# IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project: DRAFT FINAL REPORT

PREPARED FOR:

The Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association

PREPARED BY:

Human Capital Strategies
Kerry Jothen, CEO, and Associates:

Kylie Cavaliere, Sarah Cormode, Lois-Anne Hanson Arnold, Sandra McKay and Dr. Gerry William

March 31, 2011

© 2011 Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA). All rights reserved. This publication is available for personal non-commercial use. Users are restricted to making one copy for personal non-commercial use. Reproduction of multiple copies by an individual user, or reproduction by multiple users with the same organization, is prohibited except with written permission of IAHLA at info@fnesc.ca.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On behalf of the Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) and Human Capital Strategies (HCS), I would like to thank the many individuals and organizations that participated in the IAHLA Better Learner Assessment (BLA) Project over the past two years. In particular, I would like to thank the BLA Steering Committee members who oversaw this project and whose tireless efforts and keen insight added great value to the project and this report:

- Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi, Director, Office of Indigenous Affairs, University of Victoria;
- Verna Billy-Minnabarriet, Chair, IAHLA Board and Vice-President Learning Services and Campus Administrator, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (Merritt and Burnaby campuses);
- Cathy Seymour, IAHLA Board Member and Director of Post Secondary Education, Kwadacha Dune Ty, Fort Ware;
- Hilistis Pauline Waterfall, OBC, IAHLA Board Treasurer and Heiltsuk College, Bella Bella;
- Jan E. Green, IAHLA Board Secretary and Adult Alternative Learning Education Specialist, a-m'aa-sip Learning Place, Nuu-chah-nulth Employment and Training Program, Port Alberni;
- Karen Bailey-Romanko, FNESC – Director, Post-Secondary Education and Training/IAHLA.

I would also like to acknowledge the following groups that participated in this project:

- The 39 IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions that participated in the online survey and other parts of the project;
- The 37 assessment practitioners, students and other stakeholders who participated in the focus groups of this project; and,
- The representatives of NVIT, Bonaparte Indian Band, Saulteau First Nation and Seabird Island Band, who administered the pilot testing of the Best Learner Assessment Checklist developed during this project.

I would like to thank and acknowledge the work of my associates on this project, without whose support, dedication and professionalism, this project would never have been successfully completed:

- Kylie Cavaliere;
- Sarah Cormode;
- Lois-Anne Hanson Arnold;
- Sandra McKay; and,
- Dr. Gerry William

Finally, IAHLA and I would like to acknowledge NVIT and Kylie Cavaliere, Director of Enrolment Services & Registrar, NVIT, for Kylie's development of the Better Learner Assessment Checklist as a result of this project.

This project contributes significantly to a body of research and practice that has a dearth of empirical evidence of what contributes to the culturally sensitive and accurate (hence valid) literacy assessment of Aboriginal adult learners. It is an honour to have been involved and to have served IAHLA on this work.

Sincerely,

Kerry Jothen, CEO
Human Capital Strategies

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aboriginal adult learners who enter or re-enter the British Columbia post-secondary education system usually are required to complete learning assessments, whether they are pursuing literacy and numeracy courses, adult basic education, certification in the trades, or a certificate, diploma or degree program.

This is a pivotal step in an Aboriginal adult's progression through the higher learning process that can significantly influence whether or not such learners succeed on this pathway. It is important for Aboriginal adult learners attending both Aboriginal-controlled institutes and/or public post-secondary institutions. Further, there is very little empirical study of the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners in Canada.

Therefore, the Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) initiated a project to study the learner assessment process and tools, and develop a framework for improving the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners. With funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), IAHLA initiated the 18-month Better Learner Assessment (BLA) Project to be completed by April 2011.

IAHLA partnered with the University of Victoria (UVIC) and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) to execute the BLA Project to enhance the learner assessment tools used to assess the literacy levels of Aboriginal adult learners. Via a competitive procurement process, Human Capital Strategies of Victoria was selected to carry out the "Better Learner Assessment Project" on behalf of IAHLA and its partners.

### Project Goals, Deliverables and Methodology

The Better Learner Assessment (BLA) project was intended to achieve the following goals:

1. Provide an effective set of culturally appropriate learner assessment methods that will accurately determine the literacy levels of Aboriginal adult learners.
2. Reduce the negative impacts regular assessment processes have on many Aboriginal learners, in order to allow more Aboriginal learners to access education programs that improve their literacy and open doors for post-secondary learning, trades training and other lifelong learning opportunities; and that benefit their families and communities.

The BLA Project was intended to reduce the barriers to education for Aboriginal adult learners that are inherent in current learner assessments methods by achieving the following deliverables:

- Providing a comprehensive literature review on this subject;
- Developing a culturally appropriate conceptual framework and learner assessment methods that determine the literacy of Aboriginal adult learners and serve as a gateway to access educational programs that fulfill the Aboriginal adult learner's goals and potential;
- Training staff at IAHLA member institutes and public post-secondary institutes in the use of enhanced assessment methods; and,
- Making the new learner assessment methods available to the BC adult education community through project reports.

The project was overseen by a Better Learner Assessment Steering Committee that included three directors of IAHLA, representatives of other project partners, and representatives of two public post-secondary institutions (NVIT and UVIC). It took place over an almost eighteen-month period ending in April 2011.

The methodology for the BLA Project involved a robust combination of secondary and primary study, including the following:

- A comprehensive literature review;
- A survey of assessment practices at IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions in BC;
- Focus groups of assessment practitioners and Aboriginal students; and,
- Piloting of a framework of successful assessment practices.

The BLA Project has, as its primary focus, the assessment of literacy of Aboriginal people who are seeking access to programs in, or credentials from, post-secondary educational institutions.

### Recommendations Emerging from the Review of Literature

Aboriginal adult learners have a wide scope of unique life experience that affects and informs their learning. Many adult learners have had difficult and negative learning experiences in the past. Assessment practices must take into account where the learner is coming from, in order to support the learner through the process. Findings on assessment in relevant literature and research lead to the following recommendations for Aboriginal adult learner assessment models:

1. Measure assessment in a holistic manner, using assessment tools that include culturally relevant materials.
2. Use a combination of formal and informal assessment tools using various assessment procedures. Informal assessment tools may include but are not limited to: checklists, essays, oral readings, portfolios, interviews, demonstrations, work samples, self-evaluations, short answer questions, and performance charts.
3. Adhere to a holistic lifelong learning paradigm. Methodologies should be developed to use Aboriginal assessment practices and tools to measure success in other areas of the individual learner's life, as well as in the learner's classroom and learning environment.

### Recommendations Emerging from the Survey Findings

The next step of this project was to survey all IAHLA member institutes and all public post-secondary institutions in BC regarding their current adult Aboriginal learner assessment practices. This survey was intended to discover current assessment tools, assessment administration processes, critical success factors, best practices, and challenges on a system-wide spectrum. The survey yielded important information on Aboriginal adult learner assessment related to the following topics:

- Identification of Aboriginal Students
- Barriers to Accurate Assessments for Aboriginal Students
- Current Assessment Tools
- Development of Assessment Tools
- Factors Determining Selection of Assessment Tool for Learners
- Modification of Assessment Tools and Assessment Administration Process
- Effective Practices of Current Assessment Processes and Tools
- Further Enhancement of Assessment Tools and Process
- Validity and Reliability of Assessment Tools and Processes
- Critical Elements of Effective and Relevant Assessment Tools and Processes
- Recommendations Emerging from the Survey Results

Respondents at both IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions have modified their assessment tools, processes and environments to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners. There is strong support for further development of an assessment methodology that is culturally relevant and provides an accurate analysis of a prospective student's abilities and readiness for upgrading or post-secondary education.

The recommendations emerging from the survey results were:

1. Assessment tools should be framed in a manner that allows students to see the feedback as an opportunity for self-reflection, planning and growth.
2. Assessment is part of the whole learning process. It must to be an integrated process that provides seamless transition into public post-secondary institutions. It must be embraced within the community and practiced by instructors and administrators at both IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions.
3. The assessment tool should include culturally-relevant material (e.g. essay topics, reading samples). The tools should provide students with the opportunity to include cultural leadership experience, and an oral examination component.
4. The assessment tool should be accessible to students, incorporating measures that assess various learning styles.
5. Several critical success factors were identified for successful assessments and should be incorporated into assessment processes. These are detailed in the main body of this report.
6. Respondents at both IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions (PPSI) indicated the need to form relationships with prospective students. Building a relationship helps students develop confidence and

trust. This relationship should continue throughout the assessment process and beyond, from the initial inquiry through to the debriefing process.

7. In developing the assessment tool, it is also vital to consider how the assessment environment can be modified to make students feel more welcomed and comfortable. Considerations include the development of and ongoing relationships with staff members, the inclusion of Aboriginal staff members, and a welcoming space.
8. The development of the Better Learner Assessment must be supported and mandated at a provincial level, as this will provide a philosophical shift that will ensure that it is utilized through the post-secondary education system.

### Recommendations Emerging from the Practitioner and Student Focus Groups

Next, building on the survey research, the BLA project involved four regional focus groups involving a total of 37 assessment practitioners and students from IAHLA and public institutions. The questions posed to the focus groups were based on themes derived from the survey, and as such they formed a natural organizational framework to begin analysis of the information obtained through the focus groups. In addition, it became apparent that focus group participants organized their stories temporally (pre-assessment, during the assessment and post-assessment). As such, this also became part of the initial organizational framework. Key themes arising from the focus groups were:

- Community-Based Assessments;
- Relationship-Based Assessments;
- Flexible Assessments;
- Ethical Assessments; and,
- Holistic Assessments.

Based on the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project Survey Report* and the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project Focus Groups,* the following recommendations are provided as critical success factors in regards to an assessment process for Aboriginal adult learners.

Pre-Assessment

- Assessment should begin and end in the community where feasible. Public post-secondary institutions need to engage the community and follow the lead of the community in this process. Where possible, assessments should be held in the learner's community, where cultural and social supports are easily accessed.
- Assessment needs to be relationship-based, beginning with the first contact with the learner, whether this occurs at the information desk, registration, or the Aboriginal support services. Institutions must create a welcoming environment at the front line.
- PPSI's administrators need to revise policy that limits contact time between advisors and learners. Limiting student contact to 15- or 20-minute time slots clearly does not meet the needs of Aboriginal adult learners.
- Preparing for assessments needs to be established as the norm at all institutions. At the very least, students should be provided with preparation materials which are based on the assessment they will write, well in advance of writing the assessment. Ideally, preparation tutorials should be offered to learners. These tutorials should begin with simple concepts and progress through more complex concepts. They should use questions similar to the assessment in form and content. Standardized assessments should be understood by instructors and administrators; and, framed for learners as a starting point for assessment, that is only as a small part of who the learner is at any point in time.

Written Assessments

- Whether the assessment takes place in the community or at a PPSI, learners need to feel safe and comfortable when writing an assessment. Beginning the assessment with a prayer and/or a song may help to facilitate this, as well as permitting supports such as mentors, Elders and family to sit with the learner while they are writing the assessment. Allowing for smaller groups of Aboriginal adult learners to write together may help to create a safe environment at a PPSI. There should be no time restrictions with respect to writing assessments and policy at PPSIs may need to be changed to allow for this. Healthy snacks and coffee or juice should be made available to learners writing assessments.

Post-Assessment

- Learners should never be shamed intentionally or unintentionally during any part of the assessment process. Assessment results need to be kept confidential. The language used to report results needs to be clear, simple and positive. Where possible, results should be reported to learners in person, not by letter. Follow-up interviews should be scheduled with students to review results, which can be used (never exclusively) to inform the learner's next academic steps. With respect to PPSIs, this step can be accomplished through the campus Aboriginal support services and the BC Aboriginal Post-Secondary Coordinators.
- Most importantly, learners need to be involved in and empowered through the assessment process. Assessment should never be something that is done *to* the learner, but rather an activity through which the learner is enabled and galvanized. Empowering students as learners should be a goal of education and this should begin with the assessment process.

### Results of the Pilot Projects

Based on a the literature review, survey, focus groups, and Steering Committee input, the consultant worked with NVIT to develop an Assessment Best Practices Checklist to apply the research learning to the assessment process. As indicated previously, NVIT has been a key partner throughout the BLA project. It has done a lot of research and program delivery work related to literacy and learner assessment. NVIT is also in a unique position in that it is both an Aboriginal-controlled higher learning institute *and* a public post-secondary institution. The pilot was a community-based model and it was conducted at three sites during the winter of 2011: Seabird Island Band (upper Fraser Valley, northeast of Agassiz); Saulteau First Nation (east end of Moberly Lake, northwest of Chetwynd); and Bonaparte Indian Band (west of Cache Creek).

The pilot results were organized according to each stage of the assessment process: pre-assessment; assessment and post-assessment. In addition to reporting on how the process worked for learners and assessors, the pilot report included successes and opportunities at each stage in each Aboriginal community. These are detailed in the main body of this report.

During the pilot projects in February, NVIT attempted to apply the basic principles specified on the Best Practices Checklist. Although not all of the principles may be applicable and/or effective for all assessment sites, the principles originating from the Better Learner Assessment Project can be applied by any post-secondary institution (public and Aboriginal-controlled) desiring to undertake community-based assessments.

The conclusions of the pilots emphasize the importance of the following factors:

- Significant pre-assessment planning and activities;
- The value of subject-based preparatory reviews prior to assessment;
- Adaptable approaches to address situational needs;
- Sufficient resources and time allocation necessary for the three phases of assessment;
- Meaningful face-to-face post-assessment dialogue with learner; and,
- Reporting back to the community on overall (not individual) academic learner needs.

### Project Conclusions and Recommendations

A thorough literature review for this project reinforced the need for the research and application of findings regarding Aboriginal adult learner assessment. There is clearly a shortage of empirical research focused on this area in Canada. This IAHLA project adds to the small body of knowledge and provides questions to further investigate, and principles and factors to further test.

Collectively, the research undertaken and pilot conducted for this project have reinforced some key themes about the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners (e.g. the importance of the broader context and cultural sensitivity, viewing assessment as a process and not simply a tool or instrument, etc.).

While assessment discussions often involve a focus on the actual instruments or assessment tool, this project found that the broader context was equally important for Aboriginal adult learners (including benchmarking). This includes taking a holistic approach to assessment and considering the interrelationship among all factors in the assessment environment, including social, psychological, physical, institutional and personal variables.

It is also important to look at all stages of the assessment process, not just the assessment proper. Factors in the pre-assessment and post-assessment are very important in making an effective and culturally sensitive process and

assessment. A richer, more comprehensive assessment result is possible when the proper supports are in place as mentioned in this section.

Assessment practitioners and their organizations need to be flexible in how they adapt the assessment process and supplement standardized instruments. As indicated from the research, assessment is and should be a relationship-based process. Policies, procedures and tools need to be flexible, as do the scheduling, location and process.

While a number of positive examples of assessment approaches were uncovered in the BLA survey, it appears as though many IAHLA institutes and PPSIs use standardized tools and processes for assessing Aboriginal adult learners in BC. While standardization is practical and cost-effective, the BLA research has reinforced that assessors and institutions must go beyond this to adapt their assessment processes in order for them to be effective, fair, accurate and reflective of each learner, and culturally sensitive.

The survey also showed that few IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions work together on developing effective assessment processes for Aboriginal adult learner, some of which are part of affiliation agreements and other partnerships This project provides a real opportunity for both types of higher learning organizations to apply the findings, principles, best practices and checklist from the BLA project to the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners in a respectful, fair and culturally sensitive way.

### Recommendations

Rather than repeating the recommendations that emerged from the literature review, the survey, the focus groups and the pilot testing, the following recommendations relate to process steps as part of next steps after the BLA Project:

1. The BLA Checklist should be updated, refined and printed in colour and in a hard-copy and web-usable format.
2. In the longer term, IAHLA might consider converting the Checklist into a tool kit with more information, best practice examples, and a guidebook for assessors.
3. This project final report, a summary version of it, and the Checklist should be packaged and disseminated widely with an IAHLA cover letter to Aboriginal, post-secondary, government and other stakeholders. Particularly IAHLA institutes and PPSIs should be directly engaged and encouraged to make use of this knowledge and apply it to their assessment process. The Ministry of Advanced Education's assistance in this will be valuable.
4. The Checklist and other language about principles and best practices for learner assessment should be embedded in affiliation agreements and other agreements and partnerships between IAHLA institutes and PPSIs.
5. IAHLA and its partners should look for opportunities to showcase the BLA results and package, including conferences, forums, committees, roundtables, board meetings, and other meetings and events throughout the province.
6. IAHLA should focus on the Ministry of Advanced Education in particular as a key influencer through its policies, programs and funding and its responsibility vis-à-vis the public post-secondary system, as the Ministry has responsibility for Aboriginal PSE and adult literacy.
7. IAHLA and its partners should consider seeking provincial government funding to develop a more comprehensive BLA tool kit and distribution of it.
8. In order to breathe life into the BLA outcomes and ensure they are used to enhance the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners, the following Action and Communications Plan is provided as a starting point.

In addition to these recommendations, IAHLA met with the Ministry of Advanced Education in June 2011 before finalizing this report. As a result, commitments were made to the following actions.

The Ministry has indicated it will put this topic on the agenda of the fall meeting of the Deans of Developmental Education. It and IAHLA have discussed the concept of a demonstration project involving a few "early adopter" public PSE institutions to profile leading practices in assessment (i.e. apply and test the BLA Checklist). The Ministry and IAHLA will encourage IAHLA member institutes to consider submitting CALP proposals. Finally, the Ministry will look at positioning Aboriginal Service Plans (under Access and Retention theme) for possible use of funding for BLA assessment projects.

### Action and Communications Plan

The BLA Project has produced some important research findings and other key outcomes. It will be important for IAHLA, its institutes and PPSIs use this tool. In order to support this, IAHLA and partners can actively communicate, distribute and promote the outcomes of this the BLA Project to potential users and policy influencers. The following Action and Communications Plan is a start to this end.

| Audience | Action | Timeline |
|---|---|---|
| OLES | Submit BLA Final Report | Draft April 2011<br>Final June 2011 |
| IAHLA institutes | Profile the BLA Project at the IAHLA AGM/Conference | Completed April 29 |
| Other OLES projects | Ask OLES for information on related OLES projects, and share the BLA Project package with related OLES projects and ask for reciprocal information | Pending |
| Ministry of Advanced Education | Brief the Ministry on the results of the BLA Project<br>Ask the Ministry to promote use of the BLA Project results by PPSIs<br>Provide a cost estimate of a BLA demonstration project to the Ministry as part of next steps | Completed<br>Completed<br><br>Pending |
| Decoda (formerly Literacy BC and Literacy Now) | Share the BLA Project package and ask Decoda to distribute it to local literacy councils | September 2011 |
| IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions | Distribute BLA Project package via IAHLA and the Ministry | September 2011 |
| Ministry of Education<br>Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation | Meet with Ministries of Advanced Education, Education, and Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation to obtain their input on applying the results of the BLA Project | September 2011 |
| Human Resources and Skills Development Canada<br>Indian and Northern Affairs Canada | Meet with these federal departments to brief them on the BLA Project and obtain their input on applying the results of it | September 2011 |
| Adult Basic Education Association of BC | Share the BLA Project package | September 2011 |
| BC Assembly of First Nations<br>First Nation Summit<br>Union of BC Indian Chiefs | Share the BLA Project package with Aboriginal political organizations | September 2011 |
| FNESC<br>Metis Nation BC<br>BC Association of Friendship Centres<br>First Nations Schools Association | Distribute BLA Project package to key Aboriginal organizations directly and via umbrella groups | September 2011 |
| Showcase Events | Look for and confirm events at which IAHLA can profile and promote BLA Project results | On-going |
| BC Post-Secondary Education and Training Partners | Distribute BLA package to Partners and have IAHLA speak to this at a Partners meeting | Fall 2011 |
| Assessment practitioners | Promote the use of the BLA Checklist and other project out | Fall 2011 |

# TABLE OF CONTENTS


**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** II
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** III
**1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE** 1
**2. PROJECT METHODOLOGY** 4
**3. ASSESSMENT LITERATURE REVIEW** 8
3.1 Definitions and Conceptual Framework 8
3.2 Cultural Sensitivity/Validity and Cultural Bias 14
3.3 Literacy Assessment Tools and Successes Currently Used 18
3.4 Moving Forward with an Aboriginal Focus on Literacy Assessment 24
3.5 Key Findings and Recommendations Emerging from the Literature Review 29
**4. SURVEY OF IAHLA INSTITUTES AND PUBLIC POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS** 33
4.1 Identification of Aboriginal Students 35
4.2 Barriers to Accurate Assessments for Aboriginal Students 36
4.3 Current Assessment Tools 38
4.4 Development of Assessment Tools 40
4.5 Factors Determining Selection of Assessment Tools for Learners 41
4.6 Modification of Assessment Tools and Assessment Administration Process 42
4.7 Effective Practices of Current Assessment Processes and Tools 46
4.8 Further Enhancement of Assessment Tools and Processes 47
4.9 Validity and Reliability of Assessment Tools and Processes 50
4.10 Critical Elements of Effective and Relevant Assessment Tools and Processes 51
4.11 Recommendations Emerging from the Survey Results 52
**5. PRACTITIONER AND ABORIGINAL ADULT LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS** 54
5.1 Themes and Sub-Themes in the Focus Group Responses 55
5.2 Recommendations Emerging from the Focus Group Research 63
**6. PILOT PROJECT: TESTING THE ASSESSMENT RESEARCH FINDINGS** 65
6.1 Pre-Assessment 65
6.2 Assessment 71
6.3 Post-Assessment 74
6.4 Conclusions Emerging from the Assessment Pilot 76
**7. PROJECT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS** 77
**BIBLIOGRAPHY** 81
**APPENDICES**
Appendix 1: BLA Project Steering Committee Members 84
Appendix 2: Institutional Survey Questionnaire 85
Appendix 3: Focus Group Participants 95
Appendix 4: First Nations Holistic Literacy Learning Model 96
Appendix 5: Circle of Learning Models 97
Appendix 6: Focus Group Topics and Thematic Summary 100

# 1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Aboriginal adult learners who enter or re-enter the British Columbia post-secondary education system are most often required to complete learning assessments, whether they are pursuing literacy and numeracy courses, adult basic education, certification in the trades, or a certificate, diploma or degree program.

This is a pivotal step in an Aboriginal adult's progression through the higher learning process that can significantly influence whether or not such learners succeed on this pathway. It is important for Aboriginal adult learners attending both Aboriginal-controlled institutes and/or public post-secondary institutions. Further, there is very little empirical study of the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners in Canada.

Therefore, the Indigenous Adult Higher Learning Association (IAHLA) initiated the Better Learner Assessment (BLA) Project to study the learner assessment process and tools and develop a framework for improving the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners. With funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC), IAHLA initiated an 18-month project to be completed by April 2011.

IAHLA partnered with the University of Victoria (UVIC) and the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) to execute the BLA project to enhance the learner assessment tools used to assess the literacy levels of Aboriginal adult learners. Via a competitive procurement process, Human Capital Strategies of Victoria was selected to carry out the "Better Learner Assessment Project" on behalf of IAHLA and its partners.

## Context and Project Rationale

IAHLA believes that working together with public post-secondary partners can help Aboriginal-controlled institutes in BC to develop accredited courses and programs that offer adult students the opportunity to transition into higher learning elsewhere or graduate in their own community with recognized certificates, diplomas, and degrees. IAHLA institutes play an important role in preparing students academically so that they can transition to public post-secondary institutions (PPSIs) for further studies. IAHLA institutes are an important bridge between Aboriginal communities and the world of lifelong learning and public post-secondary institutions. This transition between IAHLA institutes and PPSIs is what makes the necessity of this project critical to enhancing the success of the adult Aboriginal learners, which both types of educational institutes collectively serve.

Enhanced assessment processes resulting from this project may highlight opportunities for IAHLA institutes and PPSIs across the post-secondary system to better welcome

Aboriginal adult learners and effectively confirm their educational readiness. Learner assessment is the gateway to adult education. Whether seeking basic reading and numeracy skills, trades certification, or entrance to college or university, adult students all face some form of assessment of their skill levels. Many post-secondary institutions use standardized assessment methods like Accuplacer, Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT) and Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES), while others have developed in-house assessment methods. While these methods may be less intimidating and more culturally appropriate; they often lack the extensive testing of the standardized methods and are not commonly accepted by many academic institutes as a measure of the adult Aboriginal learners' readiness levels. The result is that to-date, standardized, pre-packaged assessment methods remain the norm.

The opportunity in this project is the discovery and creation of common assessment tools and methods to accurately assess and support Aboriginal adult learners. Many Adult Basic Education and Literacy instructors share stories of prospective students feeling intimidated and discouraged even before taking placement tests. Several problems arise through the use of standardized assessment tools and practices. For example, numerous educators have expressed their concern over the use of these assessment tools, as their students are intimidated and feel despondent. Students frequently choose not to complete the tests and furthermore, do not return for their placement interview. Clearly, this leads to an inaccurate assessment of the students' true abilities. These challenges are compounded for Aboriginal adult learners as assessment tools and processes are designed for mainstream populations.

Current assessment tools and practices can be an impediment to the efforts of BC First Nations to protect their traditional languages and cultures through the accreditation of First Nations language programs. Attempts to accredit Aboriginal language programs have been limited by the difficulty of accrediting the Aboriginal instructors. Some Aboriginal language instructors – often including Elders who have successfully taught the language for many years – are intimidated by the assessments they must take in order to enroll in a post-secondary institute. Despite having the required readiness, they do not proceed with teacher certification as a result of the assessment process. It is anticipated that having consistent, respectful and relevant practices among the IAHLA member institutes and public post-secondary institutes will provide adult Aboriginal post-secondary learners with a system-wide, respectful, relevant and credible assessment, resulting in smoother transition and increased success for adult Aboriginal learners.

## Project Goals

The Better Learner Assessment (BLA) project was intended to achieve the following goals:

1. Provide an effective set of culturally appropriate learner assessment methods that will accurately determine the literacy levels of Aboriginal adult learners.

2. Reduce the negative impacts regular assessment processes have on many Aboriginal learners, in order to allow more Aboriginal learners to access education programs that improve their literacy and open doors for post-secondary learning, trades training and other lifelong learning opportunities; and that benefit their families and communities.

## Project Deliverables

The BLA Project was intended to reduce the barriers to education for Aboriginal adult learners that are inherent in current learner assessments methods by achieving the following deliverables:

- Providing a comprehensive literature review on this subject;
- Developing a culturally appropriate conceptual framework and learner assessment methods that determine the literacy of Aboriginal adult learners and serve as a gateway to access educational programs that fulfill the Aboriginal adult learner's goals and potential;
- Training staff at IAHLA member institutes and public post-secondary institutes in the use of enhanced assessment methods;
- Making the new learner assessment methods available to the BC adult education community through project reports.

This project was overseen by a Project Steering Committee that included three directors of IAHLA, representatives of other project partners, and representatives of two public post-secondary institutions (NVIT and UVIC). See Appendix 1 for a list of Steering Committee members. Working with this Committee, the HCS team was contracted to undertake the following activities:

*Year One – Phase One (November 2009 – February 28, 2010)*

- Undertake a comprehensive literature review to inform the project.
- Facilitate input from IAHLA member institutes to consider the challenges associated with learner assessments, through survey, telephone interviews and possibly site visits to meet with institute representatives.
- Prepare a report for Phase One of the project.

*Year One – Phase Two (February 28 – March 31, 2010)*

- Review and analyze existing learner assessment methods within the context of the findings of Phase One.

- Propose modifications and enhancements for learner assessment tools and methods to ensure that they reflect the circumstances and needs of Aboriginal adult learners more appropriately
- Prepare a report for Phase Two of the project

*Year Two – Phase Three (April 2010 – August 31, 2010)*

- Facilitate pilot projects to determine the effectiveness of the modified learner assessment tools and methods.
- Prepare a report for Phase Three of the project.

*Year Two – Phase Four (September 2010 – March 31, 2011)*

- Lead training for at least 10 IAHLA member institutes and public post-secondary institutions on the modified assessment tools and methods.
- Prepare a report for Phase Four of the project.

Due to unforeseen factors and the challenge of completing methodology that involved hundreds of stakeholder individuals and organizations during periods that included summer and Christmas breaks – and thanks to the flexibility of the OLES and IAHLA – the actual project timelines varied somewhat from the above phases. These variances were explained in project reporting by IAHLA to the OLES.

# 2. PROJECT METHOLOGY

The methodology for the BLA Project involved a robust combination of empirical study, including the following:

- A comprehensive literature review;
- A survey of assessment practices at IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions in BC;
- Focus groups of assessment practitioners and Aboriginal students;
- Piloting of a framework of successful assessment practices.

## Literature Review

This literature review examines existing methods and tools involved in the assessment of literacy among Aboriginal adult learners. Within the current context of the education system, Aboriginal learners are generally assessed using assessment tools, which reflect a Eurocentric cultural perspective. This literature review explores the current assessment tools that are used and then further examines reports specific to Aboriginal

education, transition and outcomes. Additionally, assessment methodology and the importance of "culturally sensitive" learner assessment tools, and the challenges associated with existing learner assessments are examined.

The literature review focuses on the initial assessment of literacy; the processes, procedures and measures that adult learners encounter in order to determine an accurate baseline assessment for learning. The initial assessment is a measure of the student's learning skills. Recent literature and research regarding Aboriginal education proposes a holistic approach to lifelong learning for Aboriginal learners. This holistic approach incorporates cultural components that support and sustain the Aboriginal learner.

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze and summarize recent and current research and practice of literacy assessment, with the intent of developing recommendations and methodology for better learner assessment tools and processes for Aboriginal adult learners.

The literature review:

1. Summarizes research that is relevant to the development of culturally appropriate learner assessment content, methods, and processes that will accurately determine the literacy levels of Aboriginal adult learners;
2. Synthesizes the literature in a summary of what is known about the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners and identifying gaps in this process;
3. Recommends research that will allow for the development of a conceptual framework that is based on Aboriginal lifelong learning within the domains of physical, social, institutional and cultural realms; and,
4. Suggests areas that need further research and, thus, inform the project's primary research and beyond this project.

## Survey of Institutions

Based on the findings of the literature review, HCS worked with IAHLA and the Steering Committee to develop the methodology and instrument for a web-based questionnaire survey of IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions (PPSIs). Upon completion of the survey instrument, the tool was tested with an IAHLA institute and a PPSI. The survey questionnaire is included as Appendix 2.

The survey was distributed via electronic mail to all (at the time) IAHLA institutes (35) and all public post-secondary institutions (25) in BC. Consisting primarily of open-ended questions, the survey was designed to seek responses regarding Aboriginal adult

learner assessment practices, including specific tools, administration processes, critical success factors, best practices, challenges and issues to address. The information collected from the survey would serve to inform focus groups and interviews being conducted in the next phase of this project.

In total, the survey was distributed to 59 institutions, seeking one collective response from each institution. The survey was distributed through electronic mail forwarded by the IAHLA Executive. Specifically, the survey was directed to Vice-Presidents, Academic at PPSIs and to senior contacts at IAHLA institutes. HCS followed up with the PPSIs and the IAHLA executive followed up with IAHLA institutes to ensure a higher response rate. It should be noted that one of the PPSIs is also considered an IAHLA institute. For the purposes of this survey, the survey responses from NVIT are collated as an IAHLA institute response. In total, 40 responses were received: 22 from PPSIs; 16 from IAHLA institutes (inclusive of one dual membership institute); and two unidentifiable responses. The two unidentifiable responses were not included in the data results. The survey was distributed and available for an 85-day period from Wednesday, March 24, 2010 to Wednesday, June 16, 2010. During this period, the survey was available 24 hours per day. The response rate from IAHLA institutes (46%) may be lower than that of the PPSIs (88% response rate) due to the limited resources and funding available at these institutes. Many staff members at IAHLA institutes have multiple roles (e.g. instructor, administrator, counselor) and therefore, time is limited for additional tasks.

## Focus Groups

The IAHLA institutes and the PPSIs that responded to the BLA Project Survey were invited to participate in focus groups. Those IAHLA institutes and PPSIs that did not submit a response to the survey were invited to participate. Some institutions and organizations that do not belong to IAHLA or to the PPSI categories were also invited to participate in the focus groups, on the basis that they were experienced in the area of Aboriginal adult literacy and were recommended by individual IAHLA Board members.

Ideally, each focus group was to have administrators/instructors and student participants from both IAHLA institutes and PPSIs; invitations were worded to solicit participants from each group. Student participants were provided with a gift in appreciation of their participation. Focus groups were organized in four regions of the province: Greater Vancouver (including the Fraser Valley); Vancouver Island; the Interior; and Northern BC. Realizing that some invitees would be unable for various reasons to attend in person, an option of participating by conference phone was included in the invitation. A list of participating institutions/organizations organized by focus group is attached as Appendix 3.

Each focus group, with the exception of the Greater Vancouver one, was hosted by an institution. The Greater Vancouver focus group was held on November 4th in Richmond,

to accommodate those institutions present for the Aboriginal Transitions Research Forum. As there was no host institute, Jan Green, an IAHLA Board member, agreed to participate, to represent IAHLA. The Vancouver Island Focus group held on November 22nd was hosted by Chemainus Native College, with Joe Elliott (an IAHLA Board member) representing IAHLA. The Kamloops focus group was held on November 24th, at the Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations, with Geri Collins (who leads this IAHLA institute) as the IAHLA representative. Due to weather and consequent flight cancellations, the Prince George Focus Group was held via conference call on November 26th. It was to have taken place at the College of New Caledonia and Marlene Erickson of that institution had organized that focus group.

The focus groups were led by HCS associates; one researcher transcribed participant responses on a laptop during the focus group, which allowed the second researcher to facilitate the focus group. The transcribed notes from each focus group were reviewed and reoccurring experiences, successful strategies and challenges with respect to Aboriginal adult assessment were identified. These notes were then distilled into themes. The themes and sub-themes that emerged from the participants' comments were then pieced together to form a comprehensive summary of the information obtained through the focus groups.

## Pilot Testing

Based on the findings of the secondary (literature review) research and primary (survey, and focus groups) research, and after input from the BLA Steering Committee, HCS worked with NVIT to a) develop an Assessment "Best Practices Checklist" that reflects the findings and NVIT's experiences with assessment; and b) pilot the application of the Checklist in assessments of Aboriginal adult learners in three Aboriginal communities.

When assessing in community or on-campus, NVIT uses the assessment process as an opportunity to engage with the prospective learner and assist the learner in identifying the rich opportunities that exist to enhance their educational experience. In attempting to provide a more relevant and effective assessment process, NVIT undertook three assessment pilots based on the Checklist attached as Appendix 4. The concepts behind the Best Practices Checklist originated from a thematic analysis of the focus groups conducted for this project. The Checklist provided a framework with which NVIT piloted an overall assessment process in three communities where NVIT anticipated program offerings. For the purposes of this study, NVIT conducted assessments at Seabird Island Band, Saulteau First Nation, and Bonaparte Indian Band.

# 3. ASSESSMENT LITERATURE REVIEW

## 3.1 DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Defining Literacy

In order to examine Aboriginal literacy assessment practices, it is necessary to have an understanding of the concept of literacy. For the purpose of the BLA literature review, three definitions of literacy are listed below:

> Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society (UNESCO Education Sector, 2004, p. 32).

> Literacy means communication for participation. Literacy is a spectrum of ability. Literacy encompasses the basic skills people need to achieve their goals, to function and thrive in the modern economy, and to develop their knowledge and potential - the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community. Literacy is the essential skill. It is the cornerstone of human capital development - the foundational competence upon which the acquisition of other skills depends (Literacy BC, 2010, p. 2).

> Aboriginal literacy is more than reading, numeracy, and writing to gain access into mainstream employment. It is the beginning of a life long process to affirm the worldview held by Aboriginal peoples and thus empowers the spirit of Aboriginal peoples. It is a tool that begins the process of critical thinking and the need to regain their languages. It is the understanding that their language holds the key to maintaining their culture. Aboriginal literacy is a tool that begins the process of self-achievement and sense of purpose (Antone, et al., 2002, p. 3).

The BLA Project has, as its primary focus, the assessment of literacy of Aboriginal people who are seeking access to programs in, or credentials from, post-secondary educational institutes. Before examining specific literature about that topic, it is helpful to look more generally at the literature about assessment in post-secondary education.

## The Challenge of Defining Assessment in Post-Secondary Education

What is assessment?

One of the challenges in considering any aspect of assessment in post-secondary education is that assessment has come to have multiple meanings (Angelo, 2000; Ewell, 2002). Assessment is a term that has been used, variously, to hold educational institutions accountable, determine the effectiveness of curricula, review the work of instructors and teachers, and describe the extent to which learners have met learning outcomes (Ewell, 2002; Heywood, 2000). Heywood (2000) defines assessment as "a multidimensional process for judging individuals and institutions in action" (p. 13). Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment as "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (p. 4). Hartle (1986) suggests that the term "assessment" has become "a catch-all phrase that refers to a wide range of efforts to improve educational quality" (p. 4).

Additional confusion about assessment is caused by the use of various terms, sometimes seemingly interchangeably. These terms include "evaluation" and "appraisal". For example, there is literature that refers to both formative and summative *assessment* (Heywood, 2000) and formative and summative *evaluation* with similar intent.

The focus of this study is the assessment of individual learning. It is acknowledged, however, that the processes and outcomes of assessment of learning may also reflect on the quality of a variety of educational activities at institutions. In a practical sense, it may be difficult to separate processes and outcomes and this can be a source of considerable consternation for educational institutions politically on several levels. This is an important consideration of this study.

The Relationship of Assessment and Learning

Assessment is not only a way to measure learning. It is that and more. The literature points out that assessment *influences* learning. Boud (1995) states that "assessment is the most significant prompt for learning" (p. 37). Heywood (2000) offers a similar view, stating that "assessment has a powerful influence on student learning" (p. 9). There is documentation that some students learn to focus on learning the assessment mechanisms for a course of study in order to succeed in it (Entwistle, Hanley, & Ratcliffe, 1979). If the impact of assessment practices on students is recognized, then assessment instruments and procedures should be developed which have intent to "enrich teaching and learning" (Tierney, 1988, p. 32)

Hubball and Levy (2004), define assessment strategies, in the context of learning-centered graduate level courses, as the "range of methods used to assess student

learning outcomes" (p. 16) and as "perhaps the most powerful force driving the learning process" (p. 13). The authors note that, "'knowing' has shifted from being able to remember and repeat information to being able to find, use and evaluate it" (p. 15). The design of a learning-centered graduate course focuses on what "students are expected to know and be able to do" (p. 12). Hubball and Levy (2004) describe a course, which "engages learners in knowledge, attitudes and skills that are assessable, transferable, and relevant to their lives as workers and citizens in a diverse world," (p. 12). This requires an emphasis on broader learning outcomes and the use of authentic assessment approaches in contrast to a more traditional emphasis on more specific "content and instructional objectives" (p. 12). Some assessment tools focus on measuring learning outcomes, and this methodology is similar to experiential Indigenous learning models where new knowledge is put into practice. An example of such a model, the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009) is discussed later in the literature review and included in Appendix 5.

Boud (1995) states, "assessment acts as a mechanism to control students that is far more pervasive and insidious than most staff would be prepared to acknowledge" (p. 35). Boud describes that "even successful, able and committed students…have been hurt by their experiences of assessment, time and time again…this hurt did not encourage them to persist and overcome adversity…it caused them to lose confidence. It dented their self-esteem and led them never to have anything to do with some subjects again" (p. 35).

Beyond the act of assessment itself, Heywood (2000) describes how "actions arising from assessment decisions may have negative consequences which can be of profound significance for the learner. They can reduce motivation and increase anxiety; they can reduce self-esteem" (p. 26).

Values and Assessment

Ultimately, "assessment is a moral activity. What we choose to assess and how shows quite starkly what we value" (Knight, 1995, p.13). Heywood (2000) refers to "ideological validity" in assessments defining it as "the educational, moral, philosophical and political values that are implied by use of any particular assessment scheme" (p. 24). In the processes of developing and making assessments, judgments are made about what is deemed to be of importance.

Assumptions/Beliefs and Assessments

Gray (2002) contrasts the assumptions that define learning as being evidenced by behaviors and focused on specific types of knowledge and skills and the assumptions about learning which allow "a focus on the whole range of knowledge, skills, and values of an educated person" (p. 52). The latter assumes that "the relationship of student

learning to teaching and [thus] testing is much less precisely defined" (Gray, 2002, p. 52) than the former. As Gray (2002) describes, in the former way of thinking, "the relationship of learning and evidence is tightly coupled" (p. 53). In that line of thinking, "norm-referenced or criterion-referenced standardized tests, performance measures, and other forms of objective testing are the desired methods of evaluation" (p. 53).

The Challenge of Validity in Assessment

Heywood (2000) describes an array of types, or dimensions, of validity associated with assessment. The author notes how difficult it is to ensure that any single assessment process meets the requirements of more than one or two types of validity. Heywood categorizes validity of assessment according to a number of factors. Some of the validity categories include: content, prediction of future performance, construct, concurrent, ideological, generative and tentative generative (pp. 22-25). Furthermore, Heywood coins the term "stick and carrot validity…the extent to which an assessment system can be used to control the education system" (2000, p. 25).

There are many potential threats to validity in assessment. Heywood (2000) describes the analogy about assessment originally offered by Crooks, Kane and Cohen (1996). In this conception, "any system of assessment may be viewed as a chain linked to the student. Any weakness in one link will weaken the chain as a whole" (Heywood, 2000, p.26), and is a threat to the validity of the particular assessment process. Crooks, Kane and Cohen proposed eight such links and gave examples of threats to validity (in parentheses below) which could be associated with each link:

1. Administration of assessment tasks to the student (assessment anxiety);
2. Scoring of the student's performance on the tasks (inappropriate scoring);
3. Aggregation of the scores on individual tasks to produce one or more combined scores (inappropriate weights given to different aspects of performance);
4. Generalization from the particular tasks included in a combined score to the whole domain of similar tasks (too few tasks);
5. Extrapolation from the assessed domain to a target domain containing all the tasks relevant to the proposed interpretation (part of the target domain given too little weight);
6. Evaluation of the student's performance, forming judgments (poor grasp of assessment information and its limitations);
7. Decision on action to be taken in the light of the judgments (inappropriate standards); and,

8. Impact on the student and other participants arising from the assessment processes, interpretations, and decisions (positive consequences not achieved) (Heywood, 2000, p.26).

These potential threats pose challenges to the validity of assessment processes and to the assessment efficacy period.

It may be helpful to examine, in terms of validity, the nature and use of the existing assessment mechanisms of both Aboriginal and mainstream academic institutes in assessing the literacy of Aboriginal people who are seeking educational opportunities and credentials from those institutes. The types of validity and the challenges to validity may contribute to the development of a framework for considering the various mechanisms of assessment that are collected for this project.

## What We Know about Best Practices in Assessment

Gill (2008) examined the works of Ananda and Looney (2000), the Northwest Territory Literacy Council (2004) and the Saskatchewan Literacy Council (2004) and recommended the following best practices:

*Ensure that learners:*

- Are involved in designing assessment procedures and evaluate their own work;
- Receive information on why and how they will be assessed;
- Document prior learning as part of the intake process; and
- Receive immediate and meaningful feedback on a regular basis.

*Ensure that assessments:*

- Utilize conversation to uncover experience;
- Are voluntary and kept confidential;
- Take place on intake, during the program, and on exit;
- Are linked to instruction and act as a guide for planning;
- Are flexible to adapt to different learning contexts;
- Tasks are clearly written in order to ensure understanding;
- Present content that revolves around the things that is important to adult roles as parents, citizens, and workers;
- Tasks are engaging, thought provoking, and motivating;
- Provide a range of tasks to accommodate learner differences;

- Identify any special learning needs;
- Accommodate learning disabilities or other learning challenges using any reasonable means;
- Allow for learner goals to be reviewed and modified;
- Have clear outcomes;
- Use scoring rubrics developed to assist instructors to identify work that meets the performance expectations; and,
- Include information around the validity (that the assessment measures what it is supposed to measure) and reliability (that the assessment is consistent) of the tool (Gill, 2008).

These recommendations are based on the necessity to keep assessment relevant and suitable to meet the needs of individual adult learners and, reciprocally, to meet the needs of a transforming adult education system. Gills study suggests ongoing research and development of initial assessment tools that will further "streamline assessment processes in order for assessments to be portable across programs and services" (Gill, 2008, p. 44).

## Challenges in Assessing Literacy

The literature about assessment reflects some of the challenges in the field generally. The problems are multiple and complex.

Challenges related to assessments of literacy are also multifaceted. It would appear that these problems are by no means limited to Aboriginal populations. No doubt there are generically related or similar problems when such assessments are applied to, for example, immigrant populations.

Insufficient Number of and Inadequately Prepared Assessors

Campbell (2007) studied assessment practices in adult literacy and basic education programs across Canada and determined that there are insufficient human resources to properly conduct assessments (p. 2). Campbell's comprehensive study also describes the difficulty of using assessment results in many institutions: non-faculty assessors may not have an opportunity to communicate fully with faculty who could then tailor their instruction accordingly to facilitate the learning needs of individual students.

In Campbell's study, many staff members at post-secondary education institutions in Canada reported that assessment tools are difficult to choose and, once chosen, it is a challenge to learn how to use them in a manner, which fosters accuracy and reliability. Respondents in Campbell's study wanted user-friendly assessment tools that are easy for the assessor to administer, score, and interpret (2007, pp. 2-4).

Lack of Currency and Relevancy of Assessment Tools

In Campbell's study of adult educators in Canada, respondents who were assessors wanted current assessment tools, which are "relevant to the curriculum and the student population" (2007, p. 4). For example, the CAAT is considerably out of date both in terms of its relationship to a relevant curriculum and to reading theories (Campbell, 2007).

The Impact of Assessments on Prospective Learners

Campbell reports, based on her study, that, in Canadian adult education community agencies, including colleges, "assessment can strike fear into the hearts of students because tests conjure up negative experiences in the K-12 school system" (2007, p.4). Imel (1990) indicates that "many adults associate [standardized tests] with previous school failure" (p. 2).

Peltier (2009) writes about language assessments of Aboriginal students who use First Nations English dialects rather than Standard English. Peltier notes that assessment without consideration that these students are actually learning English as a second language has led to the unfortunate "mislabeling of [students] as developmentally delayed and language deficient" and that these students "tend to be framed in a deficit theory" (p. 2). Peltier calls for a change in view, so that "Aboriginal [students'] dialects are viewed as assets, and not obstacles to learning" (p. 4). Writing about dialects spoken by Aboriginal people in Australia, Dunn notes that "dialects, far from being 'inadequate' forms of Standard English, are in fact fully developed linguistic systems, which provide clear avenues for language development" (2001, p. 3).

## 3.2 CULTURAL SENSITIVITY/VALIDITY AND CULTURAL BIAS

The history of Aboriginal education in Canada is fraught with pain and mistrust, the legacy of residential schools and the abuses that took place in these institutions. Prior to this negative colonial impact, Indigenous communities followed Indigenous pedagogy and epistemology in teaching their young people.

> Indigenous peoples have been educating themselves, their communities, and nations since time immemorial. They had a natural education system that followed the evolutionary complexities of cultural philosophy, social organization, and environmental orders. Education began at birth and continued through one's entire life. Individuals were educated by their families, clan relatives, and community members; thus, they were taught according to their role as a contributor to society. Indigenous peoples received further teachings form the spiritual realm, in the form of dreams, visions, and ceremonies (Cavaliere, 2009, p. 60).

The current Eurocentric education system minimizes opportunities for alternative worldviews. Furthermore,

> …learning opportunities and circumstances have been severely hindered for Canadian Aboriginal people by colonialist oriented polices and practices that marginalize Aboriginal people with respect to self-determination (Cavaliere, 2009, p. 61).

Aboriginal adult learners face numerous perceived and actual risks as a result of the historical implications of colonization. It is vital that these learners are provided with a welcoming opportunity to explore the option to re-enter the education system, in a manner that is non-judgmental and is strength-based.

Many authors make reference to the importance of cultural sensitivity in literacy testing; yet, it is difficult to operationally define just what the term means. Some of the elements of cultural sensitivity are evident from an examination of the literature.

The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) of UNESCO was designed to gather high quality data about literacy skills in selected countries for people who are 15 years of age and older (Ercikan, Arim, Oliveri, & Sandilands, 2008). The program uses a questionnaire, which "measures a spectrum of literacy levels from very basic reading, writing, and numeracy to high level literacy skills needed to fully participate in a learning society" (p. 8). One of the requirements of LAMP is that the testing process seeks "evidence for culturally appropriate definitions of literacy and numeracy as target constructs of measurement" (p. 5). This is part of the required "validity evidence" for the assessment. The authors recommend that test items be less "culture-specific," meaning that they could be used for people of diverse cultures (p. 6). Ercikan et al. (2008) state, "there needs to be a cultural sensitivity review of all test items … by content area, linguistic, and cultural experts" (p. 16). There also seems to be some evidence that a key to individual success in tests is familiarity with the contexts in which test items are presented. Tierney argues that, familiarity with this context "does affect performance levels of examinees, even though previous knowledge about such context is not necessary for answering the items correctly" (p. 16).

Tierney (1998) states:

> I suspect that it is well nigh impossible, and certainly questionable, to extract cultural influences from any test or measure of someone's literacy…cultural free assessments will afford, at best, a partial and perhaps distorted understanding of the students…just as teachers apt to engage students by building from their background of experiences, so assessment should pursue a goal of culturally sensitive

> assessment…it does not occur by ignoring or removing diversities (p. 16).

Tierney supports the idea of “cultural ecological assessment," defining it as “assessment which builds upon rather than displaces what students have experienced and recognizes and values their worlds” (1998, p.16). Tierney suggests that assessors of literacy are “willing to side step complex issues of culturally sensitive assessments by appealing to the need to make straightforward comparisons” (p. 17). The BLA Project aims to address these complex issues of cultural sensitivity and provide opportunities to look at current practices, tools and processes of assessments utilized with Aboriginal adult learners. In using this approach, the project will develop new tools and processes that will open the doors for Aboriginal adult learners and enable them to access their choice of post-secondary programs and courses.

Writing about assessment models and procedures for assessing adult literacy, Nurss (1989) provides probably the most straightforward description of what culturally sensitive assessment means. The author states that:

> …the assessment instruments must be sensitive to the background experiences of the adults [being tested]. They must use vocabulary and concepts and include topics familiar to adults. Illustrations, content, and language should be familiar. Especially important is sensitivity to language dialects and to language demands for limited English proficient individuals (p. 4).

Boud (1995) refers to the problem of the use of language in assessment which involves the use “of illustrations and examples which favour members of dominant groups, materials used in culturally insensitive ways and assumptions made about learners on little more than their appearance or apparent background” (p. 45).

Writing specifically about language assessment issues for Aboriginal learners, Peltier (2009) describes the evolution of recognizable dialects of English (non-standard varieties of English) among some First Nations speakers of English in Canada. Peltier proposes, in essence, that Aboriginal students who are using such dialects are “learning a new language - the Standard form of English,” similar to Aboriginal students who have spoken an Aboriginal language exclusively (p. 20). In Peltier’s view, “misunderstandings regarding First Nations English dialects have led to widespread implementation of inappropriate language and literacy programming” and, by extension, assessment (2009, p. 2).

Another aspect of cultural sensitivity is the recognition that between different cultures, there are “differences in the structure of knowledge” and ways of knowing (Dunn, 2001, p. 7). According to Dunn, there are “cultural differences in story structure” including

differences in “narrative structure” (p. 7); for example, Australian Aboriginal culture compared to Western cultural norms.

Heywood (2000) notes that standardized tests, such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test of the Educational Testing Service) in the United States, have “gender bias, and bias against minorities and socio-economic classes” (p. 18). Heywood states, “One of the reasons for the move to authentic assessment was to avoid such bias” (2000, p. 18).

In Campbell’s study of Canadian adult education institutions, respondents reported “…the tests they used contained cultural bias, particularly toward First Nations and English as a second language students” (2007, p. 5). Specifically, Campbell reported, “…the CAT II has cultural biases that do not measure First Nations’ traditional knowledge and generally First Nations students place at a lower level than necessary” (p. 5).

Speaking specifically about cultural bias and literacy testing, Johnston (1998) claims that, “because of the cultural nature of literacy, it is not possible to create an unbiased literacy test; tests always privilege particular forms of language and experience” (p. 98). Campbell recommends “test developers have a responsibility to reduce bias in tests by analyzing item data separately for different populations and then identifying and discarding items that appear to be biased” (2007, p. 5).

Doehler (2003) writes about First Nations literacy programs in Ontario and notes, “English language literacy is taught within a First Nations cultural context” (p. 250) where possible with culturally-based materials. Peltier (2009) notes that “because language is socially and culturally situated, assessment methodology must be sensitive to context” (p. 4). These considerations are vital as, “The teaching of traditional Aboriginal values and belief systems helps to empower and develop First Nations communities” (Doehler, 2003, p. 250).

The challenge for educators involved in assessment is to design assessment tools and processes, which help learners accurately demonstrate their learning.

## Conceptual Framework

At present, educational institutions assess learners with a variety of assessment tools, methods, and processes, using a wide range of content. The IAHLA Literacy project will review and recommend culturally appropriate learner assessment content, methods, and processes that will determine the literacy of Aboriginal adult learners. As part of the development of an assessment system, it is necessary to develop a conceptual framework based on the concept of lifelong learning that emphasizes the physical, social, institutional and cultural learning environments and contexts. This framework will also represent areas of formal and informal learning and how they are interrelated. A

conceptual framework will provide a snapshot of the Aboriginal learner, as he/she works his/her way through the literacy assessment process and into post-secondary education.

The recent Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) study provides a "Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework" developed by Aboriginal learning experts across Canada. The study presents a thorough description of Aboriginal learning strengths and challenges and indicates areas for future direction (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). The study emphasizes the importance of a common understanding of success in Aboriginal learning that will provide a basis for changes in current educational policy and program development. The report suggests further focus on learning outcomes of Aboriginal people in Canada and also suggests that its conceptual framework be used by Aboriginal communities, governments and researchers (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007) and the Holistic Lifelong Learning Measurement Framework (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009) exemplify models of lifelong learning that are sensitive to First Nations culture and education needs. Appendix 5 illustrates the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model. The model and framework demonstrate the importance of assessing student potential as the learning process continues throughout life. The model also indicates the important role of socio-economic factors in the learning journey; for example, collective well-being, family, community, traditions and ceremonies.

Cultural sensitivity and validity are of critical importance and these considerations will guide the development of assessment tools for the IAHLA Literacy Project.

## 3.3 LITERACY ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PROCESSES CURRENTLY USED IN CANADA

There are many different learner assessment tools and processes that are used by educational institutions to assess adult literacy across the country. Along with the changing demographics in Canada comes a need to look at the changing literacy and assessment needs of Canadian learners. According to the study, "Student Assessment in Adult Basic Education: A Canadian Snapshot", written by Dr. Pat Campbell (2006),

> …assessment is a continuous, systematic process that utilizes tools and approaches to gather information in order to make decisions about the provision of programs, instruction, training, and services for literacy, upgrading and adult basic education students [based on assessment theories of] knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values they purport to measure and provide; and the manner in which they inform placement and instruction" (p. 5).

Assessment is a way of measuring the skills and experience of a learner in a continuum of lifelong learning, including literacy assessment.

Institutions, community adult education providers, and training programs use different tools and methods of literacy assessment. Assessment tools can be classified into four different categories; standardized, diagnostic, competency based, and authentic assessment.

Assessments can be carried out objectively through multiple choice or true false test questions, or subjectively through writing samples. Assessments can be formal or informal. Formal assessments are usually carried out through tests, essays, or other pieces of writing and given a score. Informal assessments are more casual and could include observation, inventories, checklists, rubrics, portfolios, peer and self-evaluation, and discussion (Gill, 2008, p. 2). Both informal and formal assessment methods should be considered in the development of new assessment tools.

## Four Classifications of Assessment Tools: Standardized, Diagnostic, Competency Based, and Authentic

Standardized Testing

Standardized testing is common in assessment practices in Canada. These are usually criterion-referenced, or norm-referenced (Sticht, 1999). Criterion-referenced assessments are scored according to specific instructions and criteria, establishing a standard. Norm-referenced assessments are scored in reference to the scores of other students who have taken the test (Gill, 2008). “If the characteristics upon which the assessment was formed do not match the characteristics of the students who take the test, the results cannot be interpreted appropriately. Norm-referenced tests can indicate how students are progressing only relative to this norm sample” (Jacobson, Degener, & Purcell-Gates, 2003, p. 102). This type of standardized assessment will not provide an individual portrait of the learner in terms of literacy.

In the document, “Adult Literacy Learner Assessment”, Imel (1990) describes how different assessment practices reflect “varying philosophical orientations and perspectives related to learners, literacy, and educational contexts” (p. 1). For example, standardized tests are “designed to be given under specified, standard conditions” (p. 1), and are generally intended to assess large numbers of people in a cost-effective manner while comparing individual performance against either a norm or specific criteria. This leaves little room for consideration of individual circumstances or the contexts of learning.

Imel (1990) describes two problems with standardized tests as a choice of assessment tool for literacy. These are “their intrinsic defects and their misuse” (p. 2). An “intrinsic defect” described by Imel (1990) is that some standardized tests have been “normed on

children … and do not reveal the extent of the life experiences and knowledge that adults bring to an instructional program" (p. 2). Imel (1990) states that standardized tests are misused when they are the only mechanism used for program evaluation.

Campbell (2006) revealed the three most frequently used standardized tools in Canada are the Canadian Adult Achievement Test (CAAT), Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS), and the Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA). Campbell states, "It is difficult to obtain a profile of a student's knowledge, learning processes, behaviors and skills with one assessment, especially when that tool is a standardized test" (p. 12).

In the field of literacy, standardized tests have been used extensively for assessment purposes. These are established, are seemingly cost-effective in terms of their operations because they are used en masse (Imel, 1990), and may be mandated by governments in some jurisdictions. Some standardized tests were developed based on the characteristics of specific populations. Murphy, Shannon, Johnston and Hansen (1998) state that some of the assessment tests developed in the United States are considered to be examples of "the reification of White, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class values" (p. viii). Tierney (1998) criticizes standardized tests for reading programs generally because they "do not expand teachers' views of their students' learning over time, nor suggest ways the teachers might proceed in order to help them. Nor are such tests integrated into classroom life" (p. 33).

Another criticism of standardized testing is that such testing "does not involve much reading of connected discourse" (Murphy et al., 1998, p. 125) and is not embedded in a context. Of importance to this study, may be the idea suggested by the authors that "reading in contemporary society is a social act that is part of everyday experiences…definitive assessment is more myth than reality" (p. ix).

Diagnostic Assessment

Diagnostic tools are often useful for initial assessments. These tools allow assessors to gain valuable information regarding the student's reading levels, and therefore place the students at an appropriate level, in the appropriate learning environment. Diagnostic assessment requires the assessor to have strong interpretive skills that can only be gained through specialized training and experience (Campbell, 2006). The interpretation of the test results provides specific information about the learner's reading patterns, skills, and capabilities. The assessor can then recommend an effective learning path, and specific strategies that can help meet the learner's goals, and the instructor's objectives.

Although the CARA tool is standardized, it is a diagnostic assessment that provides accurate information about the student's reading levels. This information allows for appropriate initial placement in classes, as well as the ability to align the individual

learning plan to that level. The interpretation of the test results provides specific information about how individuals process print and text, and identify specific areas of weakness and strength in a learner's skills and capabilities.

Campbell (2006) states that CARA is the most frequently used diagnostic assessment with levels that are correlated with the adult literacy and adult basic education programs offered through each province and territory in Canada. Respondents described it as easy to use and flexible, with high interest and culturally appropriate stories. It uses Canadian content, covering levels from beginning to advanced. CARA uses a process of "interaction, communication and feedback" which makes it non-threatening and non-intimidating for the student (Campbell, 2006, p. 14).

Competency Based Assessment

Competency-based assessments are based on skills that relate to specific contexts and skills. These types of assessments are often used to determine essential skills for particular employment areas. Essential skills help people perform the tasks required by their occupation and other activities of daily life. They also provide people with a foundation to learn other skills and enhance a person's ability to adapt to change (Gill, 2008). Competency-based assessment tools are often commercial products. Some of these assessments are also being used to assess literacy skills in Adult Basic Education programs, such as: Prose Document Quantitative (PDQ), Common Assessment of Essential Skills (CAES), Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA), and the Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES).

Authentic Assessment

In the histories of schooling and post-secondary education generally, authentic assessment has emerged as one alternative assessment approach (Heywood, 2000). According to Ewell (2002), it evolved as an approach to assessment "for those skeptical of overly empirical methodologies" (p. 5). Wiggins (1990) , who is credited with originating the concept of authentic assessment, states that it consists of "contextualized complex intellectual challenges, not fragmented and static bits or tasks" (p. 711), such as might be found in standardized testing protocols.

In some respects, authentic assessment was also a product of the thinking related to mastery learning approaches which led to the development of ideas about learning outcomes and prior learning assessment (Ewell, 2002). Out of this broad approach, corporate assessment centres evolved and developed "ways to examine and certify complex higher-order abilities by observing group and individual performance of authentic tasks" (Ewell, 2002, p. 6). In several respects, these approaches "posed an effective alternative to the prominent (and politically popular) 'testing and measurement' paradigm" (Ewell, 2002, p. 6).

Hubball & Levy (2004) noted a shift in graduate study from "knowledge transmission to an emphasis on pedagogy," in which "learning becomes viewed as an individual and social contextual process" (p. 12). In other words, graduate courses are becoming learning-centred and have focus on "what graduate students are expected to know and be able to do" (p. 12). These observations about authentic assessment for graduate studies may also be appropriate in the context being considered in this study.

Many public post-secondary institutions across Canada use authentic performance-based literacy assessment, a formative approach that focuses on achievement. Authentic assessments and assessment practices are developed by educators within their own programs and use many different texts and tasks used in an informal manner. Sixty-eight percent of the educators surveyed by Campbell (2006), use these tools for initial assessment. These 480 educators worked in adult literacy and basic education programs sponsored by colleges, school boards, community-based agencies, and workplaces. "The assessment tasks require the application of knowledge or skills in contexts that reflect literacy and numeracy practices within the home, work, community, and school" (p. 15).

The following is an excerpt from an authentic assessment used for initial assessment of literacy skills. It is a comprehensive assessment used by a college instructor, with a Master's degree and more than 20 years experience in the field of adult basic education:

> Our literacy assessment has four components: interview, phonics, reading, and writing. We begin with the interview, talking with the student about what brought them back to school, what goals they have, what their interests are, etc., and explaining what our program offers. The phonics assessment is very simple, just asking them to identify single consonants, consonant blends, and give the sound and a word beginning with that sound. Students are also asked to read a few consonant-vowel-consonant words, and a few silent "e" words…For the reading portion, students are usually given a selection of several articles…we are looking for something that will give us a sense of their reading level and the types of strategies they use to decode. When the students have read the articles, we also ask comprehension questions and/or ask students to tell us about the article, allowing them to refer back to it…we stop the assessment at any point when it is clear that the student will not be able to handle the next level or task (Campbell, 2006, pp. 15-16).

This assessment process can be informal, non-intimidating to the learner, and supports student success. It also reflects the outcomes of the literacy program. The results of an authentic assessment "can be used to determine a student's instructional reading level,

writing strengths and weaknesses, and knowledge of mathematical concepts and operations." (Campbell, 2006, p. 16) Authentic assessment procedures influence best practices for Aboriginal adult learners by providing an assessment environment that allows for student success.

Another authentic assessment model is the Saskatchewan Literacy Benchmarks, developed in 2006. This model uses literacy benchmarks for levels 1 and 2 and uses the "Circle of Learning" framework of Aboriginal holistic and culturally appropriate assessment (Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006). Although the benchmarks have used an essential skills structure, they use a learner-centered approach to lifelong learning, and reflect the roles adult learners fill in their everyday lives – as family members, community members, and workers. The tools and process are explained:

> Making assessment authentic allows learners more opportunities for relevant application of skills. The instructor engages learners in a range of formative and summative assessment tasks that are directly related to the learning outcomes of the curriculum. These tasks require the application of knowledge and skills in real or authentic contexts. "Hands-on" exercises and real life problems and situations are used wherever possible. Instructors design assessment opportunities to allow for a true representative or an actual performance of a skill. For example, learners actually do writing for real audiences, rather than answering questions about writing or taking spelling tests (Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006).

The Circle of Learning Literacy Benchmarks offer the lifelong learner relevant learning based on real-life situations. The Circle of Learning models are included in Appendix 6. The models demonstrate an overview, context and content of adult basic education courses.

Authentic assessment meets the needs of both the program and the student, while offering a comfortable, relaxed environment. The student is supplying knowledge that is relevant to his/her life experience, allowing for "flexibility, choice, and interaction" (Campbell, 2006, p.18).

Campbell's findings showed five main weaknesses to authentic assessment. First, the tools provide general rather than detailed information about the student's capabilities, and may tend to neglect learning difficulties; secondly, the respondents expressed the concern that these tools were not recognized by other institutions and therefore have limited transferability between institutions; thirdly, effective administration and

interpretation of authentic assessment is dependent upon the experience of the examiner; fourth, the interpretation of test results can be subjective; finally, many of the respondents commented that authentic assessments are time-consuming, in terms of development and administration (Campbell, 2006, p.18).

## Future Assessment Development

Recent research and literature suggests there is a need for new forms of well-designed assessment tools, processes and guidelines that will assist literacy educators and literacy learners in reaching their educational goals.

Within the four classifications of literacy assessments discussed previously, recommendations from the Campbell study indicated "respondents want assessment tools that are culturally relevant and customized for populations with specific learning needs" (Campbell, 2006, p. 58).

Literacy educators and experts in Ontario call for a more valid, reliable and manageable approach to assessment. They state there is a need for innovative assessment that describes which goals the learners will meet at the end of their educational experience (Goforth Consulting, 2008).

Future research and development with regard to adult literacy assessment practices should focus on "further streamlining assessment processes in order for assessments to be portable across programs and services" (Gill, 2008, p. 42). The BLA Project was intended to find and develop assessment tools and processes that will accurately assess the Aboriginal adult learner within the appropriate cultural context and within a holistic domain.

## 3.4 MOVING FORWARD WITH AN ABORIGINAL FOCUS ON LITERACY ASSESSMENT

Based on a review of general literature and research regarding initial literacy assessment, it is apparent that literacy assessment tools and practices that are accurate and culturally sensitive for Aboriginal adult learners have not been thoroughly researched. However, there are several recent national and provincial reports that identify and recommend a lifelong learning approach for Aboriginal education. Research advocates a holistic lifelong learning framework that will raise cultural sensitivity and change common perceptions of the Aboriginal learner. Research also suggests that initial literacy assessment practices may be well suited to fit within this framework, because post-secondary education is part of the lifelong learning cycle (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, 2009; Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006).

## A Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy Assessment

There is a need for post-secondary institutions to take on a holistic approach to assessment, in order for prior knowledge, skills and experience of Aboriginal lifelong learners to be recognized. The recent report by the CCL, "The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: a Holistic Approach to Measuring Success", gives Canadians current insight into measuring Aboriginal success in education. The framework is based on CCL's three "Holistic Lifelong Learning Models for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples", and developed by Aboriginal education experts. The new framework incorporates elements common to all three learning models, while acknowledging elements that are unique perspectives of First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. The report states, "Learning from - and about - culture, language and tradition is critical to the well-being of Aboriginal people" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 5).

This information stresses the need for recognition and support for learning in the areas of relationships with Elders, family, and community. These social relationships will tie the learner to inter-generational connections and identities, ancestral language, culture and history. The 1996 report from the "Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples" supports this by stating:

> Family is still the central institution in Aboriginal societies. It is only a generation or two since extended kin networks of parents, grandparents and clan members made up virtually the entire social world for Aboriginal people, providing the framework for most of the business of life. Inside the web of family, norms of sharing and mutual aid provided a social safety net for every individual (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996, p. 1).

The Canadian Council on Learning developed the First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model (Appendix 5), recognizing the areas of informal and experiential learning. "Although research suggests that most adult learning is work related, studies also indicate that much of adult learning occurs informally at home and in the community" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 6).

The current holistic framework leads itself to holistic authentic assessment. Other research supports this, as well. Campbell (2006) proposes "holistic assessment tools that assess more than the 3Rs" (p. 59). Campbell recommends, "The government should target funding towards the development of user-friendly, culturally relevant diagnostic tools that provide a comprehensive assessment of: First Nations students, emergent literacy and numeracy practices and skills, numeracy practices and skills, and, writing practices and skills" (p. 63). The BLA Project takes a holistic approach in the development of enhanced assessment practices using appropriate assessment tools of this kind.

## Aligning Aboriginal Learner Literacy Assessment with an Aboriginal Lifelong Learning Framework

The "Holistic Lifelong Measurement Framework" is broken into three components that overlap. Firstly, sources and domains of knowledge from which the individual learns, including family, elders, community, languages, traditions and ceremonies, spirituality, and the natural world. Western and Aboriginal knowledge and learning approaches also exist within this component. Secondly, the lifelong learning journey measures formal and informal learning in different settings and throughout four life stages: Infants and Children (0–5), Youth (6–18), Young Adults (19–34), and Adults (35–64) and Elders (65+). Thirdly, community well-being encompasses the social, physical, economic, spiritual, political and health conditions that influence the learning process from an Aboriginal perspective (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009).

If initial assessment is not authentic, and does not include cultural content and activities that relate to the lifelong learning framework of the Aboriginal learner, their skills and experience may be overlooked. The Nicola Valley Institute of Technology "Indigenization Strategy for Aboriginal Adult Literacy" endorses specific curricular streams of an Aboriginal adult literacy program that include; learning in and for the community, respecting the environment, the wisdom, guidance, and support of the Elders, sharing and practicing traditional teachings and cultural practices, giving back/reciprocity, feeding the body and soul (Ostrowidzki, Pryce, & Urstad, 2009). Post-education research states that fair, useful, and valid assessment and curriculum should be carefully aligned (Dwyer, Millett, & Payne, 2006).

## A Changing Perception of Aboriginal Assessment and Education

Many Aboriginal students who wish to move into post-secondary education may not have the academic prerequisites necessary to succeed. Many mature students may have faced barriers that prevented them from completing secondary school. As an adult learner, they may struggle with study skills, time management and technology. Although the Internet and other technologies are necessary for lifelong learning, and community connectedness, many Aboriginal communities may have limited access (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004).

In order for governments, post-secondary institutions, community programs, literacy educators, literacy researchers, and Aboriginal communities to support these students, literacy assessment must focus on the individual's lifelong learning. The report, "Moving Forward in Aboriginal Education" states,

> One of the criteria for judging the quality of an education system or institution is the ease with which students can move from one institution or level to another. It is for this reason that we talk about

> education for today and as preparation for the next phase of one's life, about a culture of learning, and about the attitudes and skills of lifelong learning. We have much more to do in this regard to improve transition rates for Aboriginal learners (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2005, p. 18).

The issues faced by Aboriginal adult learners as they attempt to move forward into post-secondary education go beyond academic qualifications. If Aboriginal assessment is not approached with sensitivity towards culture, language and traditional teachings, the learner may not be able to connect with the material and succeed. The report on "Common Assessment in the Native Literacy Field", states:

> When Native people are expected to stop being round pegs so they can fit into square holes, it stirs some very old emotions and sharply conflicts with Aboriginal ways. Current assessment tools offer little or no recognition of these pressures and of the learning required to wrestle with or overcome them (Literacy Ontario, 2000, p. 19).

Presently, assessment is often focused on formal learning, or learning that has taken place within the public school system. This methodology does not reflect the many other ways of learning within the holistic framework, and other Aboriginal educational research.

> Current measurement approaches typically focus on the discrepancies in educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth [students] and often overlook the many aspects of learning that are integral to an Aboriginal perspective on learning. As a result, conventional measurement approaches rarely reflect the specific needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 3).

The First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) is an independent society that is committed to improving education for all First Nations learners in British Columbia. The Committee states:

> Too often, mainstream education programs ignore Aboriginal perspectives, values, and issues and give scant attention to the work environment in which students will use their professional knowledge and skills. In fact, the environment may replicate the negative features that led students to drop out of school in the first place (RCAP, 1996). In addition, Aboriginal support systems – peer networks, family activities, financial, personal and academic counseling, or daycare

> services – may not be in place in mainstream settings. For Aboriginal people, mainstream universities often represent an impersonal and intimidating environment that does not reflect or recognize their cultural knowledge, traditions, and core values (First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2008, p. 5).

The authors of the study, "Aboriginal Peoples and Post-Secondary Education: What Educators Have Learned" (R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2004), discuss a controversial alternative assessment program in Australia. Alternative assessment offers different standards for Aboriginal students, in order to allow for cultural sensitivity, and to support them in accessing post-secondary education:

> Alternative assessment sets different admission criteria for Aboriginal Australians. Alternative assessment also, more controversially, includes measuring students in different ways, recognizing diversity, shifting to more oral means of assessment and accommodating Aboriginal learning styles. Initially, alternative assessment focused on program acceptance and grading, but it has extended to deadline and attendance requirements. In a study of Indigenous performance in Western Australia, it was found that 78 per cent of the 268 Aboriginal students analyzed were accepted to university through alternative entry criteria; 48 percent had year 10 education or less. However, assessment and learning strategies that focus on participants' strengths have led to a decreased effort to overcome or evaluate weaknesses, leading to some negative attitudes about alternative assessment. Many non-Indigenous students at the University of Sydney felt Aboriginal students succeed is because of their race. Some Australians see alternative assessment as favoritism or as a watering down of standards (p. 39).

These challenges need to be addressed and considered throughout the development of alternative assessment tools for Aboriginal adult learners.

The current framework developed by the Canadian Council on Learning may facilitate a transformation of prevailing attitudes and processes that focus on the deficits of the learner, to one that is sensitive to, and honours Aboriginal culture and beliefs. This awareness and understanding will not only strengthen the cultural framework, but it will enhance the holistic learning of the Aboriginal student.

The authors of the report "The State of Aboriginal Learning in Canada: a Holistic Approach to Measuring Success" caution:

> Aboriginal communities, governments and researchers recognize the need to forge a common, balanced understanding of what constitutes success in Aboriginal learning. Failure to do so can result in information that is irrelevant to Aboriginal communities and fails to inform effective social policy (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 7).

The report emphasizes that a holistic approach will expand the opportunities for Aboriginal learning, while "a new narrative emerges that supersedes the all-too familiar and distressing storyline that centres on learning deficits and academic shortcomings among Aboriginal youth" (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 4).

## 3.5 KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

### Synthesis of Key Findings and Conclusions

By reviewing the existing research and literature on initial assessment practices and Aboriginal education in Canada, it is evident that assessment should be aligned with Aboriginal pedagogy and epistemology. By following the ideology of the most recent Canadian research, a holistic lifelong learning framework would support the development of initial assessment tools and practices for Aboriginal adult learners to be shared throughout post-secondary institutes. These assessment tools and practices should engage and develop within the Aboriginal view of a learning framework. Assessment tools and practices should integrate the following components:

- Holistic – Engage and develop all aspects of the individual (emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual) and the community, and stress the interconnectedness of all life under the Creator.
- Lifelong – Begin before birth and continue through old age, involving the intergenerational transfer of knowledge.
- Learner-centred and experiential - Connect to life experience and reinforce by traditional ceremonies, meditation, storytelling, observation and imitation.
- Integrate Aboriginal and Western knowledge - Adapt process that draws from the best of traditional and contemporary knowledge.
- Rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures - Bound to language, which conveys a community's unique values and worldview while ensuring cultural continuity.
- Communal activity - Communal process in which parents, family, Elders and community have a role and responsibility.
- Respectful of Aboriginal Cultures

- Critically Reflective and Action-Oriented (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009)

Aboriginal education that includes the above concepts, and structures them within initial assessment tools and processes, will allow for the Aboriginal adult learner to achieve greater success. The individual will be able to tap into a greater source of prior lifelong knowledge and use his/her experience to access higher education.

## Recommendations Arising from the Review of Literature

Aboriginal adult learners have a wide scope of unique life experience that affects and informs their learning. Many adult learners have had difficult and negative learning experiences in the past. Assessment practices must take into account where the learner is coming from, in order to support the learner through the process. Findings on assessment in relevant literature and research lead to the following recommendations and annotated excerpts from this literature and research:

### *1. Measure assessment in a holistic manner, using assessment tools that include culturally relevant materials.*

Educators at IAHLA member institutes have continually expressed concern that assessment scores for Aboriginal adult learners do not reflect their actual abilities. Inappropriate, culturally-biased assessment tools thus serve as a barrier to learning for Aboriginal adult learners.

> Teachers who utilize authentic materials and activities should strive to be consistent when it comes to assessment, and use holistic measures that capture the growth in students' real life uses of literacy (Jacobson, et al., 2003, p. 89).

> A set of national levels and benchmarks based on research and practice has the potential to embrace uniformity and diversity. A set of assessment tools that are culturally relevant, holistic, and customized for populations with specific learning needs could be articulated to a national set of levels and benchmarks. A flexible system that employs multiple assessment tools and approaches has the potential to meet the needs of diverse student populations and honour the complex nature of learning (Campbell, 2006, p. 61).

In providing a continuum of tools and approaches, a holistic perspective is gained about the student's abilities, strengths and attributes. The BLA Project endeavored to not only research and develop assessment tools that address specific learning needs of the Aboriginal adult learner, but take on a comprehensive approach to assessment inclusive of differing worldviews and understandings about learning and what is important to learn.

By developing a continuum of relevant tools and approaches that can be used for literacy assessment, a well-rounded snapshot of the learner from a holistic perspective will become evident.

The study "Moving Forward in Aboriginal Education: Proceedings of a National Policy Roundtable" states:

> It is important…to establish a variety of indicators of success and tools of measurement, beyond performance on standardized tests. One size does not fit all; there are many kinds of learners, many kinds of learning, and many ways of demonstrating our accomplishments. Without better research and data, we don't know where we are going, where we want to go, and if we are getting there (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2005, p. 16).
>
> Aboriginal literacy is a life-long learning venture. While we need to examine the literacy needs of Aboriginal adult learners, we also need to review the areas of Family Literacy Programs and Aboriginal Workplace Essential Skills. By understanding these domains of literacy with greater insight, we can accomplish two central goals: (1) we can note the current strengths occurring in these integral stages of literacy education and (2) observe what types of additional support we need to provide to improve the extant programs (Ostrowidzki, et al., 2009, p. 3).

2. ***Use a combination of formal and informal assessment tools using various assessment procedures. Informal assessment tools may include but are not limited to: checklists, essays, oral readings, portfolios, interviews, demonstrations, work samples, self-evaluations, short answer questions, and performance charts***.

> Just as no single teaching strategy is effective for all learners in all situations, no single assessment instrument or process is adequate in providing quality information for all purposes (Taylor, 1997, p. 1).

The International Reading Association recommends that instructors use multiple measures of assessment. Respondents to a study on assessment practices in adult basic education reported using a series of both commercial and informal tools (Campbell, 2006). Practitioners and researchers are working to develop assessment practices, which contribute to learning. They are using a variety of assessment instruments, such as portfolios of learners' work or activities, which reveal how learners actually use basic skills in different situations (Campbell, 2006).

The study, “Moving Forward in Aboriginal Education, Proceedings of a National Policy Roundtable,” suggests the following:

- Develop support structures for Aboriginal education, involving training of Aboriginal people and improvement of instruction to ensure parity with provincial/territorial standards of performance, funding and resources;
- Give special attention to problems related to transitions across the system;
- Recognize Aboriginal authority over Aboriginal curriculum to reflect the community;
- Develop common content for all Canadian students on Aboriginal culture and history, and infuse Aboriginal perspectives into all learning (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2005).

***3.*** **Adhere to a holistic lifelong learning paradigm. Methodologies should be developed to use Aboriginal assessment practices and tools to measure success in other areas of the individual learner’s life, as well as in the learner’s classroom and learning environment.**

Assessment is a process that extends beyond the initial assessment for post-secondary education. Assessment should be used in a way that will measure not only the current state of a potential student's entry into a course or program, but also take into account the potential chance of success at a given level. This involves non-quantifiable information, of a socio-economic measure, that will assess family support, personal commitments, habits, learning styles, cultural responsibilities, etc. Aboriginal learning centres, and other identified support systems within post-secondary institutions, could practice these methodologies so that there is consistent support for the Aboriginal learner throughout the holistic lifelong spectrum.

Furthermore, there is a need for each training institution to develop methodologies that expand assessment from the testing process to the classroom, allowing students to work more closely with their instructors and support services. For example, if a student has learning difficulties identified as a result of assessments, methodologies need to be put in place that notify the instructor(s), library services, student support services, etc. of the difficulties. In fact, even if learning difficulties are not identified, the learning centre can assist in maximizing the student’s learning and success through the best use of faculty and staff. As part of the assessment process, internal process, policies and communication systems need to be identified.

The Saskatchewan Circle of Learning benchmarks have been developed to offer literacy benchmarks for Aboriginal adult learners and suggest “appropriate assessment and

placement services are essential for learner success," (p. 4) and "transition services help learners plan and prepare for their next steps" (Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006, p. 5). The Canadian Council on Learning supports this notion:

> One of the goals of the Holistic Lifelong Learning Models was to convey the strong connection that exists between learning and well-being for Aboriginal people. This warrants the need to measure social and economic conditions (such as income, employment opportunities, incidence of diabetes) that contribute to (or impede) learning success (2009, p. 4).

Aboriginal literacy assessment practices should comply with an Aboriginal holistic framework that encompasses all aspects of the learner's life.

# 4. SURVEY OF IAHLA INSTITUTES AND PUBLIC POST- SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

The key first step of this project was to complete a literature review of relevant literature and data on Aboriginal adult learner assessment and related topics. The next step was to survey all IAHLA member institutes and all public post-secondary institutions in BC regarding their current adult Aboriginal learner assessment practices. This survey was intended to discover current assessment tools, assessment administration processes, critical success factors, best practices, and challenges on a system-wide spectrum. The survey was designed to gather, analyze and compare responses between IAHLA member institutes and public post-secondary institutes (e.g. colleges, universities, etc.). The encompassing purpose of the survey is to provide insight into assessment successes and the opportunities available to improve the assessment processes and tools for adult Aboriginal post-secondary learners system-wide. The collected data serves to inform further research activities, such as focus groups and interviews.

The data collected in the survey was primarily qualitative in nature as the survey was designed to procure open-ended questions. Corresponding survey questions are listed under each subheading. The entire survey questionnaire is included in Appendix 2.

Responses were categorized using thematic analysis. The responses are presented corresponding to the following themes: identification of Aboriginal students; barriers to accurate assessments for Aboriginal students; current assessment tools; development of assessment tools; factors determining selection of assessment tool for learner; modification of assessment tools and processes; strengths of current assessment tools and processes; further enhancement of assessment tools and processes; validity and

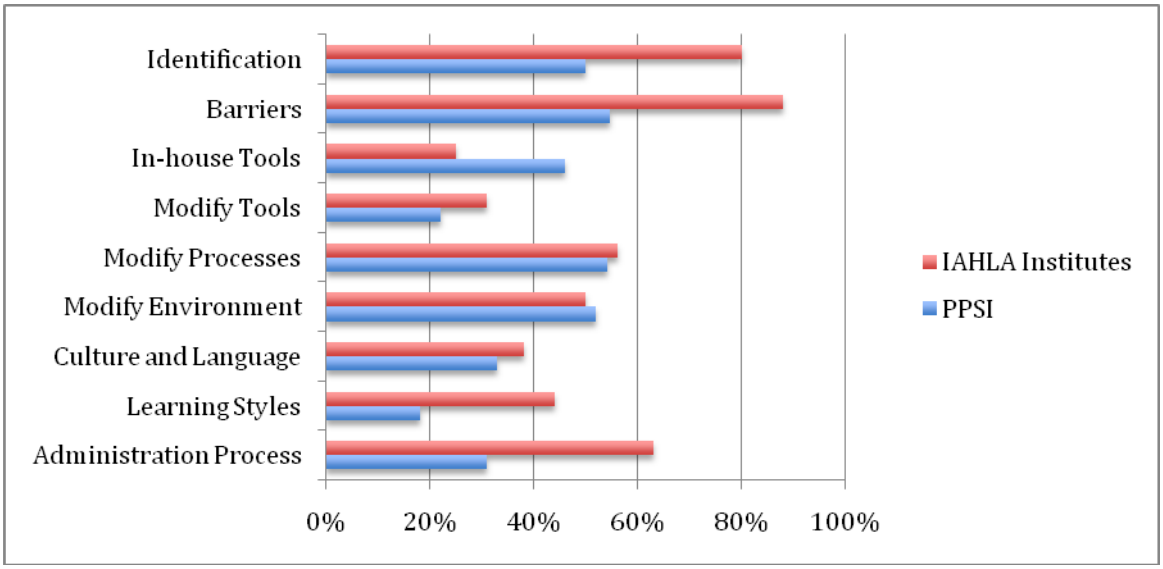
reliability of assessment tools and processes; and, critical elements of effective and relevant assessment tools and processes.

Table 1 demonstrates the quantitative results of the survey and compares the answers of the IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions (PPSI). The following questions correspond with the results in the table and indicate the extent to which respondents in each group of institutions responded affirmatively to the questions:

1. Do you determine whether or not adult learners requiring assessment services are Aboriginal? (Identification)
2. In your opinion, are there barriers to the accurate assessment of Aboriginal adult learners entering courses and programs in your institute? (Barriers)
3. What assessment tools do you use to assess the readiness of Aboriginal adult learners for the purposes of course or program placement? (In-house Tools)[1]
4. Have you modified/enhanced your assessment tool(s) to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners? (Modify Tools)
5. Have you modified/enhanced your assessment processes to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners? (Modify Process)
6. In using your assessment tool(s) and assessment processes, have you altered the assessment environment (physical, social, educational to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners? (Modify Environment)
7. Are your assessment tools sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language? (Culture and Language)
8. Are your assessment tool(s) sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles? (Learning Styles)
9. Are your assessment administration processes sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language? (Administration process)

[1] The data represents the percentage of respondents who indicated that they have developed their own in-house assessment tools. Other assessment tools are identified in Tables 2.

**Table 1: BLA Institutional Survey Results**




## 4.1 IDENTIFICATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *Do you determine whether or not adult learners requiring assessment services are Aboriginal?*
- *If you answered "Yes," how do you determine whether or not an individual requiring an assessment is Aboriginal?*

The IAHLA institutes provide a point of entry back into the education system for many Aboriginal adult learners. As most of these institutes are located in small communities, students are known community members. At larger, urban institutes, prospective learners self-declare their identity on application forms (for example, the Ministry of Advanced Education Aboriginal Data Standards form that is required for public post-secondary institutes). IAHLA institutes that are funded through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) nominal roll, are required to submit status numbers of all students. Similarly, this information is used for First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) Special Education Program (SEP) Funding.

Students at PPSI generally identify themselves through optional self-declaration. Many of the application forms provide the option for students to self-identify as an Aboriginal (First Nation, Métis, Inuit) student. Some students self-identify through accessing Aboriginal support services (if available at the institute). Some of the staff at public post-secondary institutes (PPSI) work in partnership with Aboriginal education institutes and

offer assessments on site, in their community; these students are always Aboriginal. Some PPSI have developed expanded admissions policies and in this situation, students have the option to self-identify.

At the university level, one respondent identified the fact that assessments are rare and usually program-specific.

## 4.2 BARRIERS TO ACCURATE ASSESSMENTS FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *In your opinion, are there barriers to the accurate assessment of Aboriginal adult learners entering courses and programs in your institute?*
- *If you answered "Yes" or "Not Sure," what are (or may be) the top 3 barriers?*

Respondents were asked whether they felt that there were barriers impacting the accurate assessment of Aboriginal students. Fifty-four percent (54.5%) of the PPSI respondents and eighty-eight percent (88%) of the IAHLA respondents stated that there were barriers.

Respondents from PPSIs indicated the following barriers that relate to the assessment process:

- Lack of Aboriginal Admission Policy at some institutes (some PPSI identified that they are working on developing these policies);
- Disparity between funders' and learners' expectations (e.g. amount of time required for upgrading when adult learners return to education);
- Opportunities and encouragement to prepare and practice prior to assessments;
- Negative historical perceptions and experiences in educational institutions;
- Lack of Aboriginal assessors;
- Uncomfortable testing environment (physical space);
- Anxiety;
- Financial costs of assessment and travel expenses;
- Time;
- Lack of confidence to approach admissions officer; and,
- Employees may not be skilled to deliver assessments in culturally-appropriate manner.

Respondents from PPSIs indicated the following barriers that relate to the assessment tools:

- Lack of culturally-relevant assessment tools and writing topics;
- Lack of ability to identify and recognize prior knowledge that could be transferable skills and abilities;
- Cultural biases in standardized tests;
- Lack of an Aboriginal-validated instrument for assessment; and,
- Assessment is academic-focused and does not assess the potential of the "whole" student.

Some additional comments made by PPSI respondents are as follows:

> *"One of the barriers to accurate assessment is that the assessment that we undertake for Adult Basic Education (ABE) is written. Not all individuals are able to express themselves accurately in this manner. Also, the ABE many not be culturally sensitive and quite foreign to some of our older Aboriginal learners."* (PPSI respondent)
>
> *"Standard assessments do not measure potential oral skills or listening skills, all critical elements of academic success."* (PPSI respondent)
>
> *"Students may not be aware of expanded admissions options which might consider relevant experience and/or expanded packet of application materials."* (PPSI respondent)

IAHLA respondents identified similar barriers:

- Assessments target the dominant Eurocentric culture;
- Students have received inadequate academic counselling in the education system;
- Reading, writing and arithmetic and the need to upgrade;
- Adult learners have had negative experiences within the education system which interfere with their confidence and belief in their abilities;
- Anxiety and unfamiliarity with the assessments and test procedure;
- Cultural inappropriateness of assessments;
- "Rez" language – English is considered a unique dialect or second language for many;

- Mature age;
- Financial constraints;
- Lack of cognitive and sensorimotor assessments; no appropriate intake instrument; and,
- Lack of previous records for students.

Additional comments from IAHLA respondents are cited below.

> *"Dogwood diplomas are being given to students that struggle with the required skill levels."* (IAHLA respondent)
>
> *"Standardized measurements are often not normed to Indigenous cultures and learners who have different ways of knowing and also have different ways of presenting their knowledge that are not easily captured in these types of measures."* (IAHLA respondent)
>
> *"Assessments in many institutions are a one time snapshot, assessments are rarely understood as a process. I believe that true reflection of viewing a person's knowledge, skills and abilities happens over time and in many different learning environments."* (IAHLA respondent)
>
> *"Developing a relationship between people (assessor and learner) is seen as a detriment to a true measure of a person's abilities; however, I see that everything in life is based on relationship building."* (IAHLA respondent)

The responses from both IAHLA institutes and PPSI indicate that there are numerous barriers impacting the accurate assessment of Aboriginal students. Respondents from both IAHLA institutes and PPSI indicated similar barriers related to cultural relevancy, financial barriers, geographical accessibility, lack of Aboriginal staff members, and the assessment environment.

## 4.3 CURRENT ASSESSMENT TOOLS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *What assessment tools do you use to assess the readiness of Aboriginal adult learners for the purposes of course or program placement? (Select all that apply)*

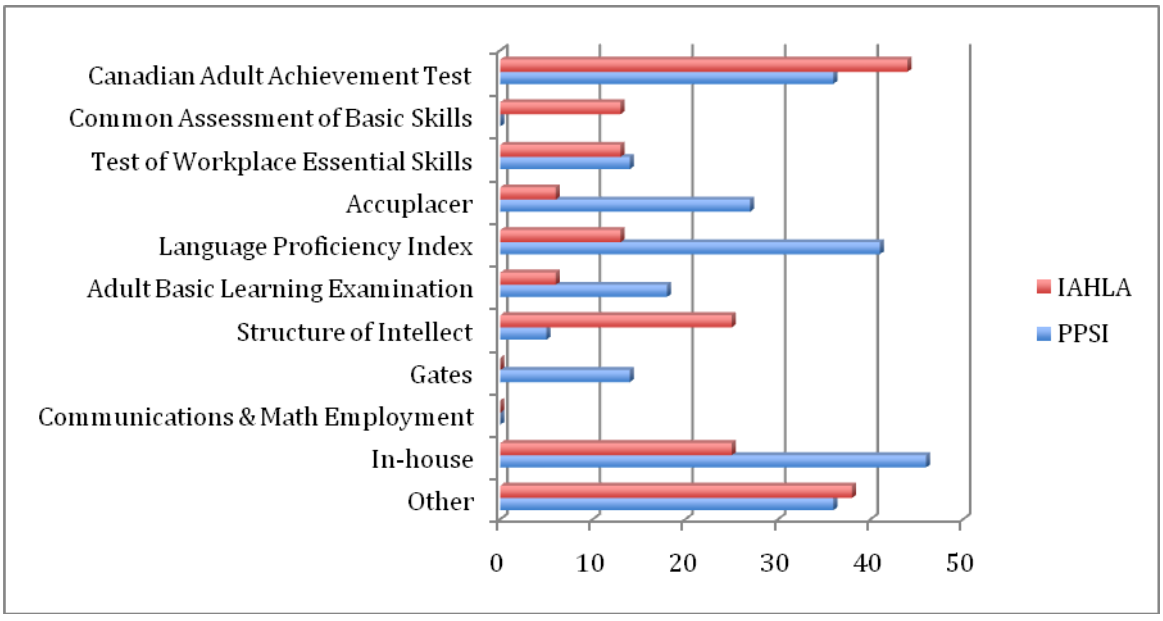
Table 2 displays the types of assessment tools that are used at IAHLA institutes and PPS institutions.

Survey respondents at PPSIs identified numerous assessment tools that are used within their institutions. Forty-five percent (45%) of the respondents used their own in-house assessment tool. The Language Proficiency Index was the second most common and was used by forty-one (41%) of respondents.

At IAHLA institutes, forty-six (46%) of respondents use their own in-house assessment tools and forty-one percent (41%) of the respondents use the Language Proficiency Index, followed by thirty-six (36%) using the Canadian Adult Achievement Test.

Respondents were asked if they would be willing to share or provide a copy of their own assessment tools to assist in the development of an assessment tool. One respondent from an IAHLA institute and two respondents from PPSIs were willing to share their assessment tools. The research team will follow up with respondents during the focus groups to encourage additional input about successful tools and strategies.

**Table 2: Assessment Tools used at IAHLA Institutes and PPSIs**




Thirty-six percent of PPSI respondents reported that they use other assessment tools including: Law School Admission Test (LSAT), Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), Dental Admissions Test (DAT), Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Cambridge Advanced Exam (CAE), personal interviews, Canadian Adult Reading Assessment (CARA), Career Assessment Inventory (CAI), Canadian Achievement Test (CAT), General Educational Development

Assessment (GED), Woodcock Johnson 3, Canadian Adult Reading Assessment, Mechanical reasoning tests and an Aboriginal Admission Committee. Some of these assessments are used for higher level, program-specific assessment and, for the purposes of our study, are not related to literacy assessment.

Thirty-eight percent of the IAHLA respondents indicated that they use other assessment tools including: North Coast Distance Education School (NCDES) and Northwest Community College (NWCC) Assessment; adapted or modified assessment tools; personal interviews; and, Communications and Math Employment Readiness Assessment (CAMERA).

## 4.4 DEVELOPMENT OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS

*Corresponding Survey Question*

- *If you have developed your own unique assessment tool(s) for Aboriginal adult learners, please describe it and indicate how you undertook this.*

Several PPSI respondents indicated that their institution had developed their own unique assessment tools for Aboriginal adult learners. Several institutions worked collaboratively with Aboriginal community partners to develop culturally appropriate skills-based assessment tests. One institution established the Northern Advancement Program, which is a first-year transition cohort designed to support students academically, socially and traditionally.

Respondents also identified assessment processes that they modified to meet the needs of some students. The process starts with a conversation, an informal intake form and a discussion around the student's goals. The staff member can then direct their assessment and identify an appropriate tool more accurately.

Another respondent explained that they do not replace the assessment, but rather prepare the students for the assessment. They provide opportunities for students to increase their comfort level, write mock essays and practice on worksheets at home and in the computer lab. The coordinator reviews assessment time, expectations, and the outline of the assessment and provides examples of essay topics.

The Aboriginal Human Resources Council (AHRC) developed "Guiding Circles" workshops and this training has proven valuable for one of the PPSI. Respondents indicated that some PPSIs have created Aboriginal student support services and the staff members are excellent resources to further support and prepare students for assessments and accessing learning resources.

Respondents at the IAHLA institutes incorporate traditional practices into their assessment process. For example, one respondent indicated that for their language program, an Elder sits with the students and helps to determine their level. Another respondent explained that they use informal assessment methods such as observation to determine a student's ability in relation to critical thinking and storytelling. These personal inventories help students identify their unique abilities that will support them throughout post-secondary education.

IAHLA respondents indicated the need for integrated assessments that examine skills such as visual, oral, kinesthetic, sensorimotor and one's ability to focus. Some respondents help students assess and understand their unique learning preferences and how this may affect their education.

## 4.5 FACTORS DETERMINING SELECTION OF ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR LEARNERS

*Corresponding Survey Question*

- *When an individual requires an assessment, what are 3 significant determining factors in selecting the type of assessment tool for that individual?*

One PPSI respondent explained that if students do not meet admission requirements, they are referred to the ABE department for further information. They encourage potential students to take the ABE assessment if they have been out of school for several years or if they do not have a transcript of their previous education.

Another respondent explained that they offer weekly ABE/literacy information sessions where students are informed about the intake and assessment process. People can opt out of writing if they feel that their skills are below a grade 10 level. These people work with a Student Success Advisor to determine their placement level. Students requiring disability accommodations are given the opportunity to do the assessment through the disability office.

Some of the other factors that determine the assessment tool to be used are: individual's first language, educational background, program requirements, reason for assessment, special needs or learning disability, level of academic readiness and level of academic completion.

Respondents at the IAHLA institutes identified several factors including: cultural relevancy; maturity level; purpose of the assessment; reading and comprehension level; previous educational experience; length of time since previous education; education level completed; adaptability of assessment tool (e.g. open ended questions); multi-modality of tool that assesses learning style and preference; past negative educational

experiences (e.g. residential school); educational and career goals; and, assessment availability.

## 4.6 MODIFICATION OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND ASSESSMENT ADMINISTRATION PROCESS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *Have you modified/enhanced your assessment tool(s) to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *If you answered "Yes," please identify how and why you modified your assessment tool(s).*
- *Have you modified/enhanced your assessment administration processes to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *If you answered "Yes," please describe how and why you modified/enhanced your assessment administration processes to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners.*
- *In using your assessment tool(s) and administration process(s), have you altered the assessment environment (physical, social, educational) to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *If you answered "Yes," please describe how and why you altered the assessment environment (physical, social, educational) when using your assessment tool(s) and administration process(s), to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?*

Respondents at PPSI and IAHLA institutes are supportive of the need for further development of assessment tools for Aboriginal adult learners. Twenty-three percent (23%) and fifty-five percent (55%) of the PPSI respondents indicated that they had modified their assessment tools and assessment administration processes respectively. Thirty-three percent (33%) and fifty-six percent (56%) of the IAHLA institute respondents indicated that they had modified their assessment tools and assessment administration processes respectively.

Several respondents at PPSIs modified the testing environment by providing opportunities for testing within their community whenever possible. This strategy worked well when partnerships were already established. Aboriginal assessors establish a comfortable relationship with students and facilitate debriefing sessions. Debriefing the assessment is an important step of the process as it allows students to gain a better understanding of their performance. This can also provide students with a stronger sense of pride and confidence in their academic pursuits.

> *"Our Aboriginal partnership site delivery process is sensitive to the comfort of Aboriginal students, the assessment is described in language that is understandable to Aboriginal students, and the whole process is less hurried and gentler. It is more in tune with Aboriginal community mores. Our assessments do not assume fluency in Aboriginal languages since [PPSI]'s Aboriginal student population all have either English or (rarely) French as their first language."* (PPSI respondent)

Some PPSI have further enhanced access by allowing prospective students to take assessments at any time without a previous appointment, and by providing assessments at no cost. In some instances, the assessment process has been modified by eliminating the time restriction. One respondent explained:

> *"We do not follow formal timings on standardized tests…since the process at our institution is used exclusively for admission, placement or to develop student success plans, we do not feel a formal approach to assessment is warranted."* (PPSI respondent)

Another respondent indicated that their PPSI had invested considerable time and training into implementing a portfolio process of assessment with the Aboriginal communities within their catchment area. This respondent indicated:

> *"Current assessment tools are not adequate for a complete picture of where students are at, and of measuring their prior learning. For some students, they are not culturally relevant. We are aware of the need to conduct assessments that are not Eurocentric in nature and consider the cultural knowledge that is not included in the standardized tests."* (PPSI respondent)

Consideration of writing styles and dialect is another strategy that has been considered in the modification of assessment tools and processes as indicated below:

> *"The [IAHLA institute] material has given us a way to look at Aboriginal adult learners' writing. I really like the idea of looking at different kinds of English as dialects. This allows us to focus on the ideas and communication of writing, and then consider the audience and creative writing for that style of English. I think we really pay attention to the person – some really like reassurance and others want to be assessed against objective school criteria. The stories tell us a lot about how the student wants to learn or doesn't want to learn. This is true for*

*everyone, but the experiences of many Canadian Aboriginal learners is set by the systems they have endured."* (PPSI respondent)

One PPSI modified their Aboriginal Studies program requirements so that students could take their language assessment at the end of the first term. This provided students with the opportunity to learn with a cohort and access support services throughout the term. This modified process has allowed for easier access to a two-year University Transfer program. Another PPSI followed a similar strategy:

> *"For the example of the waived pre-requisites, this is done to increase access, and to bring out the student's abilities in an authentic manner that promotes belief in one's self. Too often learners shy away from doing a program application because they do not immediately meet the entrance requirements. Upgrading and preparation can be an isolating individual process, if community is not developed."* (PPSI respondent)

The responses indicate that learners benefit from having the opportunity to access student-focused, individualized assessment. Much of the process starts with the establishment of a relationship with the prospective student.

Respondents indicated that the physical environment and atmosphere should be welcoming and comfortable. Aboriginal student support services have expanded over the past years to include comprehensive academic, social and traditional support including smudging, Elders as mentors and healing practices. These spaces create a community within the PPSI that support learners, create a welcoming environment and promotes cultural experiences. One respondent noted, *"Many of our urban Aboriginal learners came through foster care and are hungry for cultural knowledge"* (PPSI respondent).

Aboriginal staff members and faculty play a strong role in supporting Aboriginal students and motivating them to further their educational goals. Several PPSI have implemented professional development opportunities for non-Aboriginal staff to promote cultural awareness and understanding. Introducing prospective students to staff at PPSI is another successful strategy to create a more supportive environment.

Several respondents indicated that the PPSI had expanded its admissions policy and furthermore, learners could submit culturally relevant experience, service within their community and culturally appropriate experience related to arts and language. Policies for preferential or expanded admissions vary for each of the PPSI. The respondents noted that they work closely with the Aboriginal communities in their vicinity and ensure that prospective students and advisors are aware of these policies. Access programs have also been created to attract prospective students into trades training and development.

One of the IAHLA respondents highlighted the importance of building a relationship with the prospective students and helping them to understand their learning style and preference:

> *"I support the learner to review some learning principles and general learning strategies that will help them feel more comfortable coming into the assessment (and encourage them to bring in samples of past work if they wish...forms part of informal assessment). Over the past 20 years of working alongside Aboriginal adult learners, many people have taught me about assessments. I have learned to be observant, sensitive and thoughtful about how learners FEEL going through a process that often has some discomfort or negative past experiences attached to it. Again, I have found that I gain a deeper, richer sense of the person's understanding of the world through relationship building and assessing over time to develop this relationship of trust and genuine care in the person."* (IAHLA respondent)

An IAHLA respondent indicated that they modified the essay questions to reflect topics that are culturally relevant and meaningful. For example, some of the topics included canoe racing, clam digging and traditional feasts:

> *"We know that students will be able to reflect their true levels of reading and writing skills, retention and comprehension by removing standardized barriers and building in familiarity through appropriate topics. This also allows the students to reflect on prior knowledge and express a more confident answer."* (IAHLA respondent)

One IAHLA respondent explained that they inform students prior to the assessment that it is part of the process and that they will get the ongoing support they need to continue in education:

> *"Many adults who have been out of school for a long period of time, or had bad experiences in school, panic as soon as they hear they have to write a test. Even those that have attended school in recent years get very nervous when they have to take a test, so we try to make it less of an anxiety issue for them…Finally, outside influences and past histories affect the way people respond to things, so I try not to let assessment test results play a big part in whether or not students are accepted into programs. If they need extra help, we do whatever we can to provide it."* (IAHLA respondent)

Another IAHLA respondent echoed the fact that students need to understand that assessments are merely a starting point and an opportunity to see where they are.

> *"Far too often, assessment is seen as a test, rather than an opportunity for self-reflection, planning and growth."* (IAHLA respondent)

By offering assessments at IAHLA institutes, located within traditional territory, students frequently feel more comfortable, supported and confident:

> *"Through our partnership affiliation agreement, we have brought the assessment tools to traditional land, creating a cultural safety for learners."* (IAHLA respondent)

## 4.7 EFFECTIVE PRACTICES OF CURRENT ASSESSMENT PROCESSES AND TOOLS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *Please describe what you consider to be the strengths of the current assessment tools and administration processes used for Aboriginal adult learners at your institution.*
- *Are your assessment tool(s) and administrative processes sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language?*
- *Are your assessment tool(s) and administrative processes sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles?*

Respondents at PPSI indicated numerous strengths in the assessment tools and processes that they implement including: accurate placement for range of levels; flexibility; ease of admission selection process; ease of administration and evaluation; community-based delivery; year-round availability; good correlation between placement from assessment and successful completion of courses; lack of time constraint; online availability for easy access; cultural sensitivity (note that this is dependent on institute as some respondents still indicated cultural bias); discipline specificity; choice to complete assessment, as opposed to imposition; flexibility in delivery; welcoming environment; individualized student-focused process; and, less stressful than standardized testing:

> *"It [the process] meets the needs of students who are open to receiving supports and guidance, it is not a process that assumes all Aboriginal students need or desire supports or guidance."* (PPSI respondent)

Respondents at IAHLA institutes identified the following additional strengths of current assessment tools and processes: consistency; familiarity; confidentiality; relevant to all learners, not only Aboriginal students; clarity of instructions; flexibility of time duration; standardization; individualized approach; relationship building; personal interviews;

promotion of personal growth and remediation; community based; and, the provision of a baseline from which to measure future growth:

> *"A one time assessment offers a window of access to a person's learning and understanding. Utilizing a process-focused approach with a layer of assessments, over time, provides a clearer glass in the window to look through. We spend time demystifying what assessments are, how and why they are used."* (IAHLA respondent)

All of these strengths should be considered and replicated in the development of the Better Learner Assessment.

## 4.8 FURTHER ENHANCEMENT OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PROCESS

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *In your opinion, how might your institute enhance the current assessment tools used for Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *In your opinion, how might your institute enhance the current assessment administration processes used for Aboriginal adult learners?*

Respondents at both IAHLA institutes and PPSI indicated a desire to learn more about, and implement, successful tools and strategies that other institutes are using to meet the needs of prospective Aboriginal adult students.

PPSI respondents recommended that assessment tools and processes should indicate a learner's existing and potential strengths and thus, be a strength-based model. Learners may also benefit from having the option to answer questions orally. Essay questions can be modified to be reflective of an Aboriginal worldview. Enhancing the debriefing process provides students with the opportunity to gain a better understanding about their results.

Respondents from PPSIs noted that assessments generally do not consider a variety of learning styles of assessment methods. Several respondents indicated that there are conflicting and somewhat controversial notions around Aboriginal learning styles:

> *"I asked what is meant by 'Aboriginal learning styles' since I believe that learning styles are a function of personality rather than culture. I asked if this question might be referring to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. That said, I do not know if an assessment tool can be sensitive to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning because those*

*ways require a process, a relationship, rather than a tool. The content of the tool may, but the tool itself is just that, a tool."* (PPSI respondent)

These comments support the notion that assessment truly needs to reflect a "process," not only an assessment tool.

One respondent indicated the need for a holistic, culturally appropriate assessment process such as the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). Another respondent noted that they support this type of process; however, these types of assessments need to be mandated at a provincial level to get support from the institution:

*"Develop assessment tools that support the achievement of Aboriginal learners. Of course, doing this would be philosophical shift that perhaps would not be supported through our educational quality assurance mechanisms of Education Council. Unless this approach is mandated at a provincial level, it may not be well received within the institution."* (PPSI respondent)

Expanded admissions policies have been implemented at several PPSI to meet the needs of Aboriginal adult learns, for example:

*"[PPSI institute] has several programs in Indigenous language revitalization. In assessing potential students for access to these programs, we adopt expanded qualifications policies. We also adopt flexible policies for retaining instructors for these courses, seeking experienced speakers of Indigenous languages who may not have had formal teacher training."* (PPSI respondent)

Another respondent noted that PPSI staff should work with Aboriginal communities and high school advisors to share information about expanded admissions policies.

Assessment tools and processes also need to correlate to the knowledge and skills learners will require in their courses. The effectiveness of this correction should be monitored through recruitment, attrition and completion rates:

*"The tools need to reflect the courses and programs the Aboriginal learners are trying to access. Having relevant correlation between the assessment and program expectations is critical. Need to look at what the learners will be expected to do in school, and have a tool which can show capacity to do it."* (PPSI respondent)

Several PPSI respondents suggested that some assessors would benefit from further cultural training, which would also enhance the potential for outreach capacity. They also identified increased employment of Aboriginal assessors as another successful strategy.

An IAHLA respondent highlighted the need to focus further development of assessment tools around the concept of strength-based learning:

> *"Continue to resource strength-based learning and assessment tools not focusing on learning gaps but focusing on developing areas, strength areas and learning strategies."* (IAHLA respondent)

There is strong support to develop an assessment tool that is culturally relevant and reflective of an Aboriginal worldview. The assessment tools needs to be reflective of both Aboriginal culture and language:

> *"We would prefer to use assessment tools that include more questions and examples relative to Indigenous lifestyles and experiences. Unfortunately, the current standardized and widely accepted tools cannot be modified."* (IAHLA respondent)

> *"We have minimal curriculum development in Nuu-chah-nulth language and culture, yet provide forum for language, music, culture expression within assessment process."* (IAHLA respondent)

Assessments need to remain student-centred, providing an opportunity to examine their education and career goals. Assessments create a starting point upon which to plan and build the academic foundation for success in education and career goal pursuits.

> *"We are working together on the person's educational plan and career path...it is their plan that we are part of, not a plan that we design and then they fit into it."* (IAHLA respondent)

One of the IAHLA institutes commented on the strengths of the SOI assessment tool that they use for assessment:

> *"The SOI focuses on assessing learning abilities related to comprehension, memory, evaluation skills, creativity, and problem solving...these are underlying cognitive abilities that are required for learning regardless of cultural background. The assessment removes, for the most part, western academics and focuses on how the brain is working. Additionally, the IPP assessment focuses on specific sensorimotor abilities that are connected to learning; again, not connected to Western culture."* (IAHLA respondent)

## 4.9 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PROCESSES

*Corresponding Survey Questions*

- *How do you know whether or not your assessment tool(s) are valid and reliable for Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *How do you know whether or not your assessment administration processes are valid and reliable for Aboriginal adult learners?*

One respondent from a PPSI suggested that ongoing monitoring of assessment tools and process increase their validity and reliability:

> *"The content of the assessment tool needs to, as much as possible, reflect the realities of the student. We know that the tool is reliable when its results correlate with student success in the courses that follow the assessment. We know it is unreliable when students, after being place in classes, begin to demonstrate that they were assessed too low or, in some cases, too high. What might be more important, is a tool's or set of tools' limitations, what isn't measured that could and should be."* (PPSI respondent)

One PPSI respondent who uses the standardized CAT stated that they rely on the research and statistics provided by the psychometrics of the supplier. Another respondent stated that they vet assessment administration processed through their Aboriginal Advisory Committee, in addition to feedback from Aboriginal applicants and students.

Ongoing monitoring throughout the PPSI provides staff with feedback about student success, imparting insight into how access and assessment processes might be modified to meet the needs of the learner:

> *"The university employs a learner-centered approach from the doorway in to the doorway out. Aboriginal learners have told us that they are pleased with the way access is handled at the university. And, students tell their friends and family and encourage others to come to Aboriginal Access Services, or to go see so and so at the University Prep program, to get into university. We have multi-generational learners at the university and this may well be evidence of a job well done, a prime indicator that our assessment administration process is working for Aboriginal learners. At the university there is evidence of increasing success of Aboriginal learners. Assessment is critical to ensuring that*

*students are placed in courses where it can be reasonably expected that they will achieve success."* (PPSI respondent)

One of the IAHLA respondents noted that their assessment provides an opportunity for prospective students to indicate any additional information that may be relevant and missing from the assessment itself. This provides a good indicator as to how students feel about their assessment of their abilities. One IAHLA respondent also indicated that the assessment tools that they currently use are not reliable or valid for their students.

Another IAHLA respondent commented on the validity of the tools that they use for assessment at their institute:

> *"The results nearly always match the actual performance levels that students are achieving in their courses; the remediation components correlate to increased abilities in courses…We have been using SOI for 8 years; IPP for 3, and the results and outcomes have been consistent every year. SOI has 30 years of use behind it and is evidence-based research (and learning theories) in neuro-developmental understanding of how the human brain works."* (IAHLA respondent)

Another respondent indicated the importance of recognizing the role of assessments and how these fit into the community:

> *"No assessment is used solely based on its results. Those results join the teachers' assessment, the knowledge acquisition that is occurring within the community and in the student's life, and the student's own assessment of their abilities. Assessments are only as good as the team using the results."* (IAHLA respondent)

## 4.10 CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE AND RELEVANT ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PROCESSES

*Corresponding Survey Questions:*

- *In your opinion, what are the 3 most critical elements of an effective and relevant assessment tool for Aboriginal adult learners?*
- *In your opinion, what are the 3 most significant assessment administration processes required to ensure an effective and relevant experience for Aboriginal adult learners?*

Respondents at PPSI identified the following critical elements of effective and relevant assessment tools and processes: validity; reliability; flexibility; appropriate for various

learning styles; cultural relevance; considerate of work experience and cultural knowledge; choice of modalities (written, oral, online); a welcoming, relaxed, informal environment; constructivist/strengths-based; administration by Aboriginal staff members; staff members who are sensitive to and respectful of Aboriginal culture; efficiency; designed in a manner which allows for expression of alternative ways of knowing; reflective of learner's learning needs; relationship-building; academic appropriateness; level of readiness; individual, student-centred process; ease of access; consistency; seamless transition of process from assessment to admission; lack of time restraint; comprehensive interpretation of results; recognition that assessment tool is just one part of the process; and, ongoing communication with community partners.

In addition, one respondent noted the importance of implementing these strategies provincially and nationally:

> *"The tools need to be developed provincially and nationally, using professional developers that understand the Aboriginal context. Fundamentally, our nation must recognize Aboriginal knowledge, wisdom, and experiences to be at least equal to mainstream perspectives. The public must be made aware of the need for tools that are sensitive to Aboriginal learners."* (PPSI Respondent)

The IAHLA institutes consistently cited the need for cultural relevancy of assessment tools and processes. They also cited the following critical elements: learning styles; comfortable, welcoming, non-threatening and supporting environment; student-focused; clear instructions; oral component; the empowerment of learners; and, ongoing training.

## 4.11 RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE SURVEY RESULTS

Respondents at both IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions have modified their assessment tools, processes and environments to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners. There is strong support for further development of an assessment methodology that is culturally relevant and provides an accurate analysis of a prospective student's abilities and readiness for upgrading or post-secondary education. Respondents also indicated the need to modify the assessment environment to make it more welcoming and culturally relevant. In many cases, assessments are offered in the community so that transportation and financial barriers are minimized.

Respondents at PPSI and IAHLA institutes are supportive of the need for further development of assessment tools for Aboriginal adult learners. Twenty-three percent (23%) and fifty-five percent (55%) of the PPSI respondents indicated that they had modified their assessment tools and assessment administration processes respectively. Thirty-three percent (33%) and fifty-six percent (56%) of the IAHLA institute respondents

indicated that they had modified their assessment tools and assessment administration processes respectively.

Furthermore, forty-five percent (45%) of the PPSI respondents used their own in-house assessment tool and forty-six (46%) of IAHLA institute respondents use their own in-house assessment tools.

> *"Since this is being raised by IAHLA we are exploring the ways in which we might improve assessment of Aboriginal learners."* (PPSI respondent)

In order to implement emergent tools and processes, support must be provided at a provincial and national level to ensure support and consistency for all students.

> "*This is a complex issue that needs attention on a provincial and national level. The initiative needs to be appropriately funded and orchestrated to be successful. Having a process somewhat rooted in legislation would be the way to address the need and the appropriate response."* (PPSI respondent)

## Recommendations

1. Assessment tools should be framed in a manner that allows students to see the feedback as an opportunity for self-reflection, planning and growth.
2. Assessment is part of the whole learning process. It must to be an integrated process that provides seamless transition into public post-secondary. It must be embraced within the community and practiced by instructors and administrators at both IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions.
3. The assessment tool should include culturally-relevant material (e.g. essay topics, reading samples). The tools should provide students with the opportunity to include cultural leadership experience, and an oral examination component.
4. The assessment tool should be accessible to students, incorporating measures that assess various learning styles.
5. In developing the Better Learner Assessment, the following strengths have been identified by respondents and should be incorporated: accurate placement for range of levels; flexibility; ease of admission selection process; ease of administration and evaluation; community-based delivery; year-round availability; good correlation between placement from assessment and successful completion of courses; lack of time constraint; online availability for easy access; cultural sensitivity; discipline specificity; choice to complete assessment, as opposed to imposition; flexibility in delivery; welcoming environment;

individualized student-focused process; and, less stressful than standardized testing.

6. Respondents at both IAHLA institutes and PPSI indicated the need to form relationships with prospective students. Building a relationship helps students develop confidence and trust. This relationship should continue throughout the assessment process and beyond, from the initial inquiry through to the debriefing process.
7. In developing the assessment tool, it is also vital to consider how the assessment environment can be modified to make students feel more welcomed and comfortable. Considerations include the development of and ongoing relationships with staff members, the inclusion of Aboriginal staff members, and a welcoming space.
8. The development of the Better Learner Assessment must be supported and mandated at a provincial level, as this will provide a philosophical shift that will ensure that it is utilized through the post-secondary education system.
9. The next step of this project should be to hold focus groups of assessment practitioners and Aboriginal learners in PPSIs and IAHLA institutes to further delve into specific applications of the findings and conclusions of this survey in the assessment process. Only after such focus groups, will the project team be able to make specific recommendations on tools, processes and the assessment environment, which can be tested, in pilot projects.

# 5. PRACTITIONER AND ABORGINAL ADULT LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS

As indicated in the Methodology section of this report, focus groups of assessment practitioners, Aboriginal adult learners and other stakeholder groups were held by HCS in four regions in November 2010. The profile of participants is provided in Table 3.

**Table 3: Profile of Focus Group Participants**

| Focus Group | IAHLA Institutes | Public Post-Secondary Institutions | Other | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Greater Vancouver | 3 | 6 | 3 | 12 |
| Vancouver Island | 7 (2 students) | 3 (1 student) | 0 | 10 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| B.C. Interior | 5 (2 students) | 1 | 3 | 9 |
| Northern B.C. | 1 | 5 (2 students) | 0 | 6 |
| **Total** | **16** | **15** | **6** | **37** |

Participants included seven students, and the Northern BC focus group was done via teleconference.

### Organizing Framework for Focus Group Data

As previously noted, the questions posed to the focus groups were based on themes derived from the Better Learner Assessment Project Survey, and as such they formed a natural organizational framework to begin analysis of the information obtained through the focus groups. In addition, it became apparent that focus group participants organized their stories temporally (pre-assessment, during the assessment and post-assessment). As such, this also became part of the initial organizational framework. Lists of focus topics and reoccurring themes, thoughts and ideas taken from the transcribed notes and organized as described above, are attached as Appendix 7.

## 5.1 THEMES AND SUB-THEMES IN THE FOCUS GROUP RESPONSES

### Community-Based Assessments

A theme that emerged clearly in the focus group data is that assessment of Aboriginal adult learners needs to be community-based. This was stated by participants in each participant category in each focus group. Most participants agreed that PPSIs, where feasible, should send staff to the communities to conduct assessments. Alternatively, institutions might send assessments into the communities to be conducted by trained community members. Either way, it should be a community-based and community-led activity from the first inquiry about assessment through the post-assessment phase. One participant from a PPSI stated*, "It is important that we go to them or to the campus closest to their community, so we do whatever it takes and whatever the community says we need to do."*

This statement implies consultation with the community regarding the proper protocol and this was noted as an important part of this process. Another participant from a PPSI notes that her institution has started to go into First Nations communities to engage students in their own community and provide them with information. Prospective students however, must go to the institution to write the assessment.

The involvement of the community is also important in the post-assessment phase. One participant noted that in his community:

> *"Sometimes children and other family representatives are part of the selection process... [for students applying for band funding]. Elders, children, and family workers, or whatever they need to be successful in the program" [participate in this process].*

Although assessment in the learner's community is both desirable and preferred, it is also clear that community, for many of the participants, is more than just location. It signifies learners feeling comfortable and supported in the assessment process wherever it occurs. Inside or outside of the community, learners need to have available to them whomever and whatever allows them to feel safe and comfortable. Participants note that this may mean that a trusted mentor or Elder can sit with them during the assessment. It may mean that a prayer is said or there is time set aside for a song or a dance prior to the assessment. In this regard, if the assessment is not taken to the community, the community is still part of the assessment process.

For assessments that must for whatever reason, take place outside of a learner's community (generally at a PPSI), participants note that a process needs to be in place that ensures that the Indigenous support services for that institution are contacted prior to the assessment so that they can offer support to the student from the first meeting through the post-assessment stage. One participant, who works as an academic advisor for Aboriginal students at a PPSI, noted that it would be helpful if the Education Co-ordinators at her institution would notify her when Aboriginal students had appointments for assessments, or educational counselling. She noted that often if students are on campus to access upgrading, they don't know about the social or cultural support that is available to them. If she was informed about these students, she would arrange to meet them on campus and go with them to their appointment or assessment. She further noted that Aboriginal adult learners often struggle with the large group settings for assessments, are not prepared for the amount of time it will take, and sometimes have not even eaten breakfast. This participant also noted that assessment results are most often sent by PPSIs via Canada Post, and often state results in terms such as, "At this time, you do not meet the standard for this program". She commented that this can be devastating for an Aboriginal adult learner who has already struggled just to put their foot in the door of the institution. "*Tell them about the letter they will get in the mail, so that they will understand."* She has been trying to get her institution to change the letter, and says she is working hard at her institution to raise awareness about the whole assessment process for Aboriginal adult learners.

It is important to note that IAHLA institutes sometimes struggle with providing a supportive, empowering experience for learners in regards to assessment, although the barriers to this may be different than they are for a PPSI. Quite simply stated by one IAHLA participant, *"There is a challenge to wearing multiple hats; there is a lack of dollars to serve all of the people".* Many IAHLA institutes have only one staff member who is often the administrator, instructor, education counsellor, and life coach for each learner who comes through the door of their institute. Although an awareness of what is needed may be there, time and financial constraints mean it doesn't always happen. A clear and user-friendly assessment process will be helpful to these institutes.

### Relationship-Based Assessments

Participants clearly stated that assessment must be relationship-based. Relationship is important in the pre-assessment or preparation phase, during the assessment, and post-assessment. One administrator at an IAHLA institute notes that:

> "*It starts as soon as they walk in the door...I have been around [in the community] a long time, so people know me and I know their families. I try to find something in common that we can talk about--their children, transportation, family support, childcare."*

One student suggested that another student could conduct an initial interview with a prospective student. The student could start with simple questions that build relationship like, "Where are you from?" Building relationships with students creates a comfortable, supportive environment and provides the student with a space where they can ask questions and become engaged in the excitement of learning.

A sub-theme of relationship-based assessments is **student-centred learning**. Student-centred learning is learning that flows from the needs of the students, rather than the needs of staff and administration. One participant asked, *"How do we build the opportunity to hear the story and realize all the stories that exist in this person. It's not all about reading and writing."* One participant from a PPSI said regarding current assessment processes:

> "*We are trying to draw people* [Aboriginal adult learners] *into education and yet we immediately alienate them* [through the assessment process]*. We are* [supposed to be] *reaching out to those who have failed, to assist them in being successful."*

This participant then shared a story that exemplifies student-centred learning. An Aboriginal adult learner who could not read or write became this participant's student. This learner's passion was rap. The participant engaged this student with music

software programs. In order to succeed at his passion, this learner eventually decided that he needed to learn to read and write. Within a year and a half, this learner had completed two courses in building and construction and scored the highest in the class in his test results. Student-centred learning flows out of an assessment process that is relationship-based.

Another participant from an IAHLA institute noted that at their institute they focus on creating a family environment for students right from the beginning. *"It is important for students to get to know themselves and each other*." At this institute, they offer a breakfast program and life skills classes where this can happen. A student participant noted that what helped him to be successful after failing at various institutes, was "*a relaxed and welcoming environment...I worked with an Elder who was an amazing inspiration and support. It felt like a community there...A family environment made me want to keep coming back."* Another student participant noted that, "*Aboriginal people are social and I learn best when I'm learning with other people. Why not bring this into the assessment process? Bring another student/friend/Elder to provide peer support...makes you feel like you are at home."*

One PPSI takes relationship-based assessment to another level by providing the opportunity for Aboriginal adult learners to receive credit, based on their life experience. This involves relating to the individual learner at their level, carefully listening to their stories, and gauging readiness. "*Sometimes",* he noted, *"they accept people into 3rd year without doing 1st or 2nd year. Drive, determination and self-awareness are key factors to consider".* In regards to hearing the Aboriginal adult learner's stories, one participant noted that, (institutions) *"need to provide a space where students can open up to you, or they won't feel comfortable 'tooting their own horn', as it's not culturally appropriate to do this".*

## Flexible Assessments

Participants believe that administrators and staff at all institutions need to be flexible in regards to assessing Aboriginal adult learners, and that flexibility needs to start at a policy level. In addition, each administrator, academic advisor or instructor who is involved in assessing Aboriginal adult learners needs to "*be aware of all of the variables that may affect the Aboriginal adult learner and take the time needed to be sensitive to the individual learner's abilities."* This necessitates taking the time to find out about a learner's community and culture. This relates back to policy, as many PPSIs have time limits (per student), that they impose on academic advisors. One PPSI participant noted that they have a 15-minute time limit per student at their institution. This of course, does not allow for relationship-based assessment. The additional costs of relationship-based assessment this participant notes, need to be recognized and supported by administration.

Flexibility also needs to be extended to writing assessments. The majority of participants in all focus groups believe that assessments should never be timed, even with respect to standardized tests that have strict time allowances built into them. One student stated, "*There shouldn't be time limits on assessment tests. What if you're having a bad day and not able to concentrate, even though you know the material? Time restrictions induce panic...and do not provide an accurate score."* One administrator participant explained that by removing the time limit, students are even able to complete the assessment on separate days if this works better for them. Another participant noted that for many older Aboriginal adult learners, a timed test may be reminiscent of Residential School and negative emotions and memories that are associated with this experience. "*Timing is a real trigger, especially for residential school survivors".* Yet another participant noted that many people, especially if they have been out of school for a long time, simply don't know how to handle timed tests. Institutional policy may need to reflect flexibility around timing to provide consistency and sensitivity in this area.

It was also suggested by some participants that learners with low reading and writing skills should be given the opportunity to take assessments orally. Given the strong oral tradition which is part of Indigenous culture, many learners may have high verbal skills, as well as strong comprehension, memory and problem-solving skills, which will be undetected if they are required to solely write the assessment.

Some students also speak their Indigenous language and hence, English may be a second language. Even for those Aboriginal adult learners who speak English as their first language, they may be only second or third generation English speakers. The argument was posed at one focus group that there should be some consideration for Aboriginal adult learners taking assessments as ESL (English-as-a-second language) students. Considerable thought and effort has been put into developing alternative methods of assessing the English and linguistic skills of ESL students that may be of benefit to Aboriginal adult learners.

Participants were clear that preparation for standardized assessments should be the norm and suggested that it is unethical not to prepare students for assessments. *"Going in 'blind', you'll be stumped and feel frustrated, especially for people who don't like to do tests."* Another participant stated that, *"You don't want to be at a lower level than you are able to perform at. It takes practice to get reacquainted with math, reading and writing."*

Many institutions/institutes already provide assessment preparation in various forms. At one IAHLA institute, learners receive a package prior to the assessment that includes sample questions and "mini-lessons". Another IALHA institute notes that at their institute they prepare learners for the CAAT (Canadian Adult Achievement Test). Learners are

provided with ten pages of sample questions. Tutorials are also offered in which students are able to review and receive instruction and even write practice assessments. Some PPSIs have preparation material on-line that learners can access to prepare for an assessment. One participant notes that in his view, *"Preparation is warming up the brain before the assessment."* A number of participants agreed to share their assessment preparation materials with this project. These materials can be used or modeled in the pilot projects and subsequent assessment training which will be offered to IAHLA institutes and PPSIs.

One IAHLA institute extends the flexibility around assessments to the physical spaces that students may write assessments. He noted that students need to feel comfortable and safe when writing assessments. If the size or lay-out of the space is intimidating or uncomfortable, then the student should be provided an alternative space in which to write the assessment.

### Ethical Assessments

For a number of participants, flexible assessments and ethical assessments go hand-in-hand. In the pre-assessment phase, administrators need to think about why a formal assessment might be necessary for any particular learner. One participant noted that assessments should not be linked to bean-counting and funding and went on to say that she believes this to be unethical.

Participants stated that the assessment process should never shame a prospective learner. Administrators and instructors need to make sure that they have let go of preconceived notions they may have about an individual Aboriginal adult learner, or Aboriginal adult learners in general. They also need to think about what kind of language they use to speak to learners about assessments, whether in the pre-assessment or post-assessment phase. Educators, like all professionals, have a specialized vocabulary which may alienate and even shame learners. In addition, administrators and instructors need to make sure that the confidentiality of learners is always respected. This may be more problematic in small institutions where community members are known to each other. Assessment materials and results must be treated confidentially. One student stated that it is important to keep the assessment documents confidential, but that students may share their results with other students once they are comfortable with one another. The student cohort can then work as a team, and support each other in areas that have been identified through the assessment process as challenging.

Participants note that in PPSIs, there needs to be a clear procedural link between admissions, academic advisors, and Indigenous support services. One participant noted that many Aboriginal adult learners do not know how to advocate for themselves. *"If an academic advisor tells them something, they will just accept it*." This kind of autocratic

approach is unethical; it also undermines the learner and disengages them from the assessment process, and thus the potential for learning.

## Holistic Assessments

Most participants agree that standardized assessments, if used at all, should be only one part of the assessment process. One participant stated in relation to this, "A o*ne-shot assessment is not an accurate assessment".* Assessing the whole person (i.e. a holistic approach) necessitates involving the learner in their own assessment. One PPSI administrator said that students need to be gauged as to their "spiritual readiness" to learn. "Spiritual readiness" is a concept that might be seen as an irrelevant or even inappropriate concept in a "secular" (PPSI) context. However, Aboriginal culture readily accepts the spiritual realm as part of the world and each individual. Focus group participants used the term "spiritual readiness" to refer to a learner's healthy awareness of personal traits, behaviours, relationships and feelings that might impact learning. A learner's connection to their culture and cultural practices may also be part of spiritual readiness.

Engaging learners in creating portfolios was suggested as one approach to accomplish a holistic assessment. Portfolios can provide a place to gather the student's work and hence provide a demonstration of the learner's academic growth over time. Portfolios can be a means of gathering *bona fide and holistic* assessment material with respect to the learner. Portfolios can include a life time-line, a genealogy, writing samples, poems, art work, video-footage, academic programs of interest, scholarship and funding information, as well as transcripts, certificates and resumes. Creating the portfolio electronically can allow for easy access and on-going modification. A portfolio can also include goal setting, and learner reflection that can be incorporated into a Student Learning Plan. Student Learning Plans have most frequently been used with elementary aged children, but can be an effective way of engaging adult learners in determining their needs as learners, and creating learner objectives to fulfill those needs. A Student Learning Plan, which is revisited on a regular basis, should be a part of the adult student's portfolio.

Holistic assessment necessitates building a relationship with the learner. We need to ask for and listen to their stories. An Elder participant from a PPSI said the following: *"Create your own (assessments) and do a lot of observations-get to really know them-observation and relationship are the best way to do this".* This Elder also told the following story:

> *"There is a story of an Inuit woman who had FASD [Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder], who was trying to complete her studies. She told her instructors*

*that she was not dumb; she just took longer than others. It is like the rotten onion...you have to keep peeling to find the whole onion inside".*

Assessment should be about empowering the learner. This student scored poorly on standardized assessments, but she knew she could learn. Her instructors were prepared to listen to her and support her. She has successfully continued to pursue her studies and is receiving appropriate educational support.

One participant stated that the whole education system needs to be decolonized as it is based on tenets that are discriminatory and ineffectual with respect to the Aboriginal adult learner. It should be noted that this participant, who is a senior administrator at a PPSI, questioned the whole concept of assessment as it is commonly understood and used in institutions today. He believes the concept to be outdated and argues that PPSIs should instead be asking what they need to do to modify both the recruitment and assessment process to meet the needs of the learner.

### Culturally-Relevant Assessment Tools

Although it was not central to the focus group discussion, each focus group spent some time discussing the available assessment tools, and it is evident that there are a variety of assessment tools used by IAHLA institutes and PPSIs. These have been reported in the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessments Project Survey Report* and will not be repeated in this report. Whichever standardized assessment tool is used to assess Aboriginal adult learners with respect to literacy, participants note problems both with language and relevancy of the material.

One administrator from an IAHLA institute who uses the CAAT (Canadian Adult Achievement Test) with learners said, *"One of the stories they have to read is about driving a car. Lots of people don't own cars or drive, so it is irrelevant".* Another IAHLA administrator noted that in general, both wording and examples used in standardized assessments are unfamiliar to their learners.

Another instructor complaining about the use of language in standardized assessments, stated that we should be encouraging learners to write in the vernacular (unique way of speaking English in particular communities and locations), rather than requiring them to read and write from the outset in mainstream academic English. She notes that there are many examples of recognized Aboriginal authors that write their stories entirely in the vernacular. This participant encourages her students to write in the vernacular style, and encourages them to submit their writing for publication, thus building culturally-relevant literacy resources.

Although it is not within the scope of the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project* to create a new assessment tool, most participants acknowledged the need for this to happen in the future. One participant said of the available assessment tools, *"We are not going to succeed if we keep on using someone else's yardstick".* The standardized assessment tools available today are for the most part, culturally inappropriate and new tools need to be developed which more accurately measure the literacy skills of Aboriginal adult learner.

## 5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS EMERGING FROM THE FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Based on the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project Survey Report* and the *IAHLA Better Learner Assessment Project Focus Groups,* the following recommendations are provided as critical success factors in regards to an assessment process for Aboriginal adult learners.

### Pre-Assessment

Assessment should begin and end in the community where feasible. Public post-secondary nstitutions need to engage the community and follow the lead of the community in this process. Where possible, assessments should be held in the learner's community, where cultural and social supports are easily accessed. Where community-based assessment is not possible, admissions departments and academic advisors at PPSIs need to be procedurally linked to the Indigenous support services on campus. This is critical, and cannot be a "hit and miss" connection. This link needs to happen before the assessment occurs and ideally at the learner's first contact with the PPSI. It should continue during student's tenure at the institution.

Assessment needs to be relationship-based, beginning with the first contact with the learner, whether this occurs at the information desk, registration, or the Aboriginal support services. Institutions must create a welcoming environment at the front line. IAHLA institutes often excel at this, but may sometimes be hampered by lack of staff and funding. However, at IAHLA institutes lacking staff, senior students can be engaged to mentor new learners and begin the relationship building so crucial to assessment and learning. Senior students can be taught to do initial intake interviews, help new students with forms, help prepare them for assessments, and help them access the cultural and social supports available at their institute. This model can also be employed at PPSIs through campus Indigenous support services. "Learners helping learners" is potentially a "win-win" for overburdened and under-financed administrations in IAHLA institutes and PPSIs, as well as the learners themselves, who will gain both confidence and skill in this role.

PPSI's administrators need to revise policy that limits contact time between advisors and learners. Limiting student contact to 15- or 20-minute time slots clearly does not meet the needs of Aboriginal adult learners.

Preparing for assessments needs to be established as the norm at all institutions. At the very least, students should be provided with preparation materials which are based on the assessment they will write, well in advance of writing the assessment. Ideally, preparation tutorials should be offered to learners. These tutorials should begin with simple concepts and progress through more complex concepts. They should use questions similar to the assessment in form and content. Standardized assessments should be understood by instructors and administrators and framed for learners as a starting point for assessment, that is only as a small part of who the learner is at any point in time.

### Writing Assessments

Whether the assessment takes place in the community or at a PPSI, learners need to feel safe and comfortable when writing an assessment. Beginning the assessment with a prayer and/or a song may help to facilitate this, as will permitting supports such as mentors, Elders and family to sit with the learner while they are writing the assessment. Allowing for smaller groups of Aboriginal adult learners to write together may help to create a safe environment at a PPSI. There should be no time restrictions with respect to writing assessments and policy at PPSIs may need to be changed to allow for this. Healthy snacks and coffee or juice should be made available to learners writing assessments.

Clearly, standardized assessments should be only one part of the assessment process. The goal is to assess the whole person including their spiritual readiness to learn. Having learners build portfolios may be a way to facilitate a more holistic assessment, and will allow learners to share their stories in a non-threatening, culturally appropriate manner. Finding a way to hear each learner's story so should be a goal of assessment. Including an Educational Learning Plan is a positive way to engage adult learners in setting realistic goals and should always be part of assessment.

### Post-Assessment

Learners should never be shamed intentionally or unintentionally at any part of the assessment process. Assessment results need to be kept confidential. The language used to report results needs to be clear, simple and positive. Where possible, results should be reported to learners in person, not by letter. Follow-up interviews should be scheduled with students to review results, which can be used (never exclusively) to inform the learner's next academic steps. With respect to PPSIs, this can step be

accomplished through the campus Aboriginal support services, and the BC Aboriginal Post-secondary Coordinators.

Most importantly, learners need to be involved in and empowered through the assessment process. Assessment should never be something that is done to the learner, but rather an activity through which the learner is enabled and galvanized. Empowering students as learners should be a goal of education and this should begin with the assessment process.

# 6. PILOT PROJECT: TESTING ASSESSMENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

As indicated previously, NVIT has been a key partner throughout the BLA project. It has done a lot of research and program delivery work related to literacy and learner assessment. NVIT is also in a unique position in that is both an Aboriginal-controlled higher learning institute *and* a public post-secondary institution.

IAHLA, the Steering Committee and HCS were fortunate to have NVIT agree to implement an assessment pilot project based on the findings of the BLA research. NVIT's Kylie Cavaliere (Director of Enrolment Services & Registrar) reviewed the BLA research and devised a Better Learner Assessment Checklist (see next page); and used this as a framework to guide the implementation of pilot project. NVIT agreed to document the pilot process and findings and allow these to be used as part of the BLA project and this report. The BLA Checklist was refined as a result of the pilot experience.

In keeping with the earlier BLA research findings, the Checklist was organized according to three stages of assessment: pre-assessment; assessment; and post-assessment. As indicated, the pilot was a community-based model and it was conducted at three sites during February, 2011: Seabird Island Band (upper Fraser Valley, northeast of Agassiz); Saulteau First Nation (east end of Moberly Lake, northwest of Chetwynd); and Bonaparte Indian Band (west of Cache Creek). The process and findings are discussed below.

## 6.1 PRE-ASSESSMENT

Although not all components of the Best Practices Checklist can be incorporated into every pre-assessment situation, it is highly recommended that whenever possible an institutional representative visit the assessment site prior to the actual assessment date. Ideally, the representative will meet with community representatives to identify the space and resources available. During the pre-assessment visit, the NVIT representative will host a group session with those individuals requiring an assessment. The purposes of

## Better Learner Assessment Checklist Used for Project Pilots

Community:_____Program: _____Delivery Date: _____

| Objective | Best Practices | Status<br>G=Get started<br>I = In Progress<br>C= Complete | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Pre-assessment** | | | |
| Build relationships with community and develop an understanding of learner needs in the community. | Community Education contact with community: Best practice would be to encourage the community to have the community members assessed before determining which program would be delivered in the community. This is part of ensuring learner needs are met and learner success is priority. Supports NVIT's learner-centred philosophy. | | |
| Increase accessibility to post-secondary education | Plan a time where an Academic Planner can travel to the community to facilitate an assessment session. | | |
| Ensure a quality experience for all | Evaluate the available facilitation space and technology. This is critical in ensuring the environment and assessment tools are conducive to a seamless, yet effective process. | | |
| Provide opportunities to effectively prepare learner to write the assessment | Plan to prepare students to write the assessment by offering subject specific reviews. If this is not possible, have practice material available to provide the learners a few days prior to the assessment date.<br>While conducting site visit, pre-schedule a group assessment orientation to dispel myths and fears of an assessment. | | |
| Provide learners with a relevant and appropriate experience | Work with the community and encourage them to provide Elder and cultural support prior, during, and after the assessment event. This may assist in reducing anxiety and stress related to the assessment | | |
| Critical administrative processes which are purposeful and relevant to the learners and their communities. | Establish a list of community-based options and resources for the learners who score lower than the requirement for a particular program admission or below the Math and English level that is being planned for delivery. A learner should not be left feeling hopeless.<br>Ask learners to sign a Release of Information related to assessment results to assist Ed Coordinators in understanding overall learner needs in the community. | | |

©2011 Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

| During assessment | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Create a welcoming and relaxing environment conducive to assessment completion and learner achievement. | On assessment day greet students and try to relate to them in some way. Try to find something in common to talk about so they feel comfortable and safe.<br>Open with cultural practices supported by the community.<br>Provide time and space for learners to ask questions and acknowledge fears.<br>Share that there are no time limits and they are welcome to take breaks.<br>If possible have others around that the students know – those who can relate to, support and encourage the learner.<br>Have nutritional supplies on hand. Often learners are not aware of how long an assessment takes, will not have had breakfast or brought a lunch. | | |
| Create a student record | Have students fill out Admission Application forms prior to commencing assessment. This is recommended so that results can be entered into Colleague Student once the final evaluation is available. This also ensures NVIT has the contact information for its potential learners. | | |
| Ensure the learner understands the purpose of an assessment | Remind the student that this is not a test but a snapshot of where their skills are at present – completing the assessment is the first step of their success plan. | | |
| Embrace the social orientation of the Aboriginal culture | Be prepared for, and open to, collaboration in the assessment room. Establish guidelines and set parameters if and when spontaneous collaboration occurs. | | |
| Support and encourage demonstration of learner knowledge | When a learner has a question, the Planner may reword the question or provide a similar scenario so the learner understands the intent of the question.<br>When possible, accommodate diagnosed learning disabilities. For example, a learner with a disability such as dyslexia may benefit from having someone read the questions to the learner.<br>Identify and encourage opportunities for the learner to demonstrate their skill level – dialogue, letter writing, problem solving. | | |

©2011 Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

| Post-assessment | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Create a culture of acceptance | Be open to the realities, possibilities and results.<br>When evaluating the assessment results, do not allow bias resulting from learner appearance or behavior during the assessment. This may not be a true reflection of the learner, and may also be behavior resulting from related trauma and stress. | | |
| Identify the strengths and opportunities of the assessment process and tools from those experiencing the event. | Prepare and distribute an assessment evaluation relevant to the delivery site and purpose as well as the process and tools.<br>Encourage their oral story of the experience. | | |
| Construct relevant, individualized educational and career attainment plans. | Discuss with each learner their career goals in relation to the subject specific results of the assessment. This supports the assessor and learner in their efforts to establish the best plan of action.<br>Discover the unique needs of each learner by asking questions and listening to the answers.<br>Include the learner each step of the way – ask them if they agree with the results and if not, why…listen again | | |
| Build learner esteem and confidence. | Always focus on the positive - encourage learner by discussing the first step in their journey<br>Open their minds to the possibilities.<br>Strength-based advising - sharing the number of correct answers as well as the types of questions to which they responded correctly – identify their strength and how to build on that strength. | | |
| Build learner and community capacity | Find creative and innovative ways to make it happen.<br>A learner-centred solution may not include NVIT<br>Prepare a report for the community that highlights the academic needs of learners in their community | | |
| Develop meaningful relationships with the learner | Provide face-to-face feedback.<br>If face to face is not possible, call the learner and have a complete dialogue regarding the results, opportunities and priorities.<br>Follow up with a letter that reinforces their strengths, success and options. | | |
| Encourage learner achievement | When discussing education plans with students ensure they are aware of the academic, cultural, personal and financial supports available in their community. | | |
| Promote learner independence | Enrolment Services team members must train and assist learners with the admission and registration process. Teach and encourage students to register themselves online while being sensitive to technology capacity in the community. | | |

©2011 Nicola Valley Institute of Technology

the group session are to dispel assessment myths and reduce assessment anxiety. Prior to departure, the NVIT representative confirms the date and time of the assessment session. Additionally, a plan will be in place for the community to provide spiritual and cultural supports, as well as math and English reviews. The pre-assessment visit also allows NVIT to determine which assessment tool is most appropriate.

### Seabird Island Band

NVIT Administrators visited Seabird Island Band the week prior the anticipated assessment date to make arrangements for the assessment of applicants interested in the NVIT Health Care Assistant program scheduled for delivery in the community. This visit provided NVIT an opportunity to build relationships with the community, identify resources (space and technology) required to administer assessments, and become aware of what the community was hoping to accomplish through the assessment process. Through this visit, NVIT Administrators became aware of the Seabird Island Band Education Fair. The Fair was created to bring together service providers for the Health Care Assistant program, which included RCMP, Fraser Valley Health, and funding providers. During a meeting with the Seabird Island Band, NVIT Administrators, the Seabird Island Health Care Assistant program coordinator, and Fair organizers, it was determined that during the Fair NVIT would host English and math review sessions in the morning and conduct assessment sessions in the afternoon. Given the seamless access to internet, NVIT decided to use an electronic tool for assessing. In the end, NVIT decided to send a Dean to facilitate the math and English reviews, an Academic Planner to coordinate and evaluate the assessment process and an Admissions Officer to collect the applications and supporting documentation. The concept of the Fair was excellent in that it provided applicants with access to the services and an opportunity to gather and provide the non-academic pre-requisites all at the same time. NVIT's goal was to offer program admission on-site.

### Saulteau First Nation

NVIT's Community Education department worked with the Academic Planning office at NVIT to coordinate and administer in-community assessments for the applicants interested in NVIT's Bridging to Trades program. NVIT recommended that the community arrange to have an Elder available to open the assessment session. Likewise, it was recommended that the community offer both a math and English refresher for the participants the day before the scheduled assessment session. Given the travel requirements, a pre-site visit was not conducted; however, the Community Education department worked closely with Saulteau First Nation representatives to discover the resources in the community with respect to technology and physical space. Based on the information provided by the community, it was determined that NVIT would conduct paper-based assessments rather than using a tool requiring technology. NVIT's goal was to ensure that prior to returning to campus, each applicant would have the

benefit of a one-on-one meeting with the Academic Planner to learn of the assessment results in relation to their preparedness for the Bridging to Trades program and other educational opportunities.

### Bonaparte Indian Band

NVIT's Community Education department worked with the Academic Planning office at NVIT to coordinate and administer in-community assessments for the applicants interested in College Readiness programming being delivered in the community. In accordance with the recommended best practices, an NVIT representative attended the community to coordinate the spiritual and cultural support as well as to recommend that the community offer both a math and English refresher for the participants the day before the scheduled assessment session. As the Bonaparte Indian Band facilities were being renovated, during the pre-assessment visit, NVIT was able to determine that a paper-based assessment tool would be the most practical approach given the current improvements underway in the computer access area. NVIT's goal was to meet one-on-one with each participant to inform of the educational opportunities available to the individual learner.

## Pre-Assessment Successes and Opportunities

In all three instances, the pre-assessment planning was incredibly valuable. That said, pre-assessment planning does not negate the unexpected that occurs on assessment day. Although it is great to come with a plan in hand, it is critical to have a Plan B. This is particularly important when working with remote and rural communities. For example, given the travel requirements to visit Saulteau First Nation, NVIT decided to use a paper-based assessment tool rather than a technology based tool. Although the technology-based tool provides results quicker, had there been any challenges with computer and/or internet access, the assessments would not have occurred. Likewise, it is important to note that when events are planned, they do not necessarily come together as originally intended. A key outcome of pre-assessment planning is to ensure appropriate resources and alternative plans are developed and that the resources and plans are reasonable and accessible. Additionally, prior to attending the community to host the assessment session, NVIT believes it is beneficial for the assessor to understand what community-based resources are available to the learner whose results indicate they do not currently meet the admission requirements for the planned program delivery. This may include resources for upgrading, an alternate program schedule, etc. If at all possible, it is recommended that communities arrange for assessing and receive an overall analysis of their learners' educational needs prior to determining their community-based program offering.

## 6.2 ASSESSMENT

Community-based assessments are an excellent way to engage adult learners in dialogue related to educational and career planning. The needs and processes in each community will vary depending on the pre-assessment evaluation and plan; however, it is encouraged that assessors acknowledge and implement many of the basic principles identified within the Best Practices Checklist. Following is a brief description of the assessment experience in each of the described communities.

### Seabird Island Band

As determined through the pre-assessment planning, NVIT's Dean, Academic Planner, and Admissions and Registration Officer attended the Seabird Island Band Health Care Assistant Educational Fair. Once the parties were on-site, it was quickly determined that about half of the expected participants were in attendance and it was unlikely that there would be time or space to facilitate either of the math or English reviews. Likewise, there was not a quiet space for learners to undertake their assessment activities. Although computers were unavailable, NVIT did bring laptops that they were able to set up in the forum and access wireless internet. As the process was part of the community Fair, access to Elders and other support persons was plentiful. The Fair approach to the admissions process was innovative and creative and is a format others may want to consider.

Overall, a minimal number of learners completed their assessments that day. Those who did participate in the assessments were reminded that the assessment was just that – a picture of their skill level at that exact moment and in no way a test. They were also reminded that the purpose of the assessment was to support their success in their learning and assist them in meeting their educational and career goals. Participants were not subject to time limits and were able to take breaks as needed. Most of the participants did not realize the assessment would take so long and as such did not appropriately plan for snacks or refreshments. NVIT anticipated this need and came armed with apples, bananas, granola bars and juice boxes. Supporting the learners' nutritional needs is critical. NVIT did return to Seabird Island Band again the following week to host assessment sessions with the remaining learners. Overall 12 assessments were started and completed, the learners assessed well and the process seemed to work. In both instances the assessments were evaluated on-site and the Academic Planner provided the feedback and context of the results with respect to the learner's educational and career plans. Unfortunately, given the multi-day approach to assessing, NVIT was not able to offer on-site admission to all applicants.

## Saulteau First Nation

Due to conflicting scheduling, an Academic Planner was unable to attend the community to facilitate the assessment process. A representative from NVIT's Community Education department attended the community to invigilate the assessment process. Prior to leaving campus, the invigilator met with the Academic Planner to review the goals and objectives of the Best Practices and to develop a plan for the evaluation of the assessments. As in the Seabird Island Band pilot, the invigilator attended the community and was equipped with nutritional supplies. No time limits were specified. Unfortunately, the community was unable to provide the math and English review prior to assessment day as was requested by the Community Education department at NVIT. Additionally, the community was unable to provide Elder support for the day, but did provide soup and bannock for lunch. Prior to commencing the assessment, learners were reminded that the purpose of the assessment was to support their success in their learning and assist them in meeting their educational and career goals. Participants were not subject to time limits and were able to take breaks as needed.

In the end, 19 learners attended and completed the assessment session. Of importance, and unique to this delivery was that the participants sought assistance related to a math question. As the assessments were being completed at the community learning centre, the invigilator actually sought the assistance of the centre's math instructor. The math instructor reviewed the question and then provided a brief review of the principles and theories behind a similar question. This simple review was reminder enough that it relaxed the learners and reduced the anxiety and stress of the math question. Providing this opportunity to the learners was significant in that rather than quitting, the learners went on to complete the assessment. This situation directly supports the need for a review prior to the assessment.

On average, it took learners anywhere from 3 to 6 hours to complete the assessment. As participants submitted their assessment, the invigilator marked the assessments and then faxed them to an Academic Planner for evaluation. The Academic Planner then emailed the completed evaluation and placement recommendation back to the invigilator. The invigilator shared results with as many learners as possible; however, with 19 completers and a constricted travel schedule, there was not enough time to meet with each individual. To accommodate face-to-face results sharing, the learners signed a freedom of information release to their community education coordinator. NVIT shared the results with the coordinator who then passed on the results and opportunities to the learners directly.

## Bonaparte Indian Band

This particular pilot was the most satisfying for the Academic Planner. Most of the elements and variables anticipated during the pre-assessment planning became reality.

This was the smallest participant group overall, with only 5 learners attending the assessment session. As requested, the community provided an Elder to open the day. The Elder started the assessment session by sharing his stories and reflecting on the opportunities the learners have to embrace education. Once the story telling was complete, the Elder sang a prayer and played the drum for the learners. The spiritual and cultural support provided by the Elder seemed to relax the learners and reduce overall anxiety in the room. Unfortunately, the community was unable to provide the math and English review prior to assessment day as was requested by the Community Education department at NVIT. Similar to the other two pilots, the Academic Planner attended the community equipped with nutritional supplies. Prior to commencing the assessment, learners were reminded that the purpose of the assessment was to support their success in their learning and assist them in meeting their educational and career goals. Participants were not subject to time limits and were able to take breaks as needed.

All 5 participants completed the assessment within 3 to 5 hours. Of importance and unique to this pilot was the collaboration of the participants. During a particular math question, one of the participants asked if they could ask a question. The Academic Planner advised that neither she nor the other participants could share the answer, but that if anyone was willing, they could share possible approaches solving a similar equation. It appears as though the ability to have the collaboration reduced the anxiety and frustration stemming from the math portion of the assessment. The learners only collaborated on the one question, and although it reduced the stress and anxiety, there was not a common response.

The most rewarding part of this pilot was that all 5 participants completed and that the Academic Planner was able to mark, evaluate and share the results with the learner prior to leaving the community. The Planner left with a high level of confidence that the participants found the process fairly painless and had an accurate reflection of their current skill level and a plan to enhance that skill level in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the learner.

### Assessment Successes and Opportunities

Between all 3 pilot sites, there were significant variables with respect to participant numbers, facilities and objectives. The experiential learning for NVIT in conducting the pilot sites highlighted the need for institutions to allocate sufficient time and resources to the entire process as well as the necessity for the institution to be flexible and responsive to the community. Although pre-assessment planning is important, it is critical that those going into the community to facilitate the assessments are capable of instantaneous problem solving, technology trouble shooting and constantly being optimistic and responsive to the needs of the community and its learners. Even with the

best of plans, both in the community and at the institution, the unexpected occurs and institutions must be prepared to anticipate the unanticipated.

Being open to the concept of collaboration and/or sharing between participants is important. We are not suggesting announcing the opportunity or an encouragement of it, but rather permit the natural occurrence as it arises. In these instances, the Planner will need to be clear with the participants that answer sharing is not permitted; but participants can share approaches to a similar question. The one caveat, however, is that if a participant is sharing incorrect information, it may lead the whole group down the wrong path. It is important for the Planner not to interfere with the organic process; however, they may be required to pose questions during the collaboration to encourage a systemic look at the question. The overall benefit of this approach is the anticipated anxiety reduction of the participants and the overall increase in assessment completers – not necessarily whether or not participants responded appropriately to a singular question.

Time and resources are equally critical to a successful assessment session. This includes everything from providing nutritional supplies to ensuring Academic Planners have sufficient time in the community to fully complete the assessment process from beginning to end. Likewise, it is critical that the community build in the time and resources to support the learners as well. This includes Elder and cultural support as well as facilitators for a day of math and English review prior to the assessment date.

## *6.3 POST-ASSESSMENT*

The activities related to the post-assessment checklist are as critical as the pre-planning and assessment itself. During the post-assessment period the Planner has a primary opportunity to connect the results with the goals of the learner. It is critical to facilitate discussions in such a way that the participant recognizes the assessment results are about their educational success, and not a barrier.

### Seabird Island Band

On the first day of assessments - the day of the Education Fair put on by the Seabird Island Band - students started the assessments in the afternoon and as a result the Academic Planner ran out of time and was not able to give these students their results on location. There had not been a plan in place for the Planner to stay later to complete this, so assessment results were completed the next day without being able to include the student in the assessment evaluation process. Results were sent to each of the students by mail.

During the second visit, however, the Academic Planner was able to meet with each of the students who completed their assessments. The planner was able to discuss each of their assessment results in private emphasizing each student's strengths and discussing options for developing the skills that dipped below the admission requirements for their desired program of study.

With the program being offered in the Seabird community the Planner was not able to discuss learner support availability (such as the services found on-campus at Student Success Centres).

### Saulteau First Nation

The Academic Planner, although not on location, evaluated the assessments as quickly as possible, and sent the results to the invigilator. The invigilator forwarded the results to the Saulteau First Nation band. Students had all signed "Release of Information" forms; thus, consenting for NVIT to provide the assessment results and recommendations to the Education Coordinator. The Education Coordinator then shared the details with each learner.

The community planned to deliver College Readiness programming. The assessment results assisted the community in determining which courses the majority of their learners required. It is recommended that for future assessment planning, an Academic Planner is scheduled to be on-site to personally discuss the evaluation of the assessment with the learner. This assists in ensuring the best plan of action for each individual learner.

With the program being offered in the Saulteau First Nation, the Planner was unable to discuss learner support availability (such as the services found on-campus at Student Success Centres).

### Bonaparte Indian Band

Similar to the experience at Seabird Island, the Academic Planner was able to meet with each of the students who completed their assessments. During these individual reviews, the planner was able to discuss each learner's assessment results while emphasizing the learner's strengths and identifying the opportunities. These students were planning on upgrading to attend a trades program at another Institution. After their consultations, the learners had a solid plan in place and knew how to start in a way that encouraged overall success.

Once again, with the program being offered in the Bonaparte community, the planner was unable to discuss learner support availability (such as the services found on-campus at Student Success Centres).

### Post-Assessment Successes and Opportunities

Too often learners are discouraged by the results and do not follow up on their educational opportunities. In part, this is because learners have not been adequately informed as to how their assessment results start their journey. The Academic Planner discovered that the most successful and enjoyable experiences resulted from the one-on-one post-assessment sessions. The individual consultations are a powerful time of realization for the learners – particularly with respect to where they are currently and where they can go. Together, the learner and Planner designed realistic and relevant education plans conducive to learner needs and success. The one-on-one sessions also provided an opportunity for the Planner to highlight learner strengths, possibly improving learner self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn. When delivering programs/courses in communities, it is strongly recommended that a support plan be in place with respect to establishing the learning community, developing learner study/organizational skills, and tutoring.

Finally, NVIT believes it is important to share the overall assessment results with the community. NVIT could be supporting the capacity building initiatives of the communities and their learners by reporting back to the community the compiled and masked assessment results. If requested, NVIT may further assist the community by using this data to identify potential educational opportunities and priorities.

## 6.4 CONCLUSIONS RESULTING FROM THE ASSESSMENT PILOT

During the three pilot projects in February, NVIT attempted to apply the basic principles specified on the BLA Checklist. Although not all of the principles may be applicable and/or effective for all assessment sites, the principles originating from the Better Learner Assessment Project can be applied by any post-secondary institution (public and Aboriginal-controlled) desiring to undertake community-based assessments. One consideration may be to make it more generic to be adapted to differing situational or community needs and on-campus learning.

The conclusions of the pilots emphasize the importance of the following factors:

- Significant pre-assessment planning and activities;
- The value of subject-based preparatory reviews prior to assessment;
- Adaptable approaches to address situational needs;
- Sufficient resources and time allocation need to be expanded for all phases of the assessment process;
- Meaningful face-to-face post-assessment dialogue with learner; and,
- Reporting back to the community on overall (not individual) academic learner needs.

In no way do the principles adopted undermine the validity and reliability of the assessment results. The tools used by NVIT are widely accepted in the post-secondary realm and include Accuplacer and the Canadian Adult Achievement Test. Overall, with the community-based assessment pilots, NVIT recognized an increase in assessment completers compared to past processes and practices. Likewise, NVIT will be adapting many of the community-based Best Practices to establish an on-campus Best Practices Checklist. Although there will be slight variances, it is unlikely that there will be any significant change between the two sets of defined practices designed to provide respectful, relevant and meaningful assessment experiences founded on learner-centred principles.

It should be noted many attempts were made to conduct a second pilot with a PPSI and/or IAHLA institute. Researchers attempted to conduct a pilot at one of two urban PPSIs in BC; however, it turned out that the institutions did not have the time to participant in one. The researchers do not know if this is part of a general reluctance by PPSIs to adapt their established assessment methods or simply reflective of the circumstances of the two institutions that were approached.

# 7. PROJECT CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusions

A thorough literature review for this project reinforced the need for the research and application of findings regarding Aboriginal adult learner assessments. There is clearly a shortage of empirical research focused on this area in Canada. This IAHLA project adds to the small body of knowledge and provides questions to further investigate and principles and factors to further test.

Collectively, the research undertaken and pilots conducted for this project have reinforced some key themes about the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners.

While assessment discussions often involve a focus on the actual instruments or assessment tool, this project found that the broader context was equally important for Aboriginal adult learners. This includes taking a holistic approach to assessment and considering the interrelationship among all factors in the assessment environment, including social, psychological, physical, institutional and personal variables.

It is also important to look at all stages of the assessment process, not just the assessment proper. Factors in the pre-assessment and post-assessment are very important in making for an effective and cultural-sensitive process and assessment result. A richer, more comprehensive assessment result is possible when the proper supports are in place as mentioned in this section.

The community-based research also reveals the importance of relationship-building among people and institutes. In this relationship, a sharper focus on the real value of assessments is seen. Assessments only show a small part of a learner's understanding and their strengths, abilities along with developing areas of learning. When assessments are seen and practiced as a process, using a variety of measures and over a longer period of time, a richer, deeper measure of a student's abilities are obtained. With this type of assessment in hand, educators are in a better position to more fully support Aboriginal learners through the adult and post-secondary journey.

Assessment practitioners and their organizations need to be flexible in how they adapt the assessment process and supplement standardized instruments. As indicated from the research, assessment is and should be a relationship-based process. Policies, procedures and tools need to be flexible, as do the scheduling, location and process.
While a number of positive examples of assessment approaches were uncovered in the BLA survey, it appears as though many IAHLA institutes and PPSI use standardized tools and processes for assessing Aboriginal adult learners in BC. While standardization is practical and cost-effective, the BLA research has reinforced that assessors and institutions must go beyond this to adapt their assessment processes in order for them to be effective, fair and culturally-sensitive.

The survey also showed that few IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions work together on developing effective assessment processes for Aboriginal adult learners, some of which are part of affiliation agreements and other partnerships. This project provides a real opportunity for both types of higher learning organizations to apply the findings, principles, best practices and checklist from the BLA project to how they assess Aboriginal adult learners in a respectful, fair, accurate and reflective or each learner, and culturally-sensitive way.

However, as recommended in the survey report, the "development of the Better Learner Assessment must be supported and mandated at a provincial level, as this will provide a philosophical shift that will ensure that it is utilized through the post-secondary education system."

## Recommendations

Rather than repeating the recommendations that emerged from the literature review, the survey, the focus groups and the pilot testing, the following recommendations relate to process steps as part of next steps after the BLA Project:

1. The BLA Checklist should be updated, refined and printed in colour and in a hard-copy and web-usable format.

2. In the longer term, IAHLA might consider converting the Checklist into a tool kit with more information, best practice examples, and a guidebook for assessors.
3. This project final report, a summary version of it, and the Checklist should be packaged and disseminated widely with an IAHLA cover letter to Aboriginal, post-secondary, government and other stakeholders. Particularly IAHLA institutes and PPSIs should be directly engaged and encouraged to make use of this knowledge and apply it to their assessment process. The Ministry of Advanced Education's assistance in this will be valuable.
4. The Checklist and other language about principles and best practices for learner assessment should be embedded in affiliation agreements and other agreements and partnerships between IAHLA institutes and public PSE institutions.
5. IAHLA and its partners should look for opportunities to showcase the BLA results and package, including conferences, forums, committees, roundtables, board meetings, and other meetings and events throughout the province.
6. IAHLA should focus on the Ministry of Advanced Education in particular as a key influencer through its policies, programs and funding and its responsibility vis-à-vis the public post-secondary system. The Ministry has responsibility for Aboriginal PSE and adult literacy, so it should have a keen interest in the BLA outcomes and implications.
7. IAHLA and its partners should consider seeking provincial government funding to develop a more comprehensive BLA tool kit and distribution of it.
8. In order to breathe life into the BLA outcomes and ensure they are used to enhance the assessment of Aboriginal adult learners, the following Action and Communications Plan is provided as a starting point.

In addition to these recommendations, IAHLA met with the Ministry of Advanced Education in June 2011 before finalizing this report. As a result, commitments were made to the following actions.

The Ministry has indicated it will put this topic on the agenda of the fall meeting of the Deans of Developmental Education. It and IAHLA have discussed the concept of a demonstration project involving a few "early adopter" public PSE institutions to profile leading practices in assessment (i.e. apply and test the BLA Checklist). The Ministry and IAHLA will encourage IAHLA member institutes to consider submitting CALP proposals. Finally, the Ministry will look at positioning Aboriginal Service Plans (under Access and Retention theme) for possible use of funding for BLA assessment projects.

## Action and Communications Plan

The BLA Project has produced some important research findings and other key outcomes. It will be important for IAHLA and IAHLA institutes and PPSIs use this tool. In order to support this, IAHLA and partners can actively communicate, distribute and promote the outcomes of this the BLA Project to potential users and policy influencers. The following Action and Communications Plan is a start to this end.

| Audience | Action | Timeline |
|---|---|---|
| OLES | Submit BLA Final Report | Draft April 2011<br>Final June 2011 |
| IAHLA institutes | Profile the BLA Project at the IAHLA AGM/Conference | Completed April 29 |
| Other OLES projects | Ask OLES for information on related OLES projects, and share the BLA Project package with related OLES projects and ask for reciprocal information | Pending |
| Ministry of Advanced Education | Brief the Ministry on the results of the BLA Project<br>Ask the Ministry to promote use of the BLA Project results by public PSE institutions<br>Provide a cost estimate of a BLA demonstration project to the Ministry as part of next steps | Completed<br>Completed<br>Pending |
| Decoda (formerly Literacy BC and Literacy Now | Share the BLA Project package and ask Decoda BC to distribute it to local literacy councils | September 2011 |
| IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions | Distribute BLA Project package via IAHLA and the Ministry | September 2011 |
| Ministry of Education and Ministry of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation | Meet with Ministries of Advanced Education, Education, and Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation to obtain their input on applying the results of the BLA Project | September 2011 |
| Human Resources and Skills Development Canada | Meet with these federal departments to brief them on the BLA Project and obtain their input on applying the results of it | September 2011 |
| Indian and Northern Affairs Canada | | September 2011 |
| Adult Basic Education Association of BC | Share the BLA Project package | September 2011 |
| BC Assembly of First Nations, First Nation Summit, Union of BC Indian Chiefs | Share the BLA Project package with Aboriginal political organizations | September 2011 |
| FNESC, Metis Nation BC BC Association of Friendship Centres, First Nations Schools Association | Distribute BLA Project package to key Aboriginal organizations directly and via umbrella groups | September 2011 |
| Showcase Events | Look for and confirm events at which IAHLA can profile and promote BLA Project results | On-going |
| BC Post-Secondary Education and Training Partners | Distribute BLA package to Partners and have IAHLA speak to this at a Partners meeting | Fall 2011 |
| Assessment practitioners | Promote the use of the BLA Checklist and other project out | Fall 2011 |

# BIBLIOGRAPHY


Angelo, T. (2000). Assessment in higher education: Student learning, teaching, programmes and institutions. In J. Heywood (Ed.), *Higher Education Policy Series 56*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Antone, E., Gamlin, P., Sinclair, M., Turchetti, L. P., Robbins, J., & Paulsen, R. (2002). What is native literacy? Retrieved Feb. 2, 2010, from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/CASAE/cnf2002/2002_Papers/sym-antone&etal2002w.pdf

Boud, D. (1995). Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary? In P. Knight (Ed.), *Assessment for learing in higher education*. London: Kogan Page.

Campbell, P. (2006). Canadian assessment in adult basic education: A Canadian snapshot Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/snape/Snape.pdf

Campbell, P. (2007). If you could wave a magic wand Retrieved November 21, 2009, from http://www.literacyjournal.ca/literacies/7-2007/pdf/campbell.pdf

Canadian Council on Learning (2007). *Redefining How Success is Measured in First Nations, Inuit and Metis Learning, Report on Learning in Canada 2007*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Learning.

Canadian Council on Learning (2009). *State of learning in Canada: A holistic approach to measuring success*. Ottawa: Canadian Council on Learning.

Cavaliere, K.-J. A. (2009). *Prospect management for an Aboriginal public post-secondary institute.* Royal Roads University, Victoria.

Crooks, T. J., Kane, M. T., & Cohen, A. S. (1996). Threats to the valid use of assessments. *Assessment in education: Principles, policy and practice, 3*(3), 265-285.

Doehler, F. (2003). Adult literacy resources for First Nations literacy programs in Ontario. *Feliciter 49*(5), 250.

Dunn, M. (2001). Aboriginal literacy: Reading the tracks. *Reading Teacher 54*(7), 678-688.

Dwyer, C., Millett, C., & Payne, D. (2006). *A Culture of Evidence, Post Secondary Assessment and Learning Outcomes.* . Princeton, NJ: ETS.

Entwistle, N. J., Hanley, M., & Ratcliffe, G. (1979). Approaches to learning and levels of understanding. *British Educational Research Journal* (5), 99-114.

Ercikan, K., Arim, R., Oliveri, M., & Sandilands, D. (2008). Evaluation of the literacy assessment and monitoring programme (LAMP)/UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001626/162673e.pdf

Ewell, P. T. (2002). An emerging scholarship: a brief history in assessment. In T. W. Banta (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

First Nations Education Steering Committee (2008). Aboriginal post-secondary education in British Columbia: A place for Aboriginal institutes Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.fnesc.ca/publications/pdf/Policy_Bkgrd_Paper_May08.pdf

Fischer, C. F., & King, R. M. (1995). *Authentic assessment: a guide to implementation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Gill, S. (2008). *Canadian and World Research on Assessment Practices for Adult Learners*. Kitchener, ON: Adult Basic Education Association.

Goforth Consulting (2008). Learner skill attainment framework: Validation draft. Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.nald.ca/library/research/csc/framework/lsa.pdf

Gray, P. J. (2002). The roots of assessment. In T. W. Banta (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 49-66). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Hartle, T. W. (1986). The growing interest in measuring the educational achievement of college students. In C. Adelman (Ed.), *Assessment in American higher education: Issues and contexts*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

Heywood, J. (2000). *Assessment in higher education: Student learning, teaching, programmes and institutions.* London: Jessica Kingsley.

Hubball, H., & Levy, A. R. (2004). Graduate-level course desing and assessment in epidemiology: A learning-centred approach. *Journal of Faculty Development, 20*(1), 11-19.

Imel, S. (1990). Adult Literacy Learner Assessment. *ERIC Digest No. 103.* Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-9217/adult.htm

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (1996). Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/20071115053257/http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ch/rcap/sg/sgmm_e.html

Jacobson, E., Degener, S., & Purcell-Gates, V. (2003). Creating authentic materials and activities for the adult literacy classroom: A handbook for practitioners Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/jacobson.pdf

Johnston, P. (1998). The consequences and the use of standardized test. In S. Murphy, P. Shannon, P. Johnston & J. Hudson (Eds.), *Fragile evidence: A ctitique of reading assessment* (pp. 89-101). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Knight, P. (1995). Introduction. In P. Knight (Ed.), *Assessment for learning in higher education* (pp. 13-23). London: Kogan Page.

Literacy BC (2010). Literacy in BC, Retrieved February 5, 2010, from http://www.literacybc.ca/Info/literacyinbc.pdf

Literacy Ontario (2000). Common assessment in the literacy of basic skills program. Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/training/literacy/assessmt/assess.pdf

Murphy, S., Shannon, P., Johnston, P., & Hansen, J. (1998). *Fragile evidence: A critique of reading assessment*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nurss, J. R. (1989). Assessment models and insturments: Adult populations Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1f/a9/3c.pdf

Ostrowidzki, E., Pryce, M., & Urstad, K. (2009). Indigenization framework for Aboriginal literacy. Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.nvit.bc.ca/docs/4%20%20framework%20document.pdf

Palomba, C. A., & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Peltier, S. (2009). First Nations dialects in young children: Assessment issues and supportive interventions. *Encyclopedia of language and literacy development.* Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://literacyencyclopedia.ca/index.php?fa=items.show&topicid=276

R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. (2004). *Aboriginal Peoples and Post-Secondary Education: What Educators Have Learned*. Montreal, QC: The Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Saskatchewan Literacy Network, & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment (2006). The circle of learning: Saskatchewan adult literacy benchmarks levels 1 and 2 Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.aeel.gov.sk.ca/adx/aspx/adxGetMedia.aspx?DocID=164,185,173,169,94,88,Documents&MediaID=108&Filename=abe_benchmarks.pdf

Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (2005). Moving forward in Aboriginal education: Proceedings of a national policy roundtable Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.saee.ca/movingforward/028mf.pdf

Sticht, T. (1999). *Testing and accountability in adult literacy education*. El Cajon, CA: Applied Behavioral & Cognitive Sciences Inc.

Taylor, M. (1997). Test review: Workplace assessment tools. Retrieved December 3, 2009, from http://www.nald.ca/library/research/nls/inpub/test/test.pdf

Tierney, R. J. (1988). Literacy assessment reform: Shifting beliefs, principled possibilities and emerging practices. *The Reading Teacher, 51*(5), 374-390.

UNESCO Education Sector (2004). *The plurality of literacy and its implications for policies and programmes*. Paris: UNESCO.

Wiggins, G. (1990). The case for authentic assessment. *ERIC Digest.* Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://www.eric.ed.gov:80/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_0l/0000019b/80/22/c5/e7.pdf

## APPENDIX 1: BETTER LEARNER ASSESSMENT STEERING COMMITTEE

Karen Bailey-Romanko
Director, Post-Secondary Education and Training
IAHLA

Fran Hunt-Jinnouchi
Director, Office of Indigenous Affairs
University of Victoria

Verna Billy-Minnabarriet
Chair, IAHLA Board and Vice-President Learning Services and Campus Administrator
Nicola Valley Institute of Technology
Merritt and Burnaby campuses

Cathy Seymour
IAHLA Board Member and Director of Post Secondary Education
Kwadacha Dune Ty
Fort Ware

Hilistis Pauline Waterfall, OBC
IAHLA Board Treasurer and Heiltsuk College
Bella Bella

Jan E. Green
IAHLA Board Secretary and Adult Alternative Learning Education Specialist
a-m'aa-sip Learning Place, Nuu-chah-nulth Employment and Training Program
Port Alberni

# Aboriginal Learner Assessment Practices

For the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association:

***Better Learner Assessments Project***

A Project of the Indigenous Adult and Higher Learning Association (IAHLA)

With funding from the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills

Human Resources and Social Development Canada

**Survey Completion Instructions**

The purpose of this online survey is to collect information from IAHLA institutes and public post-secondary institutions (collectively referred to as "institutes") in British Columbia about their adult Aboriginal learner assessment practices and tools as part of a project to enhance the efficacy and cultural sensitivity of learner assessment tools used to determine the literacy skill levels of Aboriginal adult learners.

This project is overseen by IAHLA, a non-profit organization that represents an alliance of adult learning programs and post-secondary educational institutes governed by Aboriginal groups and communities. IAHLA has contracted with Human Capital Strategies of Victoria to undertake this project, including this survey.

The IAHLA Literacy Project - *Better Learner Assessments* - is intended to more fully explore the challenges associated with the use of standardized academic/literacy assessment tools and processes with Aboriginal adult learners by considering what assessment methods are best suited to Aboriginal adult learners, and suggesting possible modifications to the assessment tools, processes and environments to eliminate or at least mitigate cultural bias and resulting validity and reliability questions.

Please see the attached *Project Backgrounder* for more details on this project.

All personal and institute-specific information will be kept confidential and the anonymity of individuals and institutes will be maintained in the reporting on the results of this survey.

A copy of a cover letter, the project backgrounder, and the survey instrument are being sent to senior representatives in all IAHLA and public post-secondary institutes. Institute representatives

are asked to forward the name, title, and email address of the person most readily able to respond to the research questions directly to Kerry Jothen at kjothen@humancapitalstrategies.ca. We recommend that the most appropriate Aboriginal Services staff person(s) be consulted or work in collaboration with the person(s) coordinating/completing the survey. Although it is our hope that completion of the survey is a collaborative effort between administrators and faculty/staff responsible for learner assessment and Aboriginal Services, we request that each Institute submit one completed survey. This approach is necessary to eliminate the potential skewing of data should multiple responses be received from one type of, or a single institute. Additionally, multiple responses from an institute may be contradictory; thus, reducing the validity of the data. Likewise, with this methodology, it is critical that each institute submit a completed survey. Please ensure you complete question 36, inclusive of the name of your Institute and contact person and information. This will assist us in ensuring we receive only one response per institute.

At the end of the online survey, there will be instructions on who to contact if you have any questions and, most importantly, how to get to the researchers any electronic or hard copy material you can share (e.g. assessment literature, assessment tools, guides, etc.).

**SURVEY**

**1) Do you determine whether or not adult learners requiring assessment services are Aboriginal?**

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Not Sure

**2) If you answered "Yes" to Question 1, how do you determine whether or not an individual requiring an assessment is Aboriginal?**

_____
_____
_____

**3) In your opinion, are there barriers to the accurate assessment of Aboriginal adult learners entering courses and programs in your institute?**

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Not Sure

**4) If you answered "Yes" or "Not Sure" to question 3, what are (or may be) the *top 3***

**barriers?**

_____
_____
_____

**5) What assessment tools do you use to assess the readiness of Aboriginal adult learners for the purposes of course or program placement? (Select all that apply)**

- ❑ Canadian Adult Achievement Test
- ❑ Common Assessment of Basic Skills
- ❑ Test of Workplace Essential Skills
- ❑ Accuplacer
- ❑ Language Proficiency Index
- ❑ Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE)
- ❑ Structure of Intellect (SOI)
- ❑ Gates
- ❑ Communications and Math Employment Readiness (CAMERA)
- ❑ In-house
- ❑ Other (please specify)

If you selected other, please specify

_____

**6) If you have developed your own unique assessment tool(s) for Aboriginal adult learners, please describe it and indicate how you undertook this.**

Description: _____

How: _____

**7) When an individual requires an assessment, what are 3 significant determining factors in selecting the type of assessment tool for that individual?**

_____
_____
_____

**8) Have you modified/enhanced your assessment tool(s) to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?**

❍ Yes
❍ No
❍ Not Sure

**9) If you answered "Yes" to question 8, please identify how and why you modified your assessment tool(s). If you answered "No or Not sure" to question 8, please proceed to question 10.**

How did you modify your assessment tool(s)? _____

Why did you modify your assessment tool(s)? _____

**10) Have you modified/enhanced your assessment administration processes to accomodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?**

❍ Yes
❍ No
❍ Not Sure

**11) If you answered "Yes" to question 10, please describe how and why you modified/enhanced your assessment administration processes to accomodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners? If you answered "No" or "Not Sure" to question 10, please proceed to question 12.**

How did you modify/enhance your assessment administration processes? _____

Why did you modify/enhance your assessment administration processes? _____

**12) In using your assessment tool(s) and administration process(s), have you altered the assessment environment (physical, social, educational) to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal adult learners?**

❍ Yes
❍ No
❍ Not Sure

**13) If you answered "Yes" to question 12, please describe how and why you altered the assessment environment (physical, social, educational) when using your assessment tool(s) and administration process(s), to accommodate the needs of**

**Aboriginal adult learners? If you answered "No" or "Not Sure" please proceed to question 14.**

How did you alter the assessment environment? _____

Why did you alter the assessment environment? _____

**14) Please describe what you consider to be the strengths of the current assessment tools and administration processes used for Aboriginal adult learners at your institution.**

Strengths of current assessment tools are: _____

Strengths of current assessment administration processes are: _____

**15) In your opinion, how might your institute enhance the current assessment tools used for Aboriginal adult learners?**

_____
_____
_____

**16) In your opinion, how might your institute enhance the current assessment administration processes used for Aboriginal adult learners?**

_____
_____
_____

**17) Are your assessment tool(s) sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language?**

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Not Sure

**18) If you responded "Yes" to question 17, in what ways are your institute's assessment tool(s) sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language? If you responded**

**"No" to question 17, please proceed to question 19.**

_____
_____
_____

**19) If you responded "No" to question 17, what opportunities exist to enhance your institute's assessment tool(s) in a manner that increases the sensitivity to Aboriginal culture and language?**

_____
_____
_____

**20) Are your assessment tool(s) sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles?**

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Not Sure

**21) If you responded "Yes" to question 20, in what ways are your institute's assessment tool(s) sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles? If you responded "No" to question 20, please proceed to question 22.**

_____
_____
_____

**22) If you responded "No" to question 20, what opportunities exist to enhance your institute's assessment tool(s) in a manner that increases the sensitivity to Aboriginal adult learning styles?**

_____
_____
_____

**23) Are your assessment administration processes sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language?**

❍ Yes
❍ No
❍ Not Sure

**24) If you responded "Yes" to question 23, in what ways are your institute's assessment administration processes sensitive to Aboriginal culture and language? If you responded "No" to question 23, please proceed to question 25.**

_____
_____
_____

**25) If you responded "No" to question 23, what opportunities exist to enhance the sensitivity toward Aboriginal culture and language in your institute's assessment administration processes?**

_____
_____
_____

**26) Are your assessment administration processes sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles?**

❍ Yes
❍ No
❍ Not Sure

**27) If you responded "Yes" to question 26, in what ways are your institute's assessment administration processes sensitive to Aboriginal adult learning styles? If you responded "No" to question 26, please proceed to question 28.**

_____
_____
_____

**28) If you responded "No" to question 26, what opportunities exist to enhance the sensitivity toward Aboriginal adult learning styles in your institute's assessment administration processes?**

_____
_____
_____

**29) How do you know whether or not your assessment tool(s) are valid and reliable for Aboriginal adult learners?**

Valid (the extent to which assessment tools are oriented accurately to the learner): _____

Reliable (the extent to which the assessment tools produce consistent results): _____

**30) How do you know whether or not your assessment administration processes are valid and reliable for Aboriginal adult learners?**

Valid (the extent to which the assessment administration process is learner oriented): _____

Reliable (the extent to which the assessment administration process produces consistent results): _____

**31) In your opinion, what are the *3 most* critical elements of an effective and relevant assessment tool for Aboriginal adult learners?**

_____
_____
_____

**32) In your opinion, what are the *3 most* significant assessment administration processes required to ensure an effective and relevant experience for Aboriginal adult learners?**

_____
_____
_____

**33) If you have developed your own unique assessment tool(s) for Aboriginal adult**

**learners, are you willing to provide a copy of it to the researchers?**

- ❍ We do not use our own unique assessment tool(s)
- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Not Sure

**34) If you are willing to provide a copy of your own unique assessment tool(s) for Aboriginal adult learners, what is the fastest way for us to obtain it from you?**

- ❍ I will email it to you
- ❍ I will fax it to you
- ❍ I will mail it to you
- ❍ I will courier it to you

**35) Please provide any additional comments on assessments tools and administration processes for Aboriginal adult learners?**

_____
_____
_____

**36) To assist in ensuring we receive only one response from each Institute, please provide your contact information and the Institute you represent below.**

_____
_____
_____

**37) Would you like to receive a copy of the summary report for the Aboriginal Learner Assessment Practices survey?**

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

To forward electronic or hard copy assessment materials and/or if you have any questions about the survey, please contact:

Kerry Jothen, CEO, Human Capital Strategies, Email: kjothen@humancapitalstrategies.ca
Phone: (250) 213-9231

If you have any questions about the overall project or IAHLA, please contact:

Karen Bailey-Romanko, IAHLA, Email: karenbr@fnesc.ca, Phone: (250) 426-5021

On behalf of IAHLA and its partners, the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology and the University of Victoria, thank you very much for participating in this research.

This survey is now complete.

# APPENDIX 3: FOCUS GROUP ORGANIZATIONS

**Institutions and Organizations Represented**

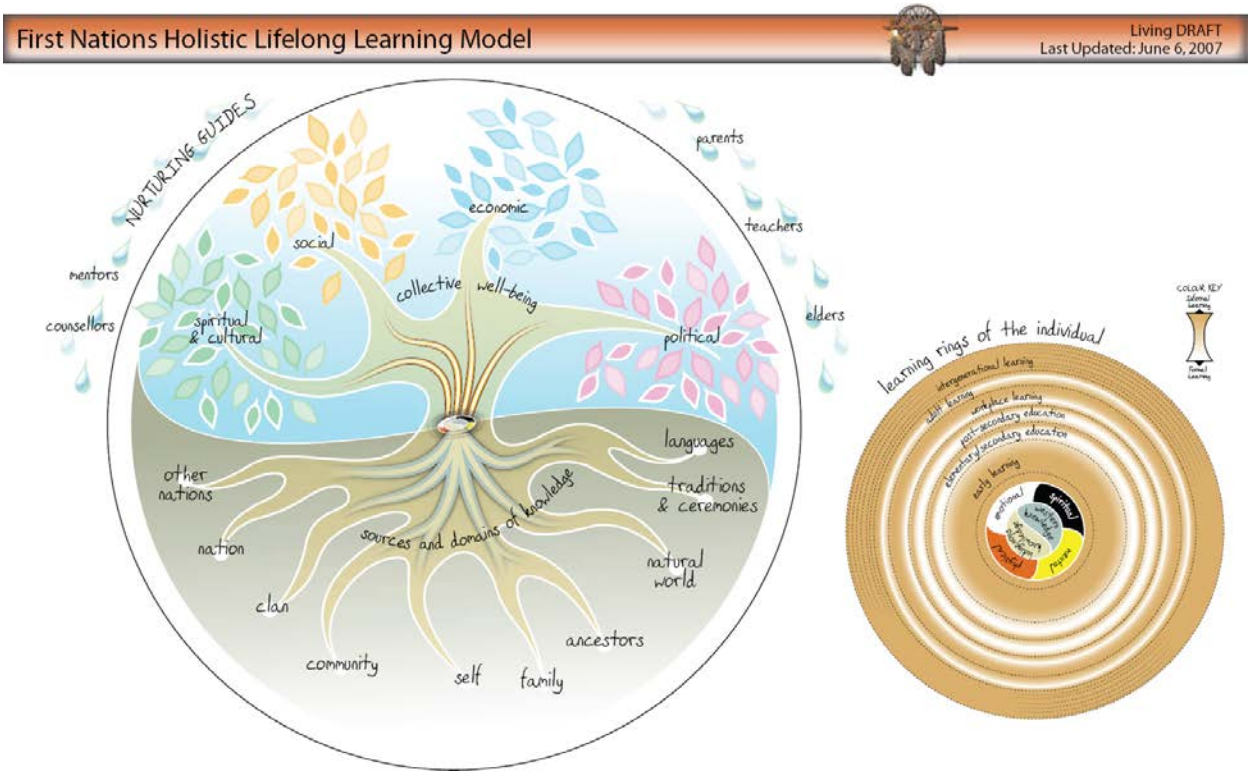
**Focus Group 1 Greater Vancouver, Delta Airport Hotel, November 3**
(ALMD) Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development
A-m'aa-sip Learning Place
BC Teacher's Federation
College of New Caledonia
College of the Rockies
FNESC
Justice Institute of BC
Ktunaxa Nation Council
Kwantlen College
Langara College
Native Education Centre,
Vancouver Island University

**Focus Group 2 Vancouver Island, Chemainus Native College, Ladysmith, November 22**
A-m'aa-sip Learning Place
Chemainus Native College
Heiltsuk College
North Island College
Royal Roads University
Vancouver Island University

**Focus Group 3 The Interior, Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations, Kamloops, November 24**
Community Futures Development Corporation of Central Interior First Nations
Coast Salish Employment and Training Society
Adams Lake Band
Thompson Rivers University
Weekend University
Williams Lake Band

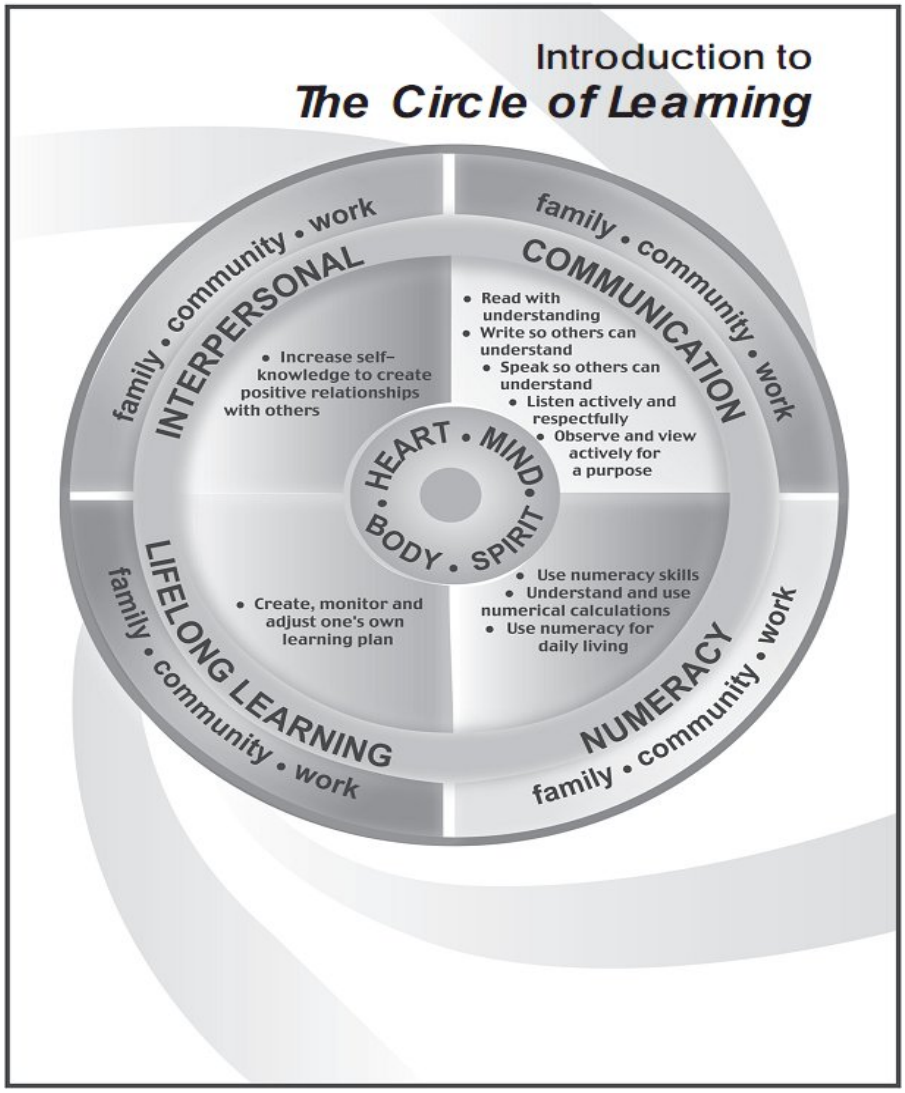
**Focus Group 4 Northern BC (by conference call), November 26**
College of New Caledonia
First Nations Training and Employment Centre (Prince Rupert)
North Island College
Northwest Community College
University of Victoria

# APPENDIX 4: FIRST NATIONS HOLISTIC LIFELONG LEARNING MODEL



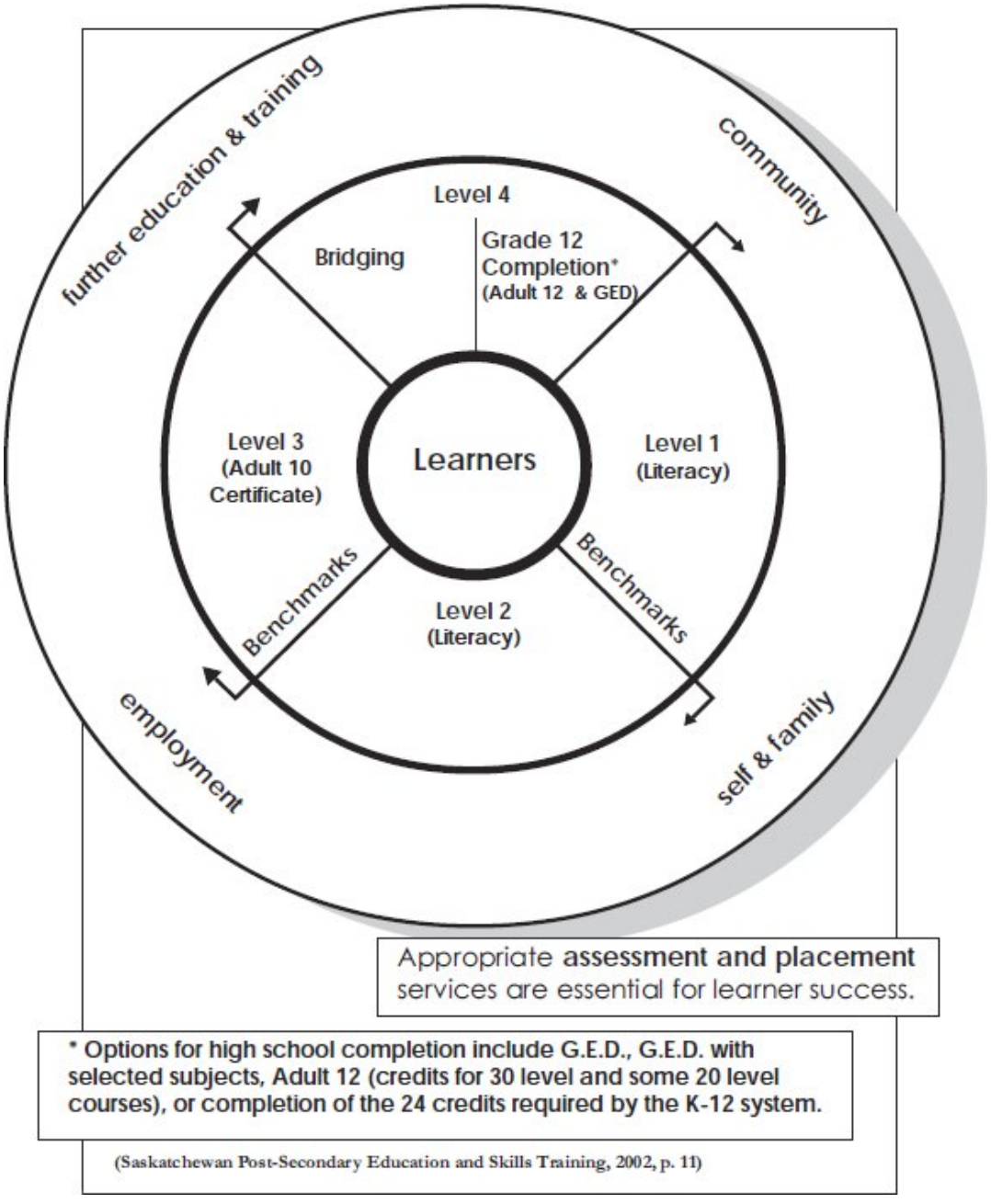

(Canadian Council on Learning, 2009, p. 12)

# APPENDIX 5: THE CIRCLE OF LEARNING MODEL



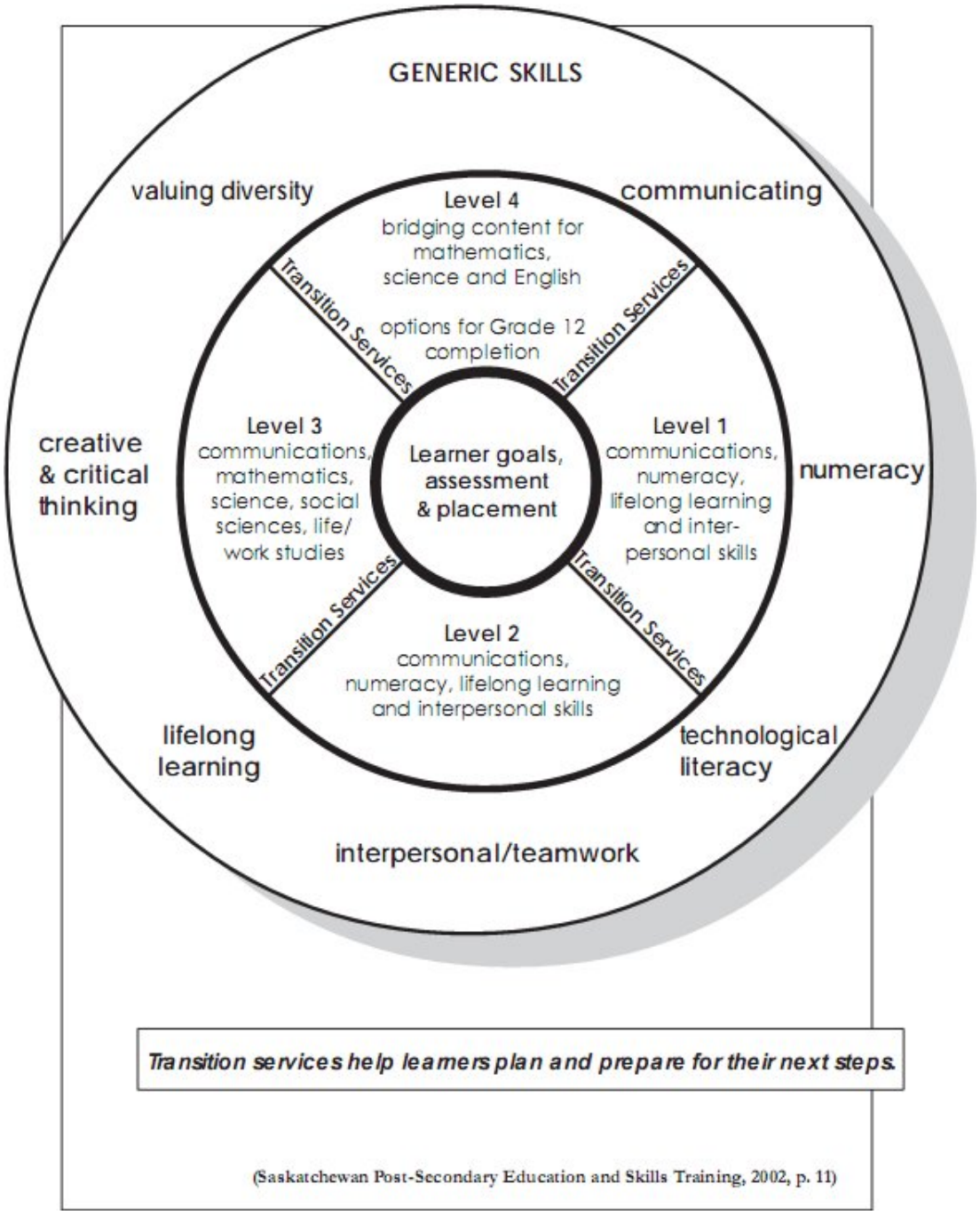

(Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006, p. 1)

**Overview of Context of Adult Basic Education Credit Programs**




(Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006, p. 4)

**Content of Adult Basic Education Credit Programs**




(Saskatchewan Literacy Network & Saskatchewan Advanced Education and Employment, 2006, p. 5)

# APPENDIX 6: FOCUS GROUP TOPICS & THEMATIC SUMMARY

**Topic 1: A supportive environment for learning assessments**

The environment for learning assessments includes the material (physical and institutional) environment as well as the non-material (social and spiritual) environment.

*What makes an environment for learning assessments effective?*

**Topic 2: A sensitive administrative process**

The administrative process can include such things as whether formal assessments are required, to what extent they are relied on in the placement process, as well as the degree of learner involvement in their own assessment.

*What does a sensitive administrative process look like?*

**Topic 3: Assessment preparation for learners**

Many assessment tools are intended to be written without prior preparation. Please think about learners preparing for assessments.

*What do you like and/or dislike about learners preparing for assessments?*

**Topic 4: Flexible timing for standardized assessments**

Most standardized learner assessments have specific time allowances for each section of the assessment.

*What do you think about flexible timing for learner assessments?*

**Topic 5: Assessment tools: The good, the bad and the ugly**

Please think about your experience (as a learner, instructor or administrator) with assessment tools.

a. *Accepting that no assessment tool is perfect, what makes an assessment tool better than others for the purpose of assessing the literacy skills of Aboriginal adult learners?*
b. *What assessment tool(s) do you have experience with?*
c. *What do you like about it? What do you dislike about it?*

## Focus Group Thematic Analysis

### Pre-assessment

- Building relationships with learner and community
- Bring the learning to the learner
- Starts with calls out into community or as soon as they walk in the door
- Initial contact so important
- It is unethical not to prepare students for assessment
- Practice tests to familiarize with material
- Don't set students up for failure!
- Relate assessment to career goals
- Frame the assessment as an starting point, place to look back on to see how much you have learned and grown
- Ethical administrative process
    - Includes confidentiality and not setting students up for failure
    - Should not be based on bean counting
    - Ask why you are assessing this student
    - Considerations for students who might have learning disabilities – do you have funding to support these students and their diagnosis.
    - Administrators should ask how the assessment process can empower student
- Student Portfolios
- Never shame the student
- Start by clearing all of your subjective judgment of the student
- Learner control of assessment – what do you want to get out of this?
- Students need to feel safe
- Students coming on campus (PPSI) for upgrading don't know about cultural supports
- Preparation for assessment should start at a simple level and move up in complexity
- Creating a family/cohort to have fellow students co-learn
- Evaluate readiness for learning as part of assessment
- Need time to be sensitive to students' abilities
- Education plan
- Need link between aboriginal support services and admission

### During assessment

- Community based
- Mentors available
- Meet students outside and bring them in (PPSI)
- Start with prayer or song
- Takes so much courage just to come in for assessment
- An Elder sitting with you, or preparing you
- Doing whatever makes the student comfortable

- Aboriginal people are social people-we learn best with each other-why not bring this into the assessment process
- “There is no cheating, only collaboration”
- No time restriction
- Time element causes stress and anxiety
- Pressure of timing does nothing to determine readiness
- Residential schools – impact around testing and timing
- Students not prepared for the amount of time it will take
- Haven’t had breakfast
- Change language within assessments to make them more relevant (eg. essay questions)
- Let them come from a place of oral strength if necessary
- Technology is able to assist students in translating from oral to written and we should be taking advantage of this technology
- Strength-based assessment focusing on students abilities – listen to their story
- Technology is able to assist students in translating from oral to written and we should be taking advantage of this technology
- Encourage writing in the vernacular
- Tools seem to cater to one learning style and need to address the needs of multiple learning styles

**Post-assessment**

- Include student in evaluating their own assessment
- Student assessment of the assessment process
- Never shame the student
- Current letter says score not good enough, so they don’t bother coming back
- Some students just don’t write tests well
- Testing behavior is learned behavior-eventually you get better
- I look at number of questions they got right and which questions they got right.
- “Instead of weeding out, let’s weed in!”
- CONFIDENTIALITY
- Education/learning plan related to their career goals – build a portfolio while doing life skills courses
- Family environment made me want to come back
- Ensure students experience success along the way