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Quantifying informal learning vital Study to examine unmet demand for adult education

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by Jenny Hall

With stories of overqualified immigrants unable to find work in their fields sharing headlines with news about shortages of doctors and other skilled workers, Canadian public policy experts are increasingly looking for ways to assess learning that has taken place outside the nation's formal post-secondary institutions.

Professor David Livingstone of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of U of T (OISE/UT) presented results from the 2004 Canadian Survey on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) Nov. 24 at a workshop hosted by the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment.

Funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the WALL survey suggests that more than half of Canadians over 18 would be interested in enrolling in further education if their prior informal learning and experiences could be translated into academic credit. Interest is even higher among young people, non-whites and recent immigrants.

The Work and Lifelong Learning survey is the first to quantify what Livingstone calls an "unmet demand" for adult education.

The answer to this unmet demand may be Prior Learning and Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), which Livingstone described as "a systematic set of procedures used by educational institutions or employers to assess the prior knowledge that hasn't been gained inside formal institutional boundaries." Portfolios and challenge exams, for example, are tools used to document prior learning -- and their more widespread usage could be good for everyone, Livingstone said.

PLAR could inspire several million more Canadians to participate in adult education. This, in turn, would help address labour shortages in

Canada and create a more productive workforce. "What this all translates into," Livingstone said, "is the larger economic and quality of life impact that learning always accrues."

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