the gaps are partial across several courses (e.g. one missing topic out of three topics that would normally be covered in a content course in Canada) the communication of the overall gap will be either on the excessive side (i.e. requiring applicants to take whole courses based on partial gaps) or unhelpful to the

creation of a learning plan (i.e. listing specific gaps that don't fall into any one particular course an applicant can take since universities don't currently offer a modular learning approach).

Another major challenge with the credentialing method is that it doesn't address the **currency** of education in the equation of gap analysis. According to Allen et al (*2002*): "*On average, almost a third of the skills obtained in (post secondary) education were obsolete seven years later. Skills obsolescence is strongly related to rapid changes in work domain, and to shortcomings in (post secondary) education.*" In some professions the time-to-knowledge-obsolesce may be even shorter (such as in Information Technology professions and to some extent in healthcare professions). This, in fact, is the very reason for life-long professional development being not only recommended but made mandatory by regulatory bodies in Canada. Nonetheless, academic credentials and course contents are compared and assessed by regulators with no regard to their potential, and often almost certain, obsolesce. The questions that need to be asked here are: what is the true value of formal education that took place over three to five years ago, no matter how good it might have been at the time? How well can it predict an individual's current professional knowledge?

In the attempt to address this challenge, most regulatory bodies require international professionals to include their continuous learning in the application package, also known as non-formal learning (e.g. conferences, workshops). This solution, however, carries its own weaknesses:
- More often than not, evidence for non-formal learning activities is difficult to produce either because evidence of completion was not provided or because such documentation was not retained by the participant throughout the years.
- The scope and level of learning achieved through these events is seldom standardized or measured and, therefore, generally unknown and unverifiable.
- Country-specific standards of, and expectations for, continuous professional development vary greatly. In most of the major source countries of immigration to Canada there are no consistent requirements for continuous professional development.

It is therefore not surprising that regulatory bodies using credentialing assessment processes are reluctant to recognize non-formal learning as an alternative evidence for mandatory degree-level content/knowledge.

b) Professional skills/competency

The Canadian standard of entry to dietetics practice requires a period of supervised practical placement, which is either integrated in the undergraduate/graduate program or applied for and completed independently post graduation. This supervised training provides candidates with the opportunity to be coached, to practise and eventually to demonstrate sufficient professional competence. Although the duration of such internships may vary to a certain degree across provinces, all the provincial regulators require a proctored and documented demonstration of all the professional competencies in the three main areas of dietetics practice. Based on these standards, the credentialing-based determination of professional competence relies on an applicant's documentation of supervised training and/or certification to practice in alternative training paths in Canada or in their country of origin. When using the credentialing process to assess documents presented by applicants who were not trained through one of the Canadian accredited training programs (such as IEDs), the regulatory body is attempting to answer the question:

Are the format, content and duration of the training/certification process comparable and substantially equivalent to the one required in Canada?

- There are multiple ways one can learn to apply knowledge and acquire practical skills. Even within Canada there are several training models. Since an internship/practicum program is based on achievement and demonstration of comprehensive competencies, it stands to reason that experience gained prior to internship/practicum (e.g. through work experience as a dietetic technician, weight loss counsellor; volunteer activities; life or personal experiences; or through a practical course, such as Marketing) may contribute to skill development and knowledge acquisition in one or more of the competency areas (Dietitians of Canada 2007).
- The credentialing process assumes that everyone enters supervised training at an equal level of existing skills and needs. In reality some individuals enter with greater life experience and transferrable skills whereas others may enter with excellent academic achievements but lacking communication and soft skills. Individuals are likely to require different lengths of practicum as well as different types of learning within the allotted time.
- Documentation of a supervised training might not be normally produced by the training body or isn't accessible.
- In the same way that there is no global standardization in the educational realm, there is no global standardization around professional training. It can be differently structured; shorter or longer; a privately paid or unsupervised

placement; a placement that doesn't cover all three required areas of practice but rather specializes in one area; professional training that doesn't define success through competency frameworks; and, other "incompatible models". Using the crude credentialing process prevents regulators from performing precise gap analysis, and therefore from providing relevant and helpful requirements.

- There are multiple examples where quality education/training can be achieved within a shorter timeframe (e.g. the movement to intensive studies in the US and the use of shorter periods of practical training). It is therefore important not to confuse time with quality.

Much like the reasoning behind the credentialing process of applicants' academic background, this process is based on the straightforwardness of assessment of professional competence relying on accredited training bodies. However, extending this process to applicants who went through other qualifying pathways raises as many challenges as the academic assessment. This is also true for applicants who were originally trained in an accredited program in Canada, left the profession for over three years and now wish to re-enter the profession. In their case, the original training no longer qualifies them for practice; therefore credentialing processes wouldn't enable regulators to validate current level of professional competency.

Another challenge similar to that of the academic assessment is currency. The questions that need to be asked here are: *what is the true value of a training period that took place over five, seven or more years ago, no matter how good it might have been? How well can it predict an individual's current professional competency?* These questions are particularly relevant in the case of IEDs who may have been trained many years ago. In the attempt to address this challenge, most regulatory bodies require international professionals to include their work experience in the application package. Similarly to the case of assessing non-formal learning through a credentialing model, this solution carries its own weaknesses:

- More often than not, evidence for work experience is difficult to verify. This is both due to the fact that many of the IEDs emigrate from non-English speaking countries, and the fact that regulators usually don't possess well developed tools to verify that the individual on the other side of the line indeed belongs to the said organization. In other cases, hiring managers/direct supervisors no longer work there or the organization no longer exists. Either way, it is a daunting and unrewarding task for regulators.

- The scope and level of professional learning and competence achieved through work experience is impossible to objectively measure through document-based processes. Even when documents with detailed lists of areas of responsibility are made available, there is no guarantee that the applicant had practiced competently according to Canadian standards.

As in the case of assessing continuing education, it is not surprising that regulatory bodies are reluctant to recognize self-documented work experience as alternative evidence for supervised training.