



Policy Paper

Student Mobility and Credit Transfer Pathways

October 2014

Prepared by:

Richard Camman, VP University Affairs
Wilfrid Laurier University Students' Union (WLUSU), Wilfrid Laurier University

Stéphane Hamade, VP Education
Federation of Students (Feds), University of Waterloo

Amy Zhou
Federation of Students (Feds), University of Waterloo

With Files From:

Ailsa Bristow, former Research Analyst
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Brandon Sloan, former Director of Communications
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Student mobility refers not to just the physical ability of a student to move from one institution to another, but the more comprehensive understanding of a student as an independent agent who - as their own needs and desires change - requires the ability to move from one institution to another to achieve their educational goal, be it a college certificate, diploma, or undergraduate degree. The policy has been broken into three key pillars, which cover the mobility needs of Ontario's postsecondary students: Transparency, Consistency, and Student Support.

Transparency

- Students should be offered an explanation if courses fail to transfer.
- Students must be able to appeal credit transfer decisions to a higher and/or external authority.
- Offers of admission should include a list of credits that will transfer.
- Institutions and ONTransfer should continue to work together to create a thorough credit database for Ontario university students.
- Institutions should work together to develop a common format for their credit transfer policies, utilizing consistent language.

Consistency

- Ontario universities should fully recognize any first or second year level courses successfully completed at another accredited Ontario university. Where possible, these credits should count towards a student's chosen field of study unless they do not meet the respective grade requirements of that institution's program.
- The government or the Council of Ontario Universities should facilitate regularly scheduled meetings for chairpersons of similar programs to work towards identifying common content and learning outcomes for first- and second-year undergraduate courses at Ontario Universities.
- The government should mandate that all per-course minimum grade requirements be set at the passing grade, as defined by the receiving institution.
- To better facilitate student mobility, Ontario universities should develop robust learning outcome measurements that could be consistent across institutions.
- To facilitate credit transfer, Ontario universities should develop a mechanism to collectively share all course descriptions and syllabi while also supporting the development and adoption of electronic transcript exchange standards.
- The government should audit institutional residency requirements in all programs and encourage or mandate reductions of those above 50 per cent.
- To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must offer the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition free of assessment fees to all students.
- To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must standardize their credit requirements for IB/AP credits and exam scores.
- While the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer should continue to fund research projects on all aspects of student mobility, there must be an emphasis on researching university-to-university transfer.

Student Support

- To ensure system-wide mobility, the government must mandate that all credit transfer administration fees be removed and covered instead by the existing ancillary fee regulations.
- Adequate bridging programs must be developed at all Ontario post-secondary institutions.
- Program eligibility requirements for the Ontario Student Assistance Program should be amended to grant financial assistance to students enrolled in bridging programs.
- Universities should use direct funding from government to hire credit transfer advisors that guide students throughout the transfer system.
- Universities should investigate the feasibility of developing specific orientation week programs directed at transfer students to help facilitate their integration into campus life.

INTRODUCTION

Ontario's post-secondary students are now, more than ever before, facing a growing field of options and opportunities in post-secondary education. The fields of study available to them today are as unique and diverse as the students who study them. Consequently the need for mobility between these opportunities is growing fast as students wish to navigate the postsecondary education system with more clarity, reach their preferred educational destination faster, and enter or re-enter the labour market sooner. Today, the top five transfer programs are business, health, social science, engineering, and liberal arts; over 21,500 students each year transfer between a variety of these programs at the 44 publicly funded colleges and universities in Ontario.¹ Student mobility between post-secondary institutions is eminently important to student success and satisfaction, and it is critical to the future of Ontario's higher education sector as students are increasingly pursuing non-traditional pathways.²

Students seek to transfer their credits or have their prior learning experiences recognized at an institution for a multitude of reasons. Students may wish to transfer between similar programs at different institutions because of family, geographical, or even financial concerns - postsecondary students who successfully transfer in Ontario can save thousands of dollars in personal savings (similarly, the Province stands to save on per-student operating grants whenever a student does not have to duplicate learning).³ Other students may decide to change to another program because they have discovered a more suitable field of study. Finally, students who have successfully completed a program may wish to enhance or continue their education to improve their opportunities in the job market without repeating prior or relevant learning. The importance of these considerations was recently recognized by several provincial credit transfer councils (including Ontario's), which have negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding, acknowledging:

Significant numbers of students transfer among post-secondary institutions each year because they view access to different post-secondary experiences as useful to their educational and career success. At the same time, post-secondary institutions are increasingly faced with the need to respond to

¹ "Credit Transfer Saves Ontario's postsecondary students time and money," *Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer*, November 2013, http://www.oncat.ca/?page=news_131120

² Angelika Kerr, Ursula McCloy and Shuping Liu, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Forging Pathways: Students Who Transfer Between Ontario Colleges and Universities* (Toronto: 2010).

³ "Credit Transfer Saves," ONCAT, 2013

students who want to know what credit they will be granted for their previous studies and expect that they will not be required to repeat demonstrated prior learning relevant to the programs of study they are pursuing.⁴

The current economic position of Ontario demands the recognition of the real financial challenges that will be faced by public institutions in the coming years. As provincial spending will not be as generous as it has been in the past, institutions will be forced to develop creative methods of facilitating student attainment with fewer resources. One of these solutions is to make Ontario's post-secondary education system more mobile, as mobility saves both time and money for eager students who wish to enter or re-enter the competitive labour market. Glenn Craney, Executive Director Ontario Council of Articulation and Transfer, echoed these remarks best as he emphasized that

students work hard to earn their credits, and deserve the opportunity to have them transferred when moving among institutions. As we build an increasingly efficient and effective transfer system, more students will have the ability to gain the necessary skills and knowledge required to contribute to Ontario's knowledge-based economy.⁵

Glossary of Terms

Articulation agreement: An agreement made between post-secondary institutions regarding the comparability of courses or learning outcomes for the purposes of transfer. These are most commonly used to facilitate college-to-university transfer between specific programs of study.

Bi-lateral articulation agreement: Refers to articulation agreements made between two post-secondary institutions.

Block Transfer Agreement: an agreement whereby a group of courses from a student's program will be accepted to a related program and assigned a specific number of transfer credits.

Bridging Program: A program designed to furnish a student with the skills and competencies required to succeed in a future academic environment.

Multi-lateral articulation agreement: Refers to articulation agreements made between three or more post-secondary institutions.

Residency Requirement: The percentage of accumulated credits required by a given post-secondary institution to have been earned at that institution in order to graduate from it.

Benefits of Student Mobility

Student mobility is an important topic to undergraduate students in Ontario for a variety of reasons. First, proper recognition of previous education helps students save time and money in their pursuit of educational goals. Second, a mobile post-secondary system that enables the transfer of credits between institutions allows students the opportunity to complete their educational goals at the institution that best suits their needs. Third, a robust credit transfer system would offer immense value to the governments responsible for funding post-secondary

⁴ British Columbia Council on Admissions & Transfer. *Provincial Councils on Credit Transfer: Collaborative Relationships Memorandum of Understanding*. BCCAT: 2014. <http://www.bccat.ca/pubs/MOU.pdf> (accessed October 2014).

⁵ "Credit Transfer Saves," ONCAT, 2013

institutions. Since the province funds universities on a per-credit basis, students who are forced to repeat courses due to unrecognized credits pose additional public costs aside from the personal costs they incur. Finally, Ontario's post-secondary institutions are not equal in their capacity to attract students from under-represented groups, meaning that effective transfer pathways between post-secondary institutions could support the facilitation of a more accessible and equitable education system overall.

Benefits for Students

The benefits of enhanced mobility opportunities for students are fairly easy to conceptualize. If a student begins their education at one post-secondary institution but later decides that another institution suits them better, the number of credits that transfer directly affects how many they must take at the new institution. In the event that they are forced to duplicate any previous learning, the result is a higher total cost of education to the student. A modeling exercise conducted by the Centre for Spatial Economics in 2010 estimated that increasing the average amount of credit recognition to 65 per cent for college transfer students would result in an average benefit to each student of approximately \$26,000.⁶ Additionally, it would allow each student to reach degree completion sooner, allowing students to move one step closer to employment or advanced education.

Benefits for Government

The benefit to the provincial government, as well as to the broader public, of enhancing the mobility of post-secondary education is enormous. As mentioned earlier, credit duplication directly translates to cost duplication for government since the Province funds universities on a per-credit basis. The more that government can facilitate the transfer of credits, the higher the overall savings for both students and government. The aforementioned 2010 study estimated that the direct savings to government of increasing the average amount of credit recognition by twenty per cent would be estimated to be between \$36 and \$61 million dollars with an additional \$69 to \$136 million in additional Gross Domestic Product.⁷

Benefits for Accessibility

As previously mentioned, not all post-secondary institutions are equally effective at attracting students from groups who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education. Aboriginal, rural, northern, first-generation, and low-income students all have higher participation rates in Ontario's colleges than universities, signaling that the lower costs or career orientation of colleges may be more appealing to these groups of students. For example, while low-income students are less than half as likely to attend university as their high-income counterparts, participation of low-income students in colleges was actually slightly higher than high-income students.⁸ This has caused many to speculate that emphasizing college-to-university transfer pathways could assist university recruitment of students from under-represented groups. Indeed, over the last decade, the percentage of college graduates who go onto university increased from 5 to 7.7 per cent - a difference largely attributed to increased

⁶ *The Financial Benefits of Enhanced College Credential and Credit Recognition in Ontario*. (Toronto: The Centre for Spatial Economics, 2011).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Joseph Berger, Anne Motte and Andrew Parkin. *The Price of Knowledge: Access and Student Finance in Canada: Fourth Edition*. (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2009).

credit transfer pathways.⁹ While this difference is small, it has sparked debate on the potential access gains that could be achieved by radically improving Ontario's credit transfer system.

Types of Credit Transfer

Due to the fact that Ontario has a binary post-secondary education system with two types of institutions – colleges and universities – credit transfer takes place along four axes: university-to-university, college-to-college, university-to-college, and college-to-university. These four pathways are all characterized by different student needs, and are each at very different stages of development. Additionally, while a plentiful amount of research has been undertaken on college-university transfer, relatively little has been documented and studied about the other three. Since this policy primarily concerns itself with university students, it will focus on two types of transfer exclusively: university-to-university and college-to-university.

Figure 1: OPSSS (2013) Transfer students at OUSA member institutions

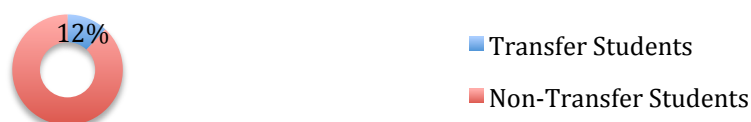
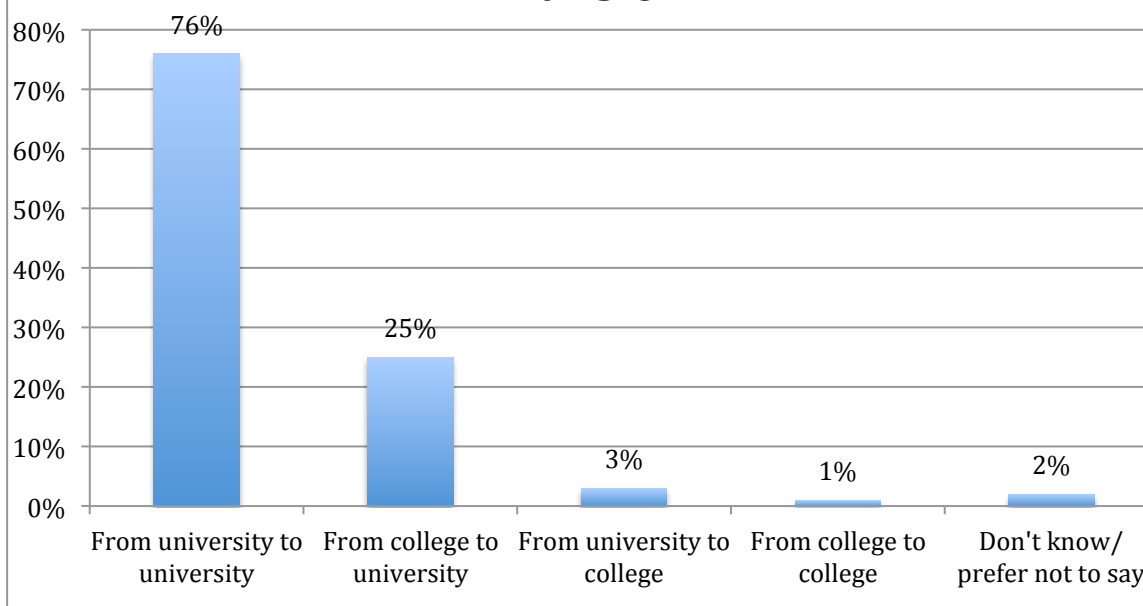


Figure 2: OPSSS (2013) Types of Credit Transfer



⁹ Kerr, McCloy and Liu. 2010.

University-to-University

According to the Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey conducted by OUSA in November 2013, university-to-university credit transfer is the most frequent type.¹⁰ Despite the common nature of this horizontal transfer, it has received markedly little attention within the ongoing discussion of mobility. Only one formal protocol has been signed governing university-university transfer by universities from the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) in 1995. In comparison, the history of college-university transfer has been shaped by an evolving series of agreements dating back to the creation of colleges in 1970. The process of transferring credits from a university to a university often involves a piecemeal analysis of each credit course by an advisor or faculty member. After applying, students indicate that they would like to transfer credits and provide copies of their transcript, at which time a faculty member or credit transfer advisor will review the student's courses to determine if they are equivalent enough for transfer. Providing that the student is admissible and all of their courses meet the minimum grade requirements of the receiving institution, the student is told how many of their credits are transferrable. According to a situation report conducted in 2009, most of Ontario's universities do not keep a common database of equivalent courses nor do they share information on course content in a public fashion, meaning that these assessment processes are often individualized to the institution or assessor.¹¹ At the very least, the process details are not available to students hoping to predict the number of transfer credits they will receive when transferring from one institution to another.

Independent analyses confirm that efforts to comply with CMEC's protocol have had mixed results among institutions, "with a significant variance between older, well-established universities intent on preserving their autonomy and reputation for academic excellence, and the more recently founded universities that have as part of their mission statement to be responsive to the immediate community and its needs for a well-educated labour force."¹² In other words, each university determines the transferability of credits for incoming students, meaning that some universities have adopted more open transfer policies than others.

As a whole, the university-to-university transfer has lagged behind college-to-university transfer as universities have rarely initiated dialogue with one another on the topic of course equivalency. Furthermore, the government has indicated that its top priority will be facilitating greater college-university transfer, rather than university-university.¹³ This is evidenced by the fact that, at time of writing, there are currently zero active university-to-university transfer pathways on the ONTransfer website.¹⁴

College-to-University

Since the creation of the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology in 1965, the topic of student mobility between two independent but naturally related systems has been prominent in Ontario's post-secondary education sector. While many tertiary education systems have multiple

¹⁰ Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance Survey. *Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey*. Toronto: OUSA, 2013.

¹¹ Philippe Constantineau. *The Ontario Credit Transfer System: A Situation Report*, (Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities, 2009).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Government of Ontario. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. *Policy Statement for Ontario's Credit Transfer System*, 2011. <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/eng/eopg/publications/CreditTransferE.pdf>

¹⁴ "ONTransfer," *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, http://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=university&slide_id=4

types of post-secondary institutions, Ontario is fairly unique in that the two have never been integrated by design. In other jurisdictions, the creation of public universities and community colleges were part of a stepping-stone system where one institution leads seamlessly into another, with pre-established, system-wide credit transfer regulations and coordinated curricula. Examples of such jurisdictions include Alberta, British Columbia, and California. This difference has led many in Ontario to wonder how and why our credit transfer system has differed so considerably.

The answer lies in the fact that, when Ontario's colleges were created, then Premier Bill Davis opted specifically for a system that did not have planned transfer pathways. Systems such as Alberta, British Columbia, and California all have state-driven approaches that mandate integrated college-university curricula, as well as certain amounts of credit transfer. Ontario has traditionally steered clear of government intervention in university teaching, curricula, or learning outcomes, leaving institutions to develop partnerships and pathways on their own. However, due to the aforementioned benefits of college-to-university transfer, governments and institutions have put a considerable amount of effort to develop mobility between universities and colleges despite the absence of a unified approach.

Traditionally, universities do not accept college credits on a course-by-course basis, due to perceived differences in teaching and evaluation standards and curriculum.¹⁵ As a result, college transfer is sometimes conducted as a "block transfer," where a prescribed number of college courses will yield a certain number of university credits. This is usually determined with an articulation agreement between the university and a college, or a policy by one of the institutions (York, Brock, and Ryerson are all excellent examples of universities with such policies). More frequently however, community colleges have begun entering into agreements with Ontario universities wherein students complete a college diploma and transfer to a university for the final years of their education. These pathways are also usually drawn out in articulation agreements made between universities and colleges.

The process of applying to university from colleges often depends on the nature of the transfer agreement, which are many in number. According to the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, as of June 30 2014 there are over 590 active c-u pathways and over 90,000 course specific equivalencies in Ontario established between institutions for different programs, which are part of over 700 articulation/block transfer agreements between colleges and universities. 300 of these articulation agreements have occurred in the last two years.¹⁶ These pathways also give students the opportunity to eventually receive both a college diploma and a university degree if they choose to complete their diploma before transferring to university.

¹⁵ Constantineau, *The Ontario Credit Transfer System*, 2009.

¹⁶ OUSA data request to ONCAT October 2014.

Figure 3: Transfer Pathways Available on the ONTransfer Web Portal - June 2014

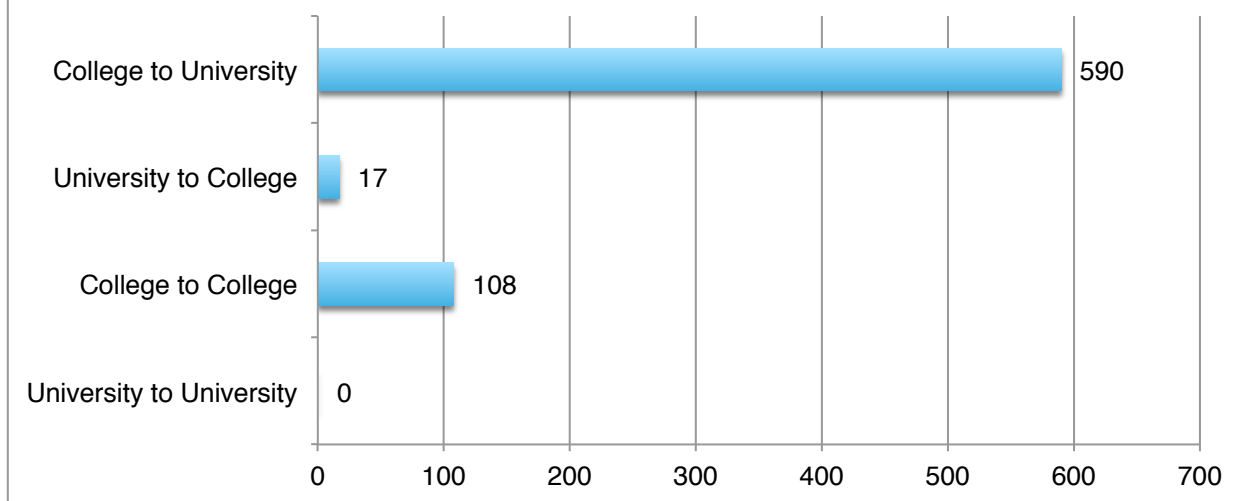


Figure 4: Incoming and Outgoing Pathways by Institution 2014-2015¹⁷

Institution	Incoming pathways	Outgoing pathways
Algoma University	25	17
Algonquin College	19	438
Brock University	43	16
Cambrian College	0	345
Canadore College	0	287
Carleton University	34	16
Centennial College	2	426
Conestoga College	64	374
Confederation College	1	326
Durham College	0	410
Fanshawe College	0	446
Fleming College	0	385
George Brown College	4	337
Georgian College	7	417
Humber College	20	397
La Cité collégiale	0	296
Lakehead University	45	16
Lambton College	0	329
Laurentian University	42	16
Le Collège Boréal	0	260
Loyalist College	0	360
McMaster University	11	16
Mohawk College	0	390
Niagara College	4	371

¹⁷ ONCAT Data Request October 2014

Nipissing University	11	16
Northern College	0	295
OCAD University	4	13
Queen's University	0	16
Ryerson University	14	15
Sault College	0	300
Seneca College	17	486
Sheridan College	42	392
St. Clair College	0	379
St. Lawrence College	0	354
Trent University	62	16
University of Guelph	36	16
UOIT	35	16
University of Ottawa	8	16
University of Toronto	0	16
University of Waterloo	7	16
University of Windsor	45	16
Western University	27	16
Wilfrid Laurier University	8	16
York University	78	16

Setting the Stage: Recent Government Investments in Credit Transfer

To address the fact that credit transfer in Ontario was not meeting the needs of sector stakeholders, the Government of Ontario announced in February 2011 that it would be implementing a new credit transfer system. This announcement came with a total investment of \$73.7 million over five years, which will go towards three specific initiatives:

1. *Credit Transfer Innovation Fund*: A program created to support the development of new transfer models and student pathways, particularly in high-demand program areas. The College-University Consortium Council (CUCC) and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) currently share separate responsibilities in the administration of the innovation fund. MTCU is able to set priorities for the fund, while ONCAT decides upon funding for individual project proposals and how the request for participation should be structured. The fund works on a request for participation basis, where universities and colleges work together to propose new credit transfer pathways and articulation agreements in specified subject areas. In 2013-14, several CTIF Pathway projects included: “12 college diploma/advanced diploma to university degree projects, one project to develop the bridge from college business accounting programs to university accounting degree programs into an on-line format, [and] Course-to-Course Equivalency to facilitate the transfer of specific course credits.”¹⁸ In addition, the Innovation Fund was being used to support 24 research projects and the creation of a database of course-to-course equivalencies.¹⁹
2. *Credit Transfer Institutional Grants*: The institutional grants are in place to support institutions as they implement the new credit transfer system. They are provided

¹⁸ Mario Bruyere & Geri Smith, *Credit Transfer Institutional Grants (CTIG)*, presentation by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities at the 2nd Annual Student Pathways in Higher Education Conference (2013).

¹⁹ Ibid.

directly to institutions by MTCU and are intended to allow institutions to upgrade their credit transfer infrastructure. All funds from these grants must be used to fulfill the CTIG goals of “improved transfer pathways, transparent and accessible information, and student success.”²⁰ For instance, funds can be spent on hiring advisors, beginning new orientation programs for transfer students, increasing participation in credit transfer assessment, or improving information systems for tracking and reporting on credit transfer activity and student success. In 2011-12, \$8.5 million was spent in credit transfer grants to each of Ontario’s 44 publicly subsidized institutions.

3. *Credit Transfer Accountability Framework:* The credit transfer accountability framework will oversee the progress of Ontario’s new credit transfer system towards the goals set out by the provincial government. The framework will provide a set of performance indicators that will allow the government to measure progress toward an enhanced credit transfer system. The framework will be developed over the course of two years and will seek to direct funding for the improvement of credit transfer activities. Currently, ONCAT is coordinating a pilot project with approximately 10 institutions (universities and colleges) to develop the data collection strategies, system changes, and information analyses used to inform implementation of the Accountability Framework.²¹

The investment has also supported a large number of research projects on the characteristics, success, and preferences of transfer students, which will allow policymakers to better understand the needs of transfer students as the system transforms. The implications of this new government plan for credit transfer in Ontario are varied. On the one hand, it is an indication that there will be resources to support and incentivize improvements to credit transfer in coming years; this is not an insignificant fact in an environment where Ontario is looking to control public spending. Many of the recommendations contained in this paper could be funded with these dedicated resources.

On the other hand, very little in this plan incentivizes universities to remove barriers to transfer credits. Both the innovation funds and institutional grant act as financial incentives, but the approximately \$15-30 million that has been spent to date is not nearly enough to change the behaviour of sometimes reluctant institutions. If \$8.5 million is spent this year, it will only amount to approximately \$193,000 per university, little more than the cost of a single professor. Clearly, more will need to be done to improve the situation for students. The principles, concerns, and recommendations that follow outline students’ proposed next steps to create a truly mobile post-secondary education system in Ontario.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Preamble

Where no specific type of transfer is specified, the following principles, concerns, and recommendations apply to both university-university and college-university transfer.

TRANSPARENCY

Principles

Principle One: The credit transfer process should be as transparent and predictable for students as possible.

With the additional personal and institutional expense from double-counting classes, it is imperative that students know and understand the standards by which their prior learning will be judged.

Transparency is a principle to which all post-secondary institutions should adhere in their administrative processes. Syllabi, which clearly lay out a roles and expectations, are given for every single course. Changes to academic programs will be passed through senates and boards of governors where all campus stakeholders have a voice at the table.

With credit transfer, however, transparency is often absent; it is often the personal, unilateral interpretation of an admissions officer or faculty staff member that decides whether a transfer credit should be awarded, sometimes with little or no explanation. This opacity makes it difficult for mobile students to predict the transferability of their credits, leading to difficulties in a student's decision-making process.

Students interested in transfer deserve to know the standards by which their prior learning will be judged, as well as the likelihood of their courses meeting eligibility requirements for transfer. Until this is achieved Ontario will lack a truly transparent credit transfer system and, by extension, a truly mobile post-secondary system.

Principle Two: Institutions must be responsible for providing students with an explanation for denied credit transfers.

As with other sections of the Ontario post-secondary system, accountability should be a key component of the credit transfer system. Students should be able to receive justification regarding why their credit transfers were denied. For a student to be confident that they have been treated fairly, they must be made aware of the details surrounding these decisions. For instance, if a credit in political science is not deemed transferable due to inconsistency between content taught in the sending and receiving institutions, students must know how this was determined and what the inconsistencies were.

Principle Three: Students should have the resources to understand their credit transfer options before being required to make decisions on post-secondary pathways.

With average undergraduate tuition for 2013-2014 sitting at \$7250.00 and college at \$3,243.50, choosing a post-secondary institution is no casual matter. Switching between institutions can be a very costly venture for students and the number of transfer credits that are accepted can

compound the cost of this transition. Not only do denied transfer credits cost students in extra tuition to repeat prior learning, but also in the amount of time they will need to make up those denied classes. For these reasons, knowing the number of credits that will transfer is important and beneficial for the transfer student.

The ONTransfer portal provides students with a means to assess their options should they wish to transfer under the purview of an articulated agreement between two post-secondary institutions. The site gives students a certain degree of guidance by providing links to each institution's credit transfer policies, a point of contact, and some course-specific information such as transferable courses from other institutions and relevant grade requirements.

In addition, many currently existing articulation agreements make few guarantees on which credits will be eligible for transfer and students who transfer outside the bounds of these agreements often have few resources with which to compare individual credit transfer pathways. All students should be fully and thoroughly equipped with this knowledge before being required to make decisions about the future of their post-secondary education.

Principle Four: Students should be able to appeal credit transfer decisions through a transparent and open process.

Institutions across Ontario give students access to a formal avenue through which to appeal grades: students who feel that their learning has not been fully recognized by the faculty or teaching assistants responsible for their grades may request the decision be reconsidered by an authority other than the marker.

The same principle should also be applied to prior learning recognition in the credit transfer process. If students do not believe a credit transfer advisor has accurately assessed whether the content or skills attained in a previous classroom are equivalent enough to facilitate credit transfer, the student should have some avenue through which to dispute the decision. Without an appeals process, the prior learning recognition process gives a small number of faculty members and credit transfer advisors a great deal of opaque and unilateral decision-making power over the credit transfer process.

Concerns

Concern One: Incoming transfer students often face difficulty throughout the transfer process.

Transferring to another institution can bring with it a host of challenges. Aside from navigating the complex bureaucracy of admissions and negotiating the transfer of credits, students have to sign up for courses, obtain a new student card, purchase books, look for housing in a new community, and navigate a new campus – all without the traditional orientation programming offered to first-year students. This can be an overwhelming experience.

Concern Two: Decisions made by institutions regarding credit transfer are often not appealable in obvious or transparent ways, leaving students primarily in charge of negotiating recognition of prior learning.

While many admissions offices at Ontario's post-secondary institutions allow students to dispute transfer decisions to the admissions officer that first made the decision, few offices have appeals processes that transcend the boundaries of the admissions department or receiving

faculty, or that foster cross-institutional dialogue to accurately assess prior learning. With prior learning assessments often simply consisting of an analysis of course syllabi, descriptions in an undergraduate calendar, or student transcripts, the thoroughness of the prior learning assessment process is already highly questionable.

Currently, the University of Ontario Institute of Technology is the only university where a student's credit transfer assessment is final and is unable to be appealed.

ONTransfer has been thorough in asking universities whether an appeal is possible ("Can I further discuss a credit transfer decision if I disagree with it?") and many universities do reply in the affirmative. Phone interviews with admissions officers conducted in early 2012 clarified that sometimes, senior levels of management in the admissions office would read appeals and that the decisions of individual officers could be overturned.²² However, it was a more common practice for the institutions that permitted appeals to contain these decisions within the admissions office or faculty where the decision was originally made; there would be no body separate from the faculty or officer that would re-assess the transfer decision. When OUSA contacted several universities, this common practice of containing the informal appeals was found at Brock, Ottawa, University of Toronto, Windsor, Laurier, and Western. Out of the seven schools contacted, only Laurentian had a process that would go to a separate senate committee to appeal decisions.²³

A process where an applicant appeals a decision through the same channels and personnel that originally made that decision is not thorough or transparent: it would be the equivalent of student appealing a grade to the same professor who had awarded the grade in the first place. Moreover, as credit decisions are often judgements of the value and equivalency of prior learning at another institution, a truly just appeals process should involve more opinions than that of the receiving institution; it should also include the input of the sending institution. As all the appeals processes at Ontario universities are currently unilateral, the onus is on the student to advocate for their prior learning, assuming the student has the time and resources to negotiate with faculty and admissions offices - a reality that is not always the case.

Concern Three: Some institutions require students to accept offers of admission before informing students of how many credits will transfer.

In order for the Ontario post-secondary education system to be truly transparent, it is important for students know the amount of credits accepted for transfer. Giving students the results of their transfer assessment with their offer of admission allows them to factor in financial considerations. Students with greater credit recognition will generally need to take fewer courses to fulfill requirements, resulting in lower costs.

However, many institutions will offer students their letters of admission before informing them of the number of credits that will transfer from their sending institution. Table 1 demonstrates that half of all universities in Ontario give transfer credit status with offers of admission.

Table 1: Credit Transfer Assessment and Admissions at Ontario Universities in 2014-15

²² Interview conducted on Wednesday, February 1st, 2012 with McMaster admission office

²³ OUSA Phone Interviews conducted October 2014 with admission offices.

Institution	Transfer Status Timing	Institution	Transfer Status Timing
Algoma	Received After Acceptance	Ottawa	Received On Admission Offer
Brock	Received On Admission Offer	Queen's	Received After Acceptance
Carleton	Received After Acceptance	Ryerson	Received After Acceptance
Guelph	Received On Admission Offer	Toronto	Received After Acceptance
Lakehead	Received On Admission Offer	Trent	Received On Admission Offer
Laurentian	Received on Admission Offer	UOIT	Received After Acceptance
Laurier	Received On Admission Offer	Waterloo	Received After Acceptance
McMaster	Received on Admission Offer	Western	Received On Admission Offer
Nipissing	Received After Acceptance	Windsor	Received On Admission Offer
OCAD	Received After Acceptance	York	Received After Acceptance

Students are concerned about the number of Ontario universities sending credit transfer assessments after acceptance of admission—this opacity forces students to make decisions without full considerations of all relevant factors.

Concern Four: Credit transfer policies often fail to utilize language that is student-friendly, clear, and consistent.

While most universities will have their own individual credit transfer policies listed online, the policies are inconsistent on an aggregate scale, making the process unnecessarily complicated and confusing for students. In a paper presented by Christine Arnold of the University of Toronto/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), it was noted that “students have to learn a new kind of language; they have to become literate in our [universities’] systems, structures, codes and terms” and that “a universal language, even among participants at a single institution, was difficult to come by.”²⁴ Arnold recounted that focus group participants were frequently in “side-discussions” to define or clarify common terms.

While the ONTransfer web portal has made leaps and bounds by having each university provide answers to consistent questions (questions like “What type(s) of credit does your institution award?” and “What is the minimum grade I must achieve for my credits to transfer?”), the answers given by each institution only underlines the inconsistent terminology used by each institution.

For example, in response to the question “What type(s) of credit does your institution award?” Brock University writes “exact equivalents, unspecified departmental credit, or unspecified

²⁴ Arnold, Christine *Transfer Literacy: Assessing informational symmetries and asymmetries*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2012.

elective credits” while the University of Ottawa indicates “Advanced Standing,” and the University of Waterloo answers with an assessment on individual basis to see if an “equivalent credit” or “non-specific credit” can be granted.^{25 26 27} This can be confusing for students, as the difference in terminology may imply differences in the way these credits are counted and with how much weight they are carried in each institution.

Concern Five: Students who transfer outside of articulation agreements have no means of predicting how many of their credits will transfer.

As each institution maintains autonomy over their transfer credit recognition, incoming transfer students who are not guaranteed a certain portion of their transfer credits in an articulation agreement are left to guess how many of their courses are equivalent to courses offered by the receiving institution. Given that these institutions hold differing levels of interest and commitment to credit recognition, students looking to transfer can be left as independent actors in a system that makes no guarantees.²⁸

For instance, York University may see equivalency in two political science credits, while the University of Toronto might not. A prospective transfer student currently has no way of knowing this relationship unless they were to actually apply to transfer to both institutions – a venture that carries significant up-front costs.

Recommendations

Recommendation One: Students should be offered an explanation if courses fail to transfer.

To create a truly transparent system, students should be given an explanation and justification why their course transfers were rejected, as well as options and adequate resources for an appeal. In order to facilitate meaningful appeals for credit transfer rejections, the explanations for the failure of transfer should be made clear to students.

In a report prepared for the Pan-Canada Consortium on Admission and Transfer (PCCAT), it is written that “work taken in the wrong discipline,” “work that has been attempted, but not passed,” and work that “begins where the preparatory work leaves off” are reasons why transfer credits are denied.²⁹ All three of these reasons are entirely reasonable when considering why a student would be denied credit transfer. However, it is important to consider how these justifications are made; the assessment that “work that has been attempted but not passed” could very much be made by a single administrator whose interpretation may vary from that of the student.

²⁵ “Brock University,” *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, http://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=transfer_profile_detail&inst=6

²⁶ “University of Ottawa,” *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, http://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=transfer_profile_detail&inst=12

²⁷ “University of Waterloo,” *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, http://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=transfer_profile_detail&inst=30

²⁸ Constantineau, *The Ontario Credit Transfer System*, 2009.

²⁹ Nick Heath, *Student Mobility in Canada: Across Canadian Jurisdictions*. Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer, 2012. http://www1.uwindsor.ca/pccat/system/files/PCCAT_mainreport_final-EN%20Full%20Document%20with%20logos.pdf

It is not standard fare for Ontario institutions to provide explanations for denied credit transfer, and this is counter-productive in the establishment of transparency in the credit transfer system. When OUSA contacted several post-secondary institutions in the fall of 2014, it was discovered that Brock, Laurentian, Ottawa, and Laurier provide no justification to the student on why their credits will be denied. Only Windsor provides such explanations, while at the University of Toronto, justification will be provided or not depending on which department is examining ones credits.³⁰ In order to encourage greater transparency and set the foundations for a proper and functional appeals structure, justifications for transfer credit denials must be given to students.

The British Columbia Council for Articulation and Transfer offers a number of suggestions to encourage the growth of such a response structure.³¹ For example, they provide professional development where administrators learn how to make consistent decisions and what sort of things to consider when making these transfer decisions. Students welcome a more structured and consistent (and thus transparent) form of response where the grounds for denial are clearly stated.

Recommendation Two: Students must be able to appeal credit transfer decisions to a higher and/or external authority.

In 2011, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities set an objective to “have a comprehensive, transparent and consistently applied credit transfer system that will improve student pathways and mobility.”³² In the current credit transfer system where decisions are often made unilaterally by an individual administrator, it is important to ensure that credit transfer decisions remain appealable to maintain appropriate levels of fairness and accountability. This appeals process must be visible to students and multi-layered.

Currently, appeals processes at Ontario institutions are divided between keeping the appeal in the admissions offices or sending them to faculty departments. In order for the system to remain accountable to the students, students applying for transfer must be informed of the justifications of transfer rejection and these students must be given the option and resources for the possibility of an appeal, first to the office that originally made the decision, but additionally to an outside authority able to make impartial decisions.

Since the credit transfer process deals with multiple institutions, the fact that prior learning assessment is the responsibility of only the receiving institution makes little sense. If a transfer credit is deemed inadmissible, but the only literature reviewed between institutions is an undergraduate calendar, course syllabus, or transcript, a meaningful student appeals process would bring representatives from the two institutions together to discuss the content and learning outcomes of the particular course. If a professor defending the student’s position cannot be in attendance of a student’s appeal, a potential option for students would be to have the professor write a reference letter on the student’s behalf to elaborate on the student’s work in the course and the content of the class.

³⁰ OUSA Phone Interviews conducted October 2014 with admission offices.

³¹ John FitzGibbon, *Transfer Credit Appeals in BC Post-Secondary Institutions*. (Vancouver: British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer, 2011). 4 http://www.bccat.ca/pubs/sr_dec11.pdf (accessed October 2014).

³² MTCU, Policy Statement for Ontario’s Credit Transfer System, (2011)

In addition to bringing together members of two institutions, students recommend creating a formal, consistent structure across all institutions for the transfer credit appeals process, similar to that of an academic petitions and grievances structure. This would contribute to the guiding principle of the 2011 MTCU policy statement previously mentioned, which states that the system should “include and/or facilitate processes to support consistency of application” in addition to “ongoing accountability.” Creating a consistent structure that seeks input from both participating institutions in a student’s transfer would greatly promote accountability and transparency in the system.

Recommendation Three: Offers of admission should include a list of credits that will transfer.

Attending university is a significant time and financial investment, so it is important for students to know if they will need to stay at university for an extended period of time. Taking more years than necessary at a post-secondary institution can be a costly venture, and thus an important decision to make.

Currently, only 10 of the 20 Universities in Ontario include the number of the student’s transferable credits with an offer of admission; all other universities send this information to students only after they accept their offers. Because of the considerable tuition and other costs associated with spending time at university, it is important for students to know if they will need to spend more time there than expected **before** they accept an offer of admission. To build on the transparent methods already being used at several institutions, students ask that all universities include a list of transferable credits with their offer of admissions.

Recommendation Four: Institutions and ONTransfer should continue to work together to create a thorough credit database for Ontario university students.

There currently exists an online credit transfer database in the form of ONTransfer, the goals of which are to “provide information and resources to help students and potential students find their way through Ontario’s postsecondary system.”³³ The database features an “interactive Transfer Guide,” in addition to information on different types of transfers (college to university, university to university).

However, while students are encouraged by the existence of such a database, which acts as a consistent central hub for information that was previously scattered across multiple university websites, students are disappointed that a website with such enormous potential fails to include university equivalencies.³⁴

Students recommend that the Ontario government push for greater representation of university courses with both ONCAT and thus ONTransfer to “provide accessible information to students, parents and guidance counselors/advisors on postsecondary education pathways, credit transfer and agreements,” as stated in MTCU’s 2011 Policy Statement for Ontario’s Credit Transfer System.

Recommendation Five: Institutions should work together to develop a common format for their credit transfer policies, utilizing consistent language.

³³ “How we can help.” *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, http://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=how_we_can_help

³⁴ *ONTransfer.ca*, accessed October 2014, <http://www.ontransfer.ca>

In 2011, the Ministry of Colleges, Trade and Universities stated that one goal in its Credit Transfer System policy was to “improve transparency and access to information about pathways and credit transfer.³⁵ To create a truly transparent system, inconsistent and unclear language that may confuse students must be removed and the undertaking of consistent language, formats and terminology.

Though the ONTransfer web portal provides links to university transfer policies, the policies to which the portal sends the user differ in language, format, and terminology in reference to key information. One of the most confusing parts of the transfer process is comparing grade requirements for different universities. The grade point average system can vary drastically at each respective university and confuse students who are examining whether or not their credits would meet their desired school’s grade requirements for transfer. An effective way to improve the transparency of Ontario’s credit transfer system would be to adopt a common credit transfer policy format between all credit transfer policies; such a system would allow a student to compare university transfer pathways in a comprehensible way whereby important pieces of information, such as minimum grade and residency requirements would be readily available. To bring further clarity to the credit transfer process the ONTransfer web portal must also offer a grade point average calculator for students to calculate their GPA at their current institution and calculate it at their desired institution of transfer. This can help ensure that a student can clearly see whether or not their credits will meet each respective institutions credit transfer grade requirements.

Given that articulation agreements already exist between multiple universities, it only makes sense that students should be provided both a common policy and language format in order assess factors like course content and academic rigour on their own.³⁶ Beginning to do so could be just as simple as using the glossary provided by ONCAT glossary of terms, as described by the method one enterprising senior leader undertook in the OISE report.³⁷ Students believe that these policies should be as clear and transparent as possible, should include clear language in references to all types of transfer (2+2, college to university, university to college), and should transfer across all years of study (differentiating between first and last two years).

CONSISTENCY

Principles

³⁵ MTCU, Policy Statement for Ontario’s Credit Transfer System, (2011)

³⁶ The policy statement is not publically available, but nearly all of Ontario universities mention this quote in their institutional credit transfer policies, available in each institution’s academic calendar.

³⁷ Christine Arnold, *Transfer Literacy: Assessing Informational Symmetries and Asymmetries*. (ONCAT, 2012).
http://www.oncat.ca/files_docs/content/pdf/en/oncat_research_reports/2012-2_ChristineArnold-Transfer-literacy-assessing-informational-symmetries-and-asymmetries.pdf

Principle Five: Post-secondary institutions in Ontario should work together to remove unnecessary barriers to transfer and make decisions as consistent as possible.

One of the Ontario government's stated goals for credit transfer announced in the 2011 policy statement is to "provide a high degree of consistency across the province in the review of transfer credit for students applying for transfer between Ontario institutions."³⁸ Students wholeheartedly agree with this goal, as a consistent method of assessing transfer credits would create a more seamless and understandable process. If students are aware at the time of application of the expectations that their prior education will be measured against, they will be empowered to make a more informed choice about their post-secondary pathway.

In Ontario, there are already consistent system-wide practices in place. One regularly cited barrier to credit transfer is residency requirements. Over the years, institutions have developed institution-wide residency requirements that are generally 50 per cent or below. This standard has been very beneficial for facilitating credit transfer especially when the institution sets the residency requirement to only one year (25 per cent) of education. This sort of progress must be replicated in other areas relevant to transfer.

Principle Six: Credit transfer should be reflective of a student's prior learning, both in terms of skills gained and content learned.

To ensure all students and their respective institutions receive fair treatment, a passing grade recognized by an accredited provincially funded institution should be recognized as such by any other institution. Moreover, skills gained during a work term or co-op placement should be recognized and transferrable between institutions, utilizing currently existing prior learning assessment practices. Prior learning assessments should facilitate transfer between different styles and structures of experiential learning. Since the admissions process for transfer students is competitive by design, it is highly unlikely that transfer students will possess many credits with low grades associated. A student whose academic performance or skillset is suitable to be deemed admissible to an institution should receive full credit for their prior academic achievement. Members of the Council of Ontario Universities have already agreed that their educational quality is roughly equal, meaning that a pass at one university should not be regarded as less than a pass at another.³⁹

There are two types of minimum grade requirement: minimum entering averages and per-course minimum grade requirements. Minimum entering averages refer to the minimum cumulative average a student must have to transfer to a new institution, while per-course minimum grade requirements are the academic standard a student must have achieved in a particular course for that credit to transfer. Typically, both grade thresholds are applied to a student looking to transfer. First, at the point of application, their academic achievement is weighed in total. After admission, each credit's grade is assessed in order for transferability, at which time a minimum grade threshold is applied again. This principle only applies to the latter practice; that is, if a student is deemed admissible, high minimum grade requirements should not prevent credits from transferring.

³⁸ MTCU, Policy Statement for Ontario's Credit Transfer System, (2011)

³⁹ "Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities," *Council of Ontario Universities*, accessed October 2014, <http://cou.on.ca/getattachment/Policy-Advocacy/Credit-Transfer/Credit-Transfer-Ontario-Universities-%281%29.pdf>

Principle Seven: Similar undergraduate courses at the first or second year level at Ontario's universities should have enough equivalent content and learning outcomes to facilitate transfer.

Students believe that post-secondary institutions, when delivering substantively similar programs, should strive to create courses or equivalent course material and value that can be mutually recognized province-wide. Currently, Ontario's continued emphasis on institutional autonomy has allowed some institutions to lag behind in the process of building effective transfer credit pathways. As the 2012 report from the Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services puts it, "when students want to transfer from one university to another or from one college to another in comparable programs, they should be able to transfer a good number of credits."⁴⁰

Former MTCU Minister Brad Duguid has also emphasized these sentiments. In January 2014 following the launch of the ONtransfer website, Duguid emphasized that the database would help all institutions to recognize each other's first- and second-year courses in arts and science. Duguid has also warned that universities that do not strive to support credit transfer in first and second year courses risk losing out on a significant quantity of student enrolment.⁴¹

Program-to-program articulation agreements outlining the mutual recognition of program materials will allow, for example, a history student from Western to transfer to Queen's and not have to start their entire education again. Freedom to move from one institution to another while keeping applicable first and second year level courses will improve both achievement rates and reduce cost to both the student and the province.

Principle Eight: Institutional autonomy to develop distinct courses with diverse learning outcomes should not be hindered during the final years of study.

In the third and fourth year of an undergraduate program, specialization is often a reality of life. More independent study commences, seminar participation begins, and theses start to get written. These experiences often are highly dependent on student/faculty relationships and as such vary from school to school. With most schools currently setting residency requirements at 25-50 per cent, final-year study is already widely designed to be localized in a single institution. Students believe that academic experiences facilitated by this system should be maintained in future.

Principle Nine: Clear, consistent, and wide-ranging credit transfer pathways should be built for all types of transfer.

Students are currently dismayed by the fact that credit transfer has made so little progress in Ontario, particularly university-university transfer. While college to university transfer has a wide variety of benefits that should be explored to an equal degree, policymakers have long favoured this type of transfer despite clear barriers to university transfer students. Even for students transferring credits within a university, from program to program, the pathway is often not clear or obvious.

⁴⁰ Government of Ontario. Ministry of Finance. *Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services*, 2012.

⁴¹ Louise Brown. "Ontario website makes it easier for students to transfer credits" *The Toronto Star* (Oct 23 2014).

http://www.thestar.com/news/queenspark/2014/01/16/website_allows_ontario_students_to_transfer_credits_with_ease.html

Students do not agree that attention should be paid to the various credit transfer pathways in discrete stages (college to university, then university to university). The nature of building a mobile post-secondary system is such that it could always be improved, even if robust pathways were built from college-university and university-college. Different barriers plague each pathway and they should be tackled together for the benefit of all students.

Concerns

Concern Six: Where transfer articulation agreements do not exist, college and university transfer students are subject to inconsistent prior learning assessment practices.
--

When a student transfers credits from one institution to another, the receiving institution must assess whether the content of transfer credits aligns with equivalent courses offered by the receiving institution. Unfortunately for students, this process is far from consistent across institutions or even within institutions themselves. Often, decisions are based on the opinion of a single faculty member or credit transfer advisor or sometimes, the recommendation of a committee. In any case, the decision is made entirely at receiving institutions.

Credit transfer decisions are often based off of tenuous evidence of the teaching and learning that takes place at other Ontario universities. Most often, a credit transfer advisor or assessment committee will look at student transcripts and refer to the course descriptions in the sending institution's undergraduate calendar to assess equivalency.⁴² While viable alternatives may not currently exist, this decision-making process relies entirely on the language used in course descriptions accurately reflecting the learning outcomes of the class, as well as the opinion of the transfer assessor.

In a few cases, institutions require students to submit previous or up-to-date course syllabi to assessment committees or credit transfer advisors. Not only is it unreasonable to expect students to keep this documentation over the course of a four-year degree (which are often now only provided digitally through learning management systems), but also the usability for credit transfer relies entirely upon the quality of the syllabus itself. While some professors certainly provide detailed and thorough course descriptions and readings, quality cannot be guaranteed system-wide.

Currently, learning outcomes of undergraduate programs in Ontario are governed by the Quality Assurance Framework. This framework is governed by the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (referred to as the Quality Council), an arms-length group comprised of academic and administrative representatives from the members of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). The framework provides explanations on what each learning outcome means, as well as how it is differentiated between general bachelor's degrees and four-year honours programs. While the framework has good intentions, the descriptions and requirements of the framework are vague. The requirements themselves offer no concrete means of measuring how it is that students are communicating "accurately and reliably" or how they are able to make their knowledge available to a "range of audiences."⁴³

⁴² Interviews conducted with Credit Transfer Assessors, February 2012.

⁴³ OUSA *An Educated Reform*, July 2012, p 38.

In comparison, the Lumina Foundation in the United States has developed a qualifications framework that outlines expectations for associate, bachelor's, and master's degree levels. While Ontario's current qualifications framework relies on semantic interpretation, Lumina suggests competencies that more clearly differentiate between degree levels and areas of learning. Furthermore, the Lumina profile is constructed in a cumulative fashion, where the skills at each degree level come in addition to the skills at the previous level, allowing for each degree level to focus on a different set of skills. While this paper is not recommending that Ontario wholly adopt the Lumina profile, it serves as evidence that more comprehensive degree profiles exist which can help assess learning outcomes for programs and courses.⁴⁴

Table 2: Credit Transfer Assessment Documents at Ontario Universities in 2014-15⁴⁵			
Institution	Documents Required of Students	Institution	Documents Required of Students
Algoma	Secondary School Transcript, PSE Transcript, Syllabi (on request)	Ottawa	PSE Transcript, Course Codes and Titles, Course Descriptions
Brock	PSE Transcript	Queen's	Transcript, Course Descriptions
Carleton	PSE Transcript, Secondary School Transcript (for students who have only completed one year of PSE), Course Descriptions	Ryerson	PSE Transcript, Syllabi (for courses not previously assessed by Ryerson)
Guelph	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions for Students Transferring from Out of Province Encouraged	Toronto	Transcript, Course Codes and Titles, Course Descriptions
Lakehead	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions (unless applying under an articulation agreement)	Trent	PSE Transcript, Course Syllabi
Laurentian	PSE Transcript	UOIT	PSE Transcript, Course Syllabi
Laurier	PSE Transcript, Course Outlines (on request)	Waterloo	PSE Transcript, Course Syllabi
McMaster	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions (for students transferring from out of province)	Western	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions (for courses not previously assessed by Western)
Nipissing	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions	Windsor	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions
OCAD	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions, Syllabi, Portfolio Review	York	PSE Transcript, Course Descriptions

Concern Seven: Credit recognition across institutions is significantly more difficult to navigate depending on a student's discipline.

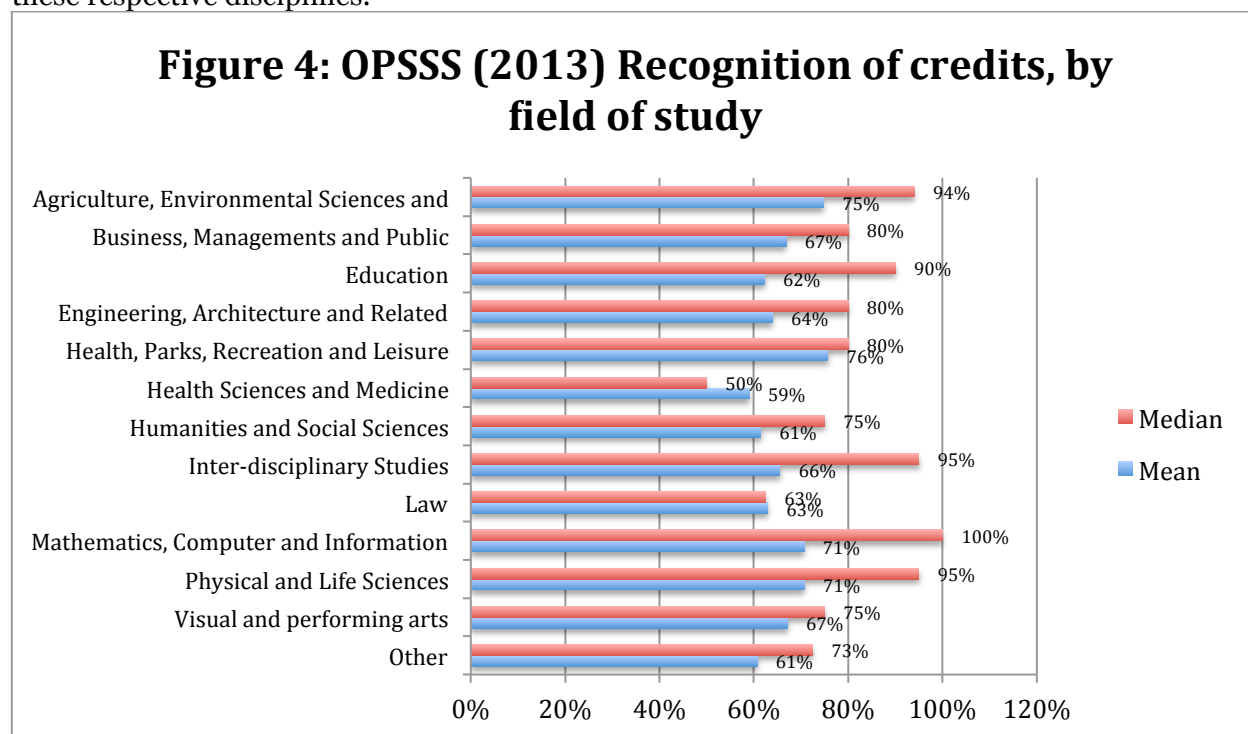
Ontario has traditionally been reluctant to impose any sort of limitations or expectations on universities regarding academic content. While this has certainly contributed to a strong culture of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, it has also posed a legitimate barrier to credit transfer. Consistently evolving disciplines are studied differently at each university, making true course equivalency a guessing game at best.

Students in common majors in the arts and social sciences should theoretically have an easier time transferring, due to the fact that nearly every university offers these programs. However, this is not always the case. When a student applies for a credit transfer between two Ontario universities, they face difficulty finding appropriate credits to transfer between institutions, because the courses they took do not have precise equivalents at the new institution. This was exemplified in OUSA's Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey conducted in November 2013 that found that median credit recognition in arts, humanities, and social science was lower in comparison to other programs such as education, math, and even business. This would seem to indicate that that despite social science, humanities, and arts courses being common majors at

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ OUSA Review of Institutional Policies, August 2014.

almost every university, academic freedom has posed a legitimate barrier to credit transfer in these respective disciplines.



Concern Eight: Minimum grade requirements prevent students who have demonstrated enough knowledge to successfully complete from transferring earned credits to their new degree.

Minimum grade requirements are in place to ensure that credits transferred are reflective of student learning equal to the standards of the receiving program. Entering averages are often competitive, and should be assessed by the institution according to the institution's own standards. However, once a student from either university or college is accepted based on their overall academic standing, their individual credits should not be subject to a higher passing standard than students at that institution. Furthermore, some programs also have pre-defined averages in order to maintain status in the program. These programs should also remain in place, according to the institution's own standards.

Most post-secondary transfer programs between colleges and universities require the college class mark to be between a 70% and 75% in order to be approved for transfer to the university; however, the passing mark for most university transfer is 60% or 65%.

Table 3: Per-Course Minimum Grade Requirements at Ontario Universities in 2014-15

Institution	College	University	Institution	College	University
Algoma	--	--	Ottawa	50%	60%
Brock	70%	60%	Queen's	60%	60%
Carleton	--	--	Ryerson	70%	60%
Guelph***	70-80%	60-75%	Toronto	N/A	60%
Lakehead	70%	60%	Trent	70%	60%
Laurentian	65%	50-60%*	UOIT	70%	60%
Laurier (Brantford)	75%**	B-	Waterloo	70%	60%
McMaster	75%	C	Western	60%	70%
Nipissing	70%	C	Windsor	B	60%
OCAD	65-70%	65-70%	York	70%	65%

* A grade of 50% or above is sufficient for elective credits, while 60% or above is necessary for required courses

** This number is for Laurier Brantford. The Waterloo campus looks at each transfer individually.

*** Differs depending on a student's program.

By rejecting credit transfer applications for students who have succeeded in completing a course based on an arbitrary grade level requirement, students are forced to retake courses or even restart their post-secondary education entirely, which unnecessarily costs both the province and student time and resources. A course's final mark, as long as it is a pass, should not be a factor in granting recognition to a recognized learning outcome.

Concern Nine: High residency requirements can serve as an unnecessary barrier to student mobility.

Another unnecessary barrier to student mobility is high residency requirements. These requirements specify the minimum number of courses that need to be taken at the receiving university to obtain a credential from the university. These requirements are typically two years or 50% of credits – though it can be as high as 75% in some programs.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the requirement can be lowered or waived in rare circumstances. The chart below displays institutional minimum residency requirements. However, individual faculties can set minimum grade requirements at higher thresholds.

⁴⁶ Philippe Constantineau, *The Ontario Credit Transfer System*, 2014

Table 4: Residency Requirements for Undergraduate Students at Ontario Universities in 2014-15⁴⁷⁴⁸

Institution	Residency Requirement	Institution	Residency Requirement
Algoma	25%	Ottawa	50%
Brock	25%	Queen's	51%
Carleton	25%	Ryerson	50%
Guelph	25%	Toronto	50%
Lakehead	25%	Trent	50%
Laurentian	25%	UOIT	50%
Laurier	50%	Waterloo	50%
McMaster	50%	Western	50%
Nipissing	25%*	Windsor	25%
OCAD	50%	York	25%*

*50% of required courses must be completed at the degree-granting university.

These requirements can potentially serve as a barrier to credit transfer. If a residency requirement is higher than 50 per cent it is impossible to transfer any of your credits after your second year. For those as high as 75 per cent the institution essentially puts up a barrier to transferring after the first year. While most of the above residency requirements are the minimums for arts and general science programs, some engineering, professional, and specialized programs may have higher requirements. Residency requirements are a legitimate tool to protect institutional integrity and degree value; however, this must be balanced with the need for a mobile system for students.

Concern Ten: Universities are failing to offer robust and affordable Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) opportunities for students who have gained knowledge and skills from the labour market.

The Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition is a process designed to recognize knowledge and skills gained through professional and experiential learning, and provide academic credit commensurate with experience. Recognizing the value of PLAR assessment, the MTCU mandated that colleges utilize PLAR to “make colleges more accessible to a broad range of adult learners, help adults to become more productive and capable members of society, and increase the efficacy of the colleges by eliminating unnecessary training.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, there are currently no provincial policies governing PLAR at Ontario universities, and as such, prospective and existing credit transfer students are forced to spend time and money completing courses with content they have already mastered. This lack of the PLAR within Ontario universities hinders the transfer and recognition of student credits from one institution to another.⁵⁰

While some institutions such as Brock, Wilfrid Laurier, and Western do not offer PLAR opportunities whatsoever, some universities such as Laurentian allow a student to take a challenge exam to demonstrate their knowledge of course subject matter. Other institutions

⁴⁷ Based on inquiries and public website information, September 2014

⁴⁸ In most cases, the final year of study must be completed at the receiving institution.

⁴⁹ M. Morrissey and D. Myers, *Achieving Our Potential: An Action Plan for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition in Canada*. (Halifax: Prior Learning Assessment [PLA] Centre, 2008).

⁵⁰ Angelika Kerr, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Adult Learners in Ontario Postsecondary Institutions* (Toronto, 2011).

offer informal PLAR avenues via their faculty departments, such as the University of Windsor. However, fees for PLAR can be extremely high. At Algoma University, students are charged \$200 to have their prior learning assessed. A student requesting PLAR for a course at Windsor is required to pay half the price of each course they're requesting be assessed. Should a student be denied PLAR at Windsor, they are not refunded.⁵¹

Concern Eleven: Credit recognition for students who have graduated or participated in the International Baccalaureate Program or Advanced Placement programs are inconsistent across Ontario's Universities.

High school students who were registered in Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs during their time in secondary school may be granted credit or advanced placement (or both) in university. Each institution sets its own policies regarding credit and placement. For example, Western will consider AP Exams with scores of 4 or higher for transfer credit to a maximum of two full credits as approved by the appropriate faculty. Similarly at the University of Waterloo, applicants who submit AP Exams with normally a final score of 4 or higher will be eligible to receive credit at the University of Waterloo up to a maximum of three credits, depending on the program and is subject to the discretion of the appropriate faculty. Depending on which university a student applies, they may be granted a drastically different number of credits for their involvement in the IB program or for their AP exam scores. This sometimes can lead to larger universities being able to attract more IB/AP students while smaller universities do not have the same advantage to attract students. This information and links to each of these respective institution's comprehensive AP policies are made available on the Advanced Placement Program – College Board website - a website and database which provides information for all activities and transfer policies available for high school students registered in AP programs in Canada. While this database is an excellent resource, it is missing the AP policies of several universities including those of Wilfrid Laurier University despite the fact that AP credit transfer policies can be found at their university website.

For the AP policies that do exist at some universities including Laurier, AP credits are recognized on a program-to-program basis rather than an overall faculty policy like it currently is at the University of Waterloo. As a result, many programs at Laurier that are in the same faculty and have similar introductory courses give or deny credits differently despite having very similar curricula or learning outcomes. This means that a political science student is given credit for introductory international politics classes while a global studies student is denied despite both programs' introductory courses having very similar learning outcomes.⁵²

While high school students in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in Canada have a website/database where they can access contact links to each university's admissions office, the IB website, unlike the AP program website, does not provide any direct information on exactly what each university will offer in terms of credits. Similarly to AP credits, universities recognition of IB diplomas and test scores can vary drastically depending on where a student applies. This again tends to favour larger institutions that are able to offer more university credits.

⁵¹ Phone Interview with the University of Windsor Transfer Advisor, October 2014.

⁵² "Tools and Programs," *College Board International*, accessed October 2014, <http://international.collegeboard.org/programs/ap-recognition/canada>

Concern Twelve: Transformations to the credit transfer system in Ontario are being contemplated without adequate understanding of the current experiences of transfer students.

Relatively little is known about the experiences of transfer students from many backgrounds. Though the recent government investment has empowered ONCAT to fund research projects, the initial findings have painted mixed results. For instance, one study conducted at Brock University indicated that college transfer students did not differentiate from high school entry students on final course grade, likelihood of withdrawal or grades.⁵³ However, another study conducted at McMaster University indicated that college transfer students were slightly less likely to drop out, when controlling for full-time student status, age, program and a number of other factors.⁵⁴ When controlling for these factors, some college transfer students were less likely to graduate than some direct-entry students.

These two studies, both concluded in 2012, provide a small insight into what the success rates of some colleges transfer students could be. However, more work is necessary in order to truly understand whether or not receiving institutions, as well as the credit transfer pathways, are truly serving students.

Recommendations

Recommendation Six: Ontario universities should fully recognize any first or second year level credit courses successfully completed at another accredited Ontario university. These credits should count towards a student's chosen field of study unless they do not meet the respective grade requirements of that institution's program requirements.

In the 1995 Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits, the Premiers of Canada's provinces endorsed the following recommendation: that "all course work completed by transfer students during the first two years of university study in Canada will be recognized and fully credited for the purposes of granting a degree, provided that:

- The transfer student is deemed admissible and has been presented with an offer of admission;
- The transfer student has achieved a passing grade in his/her course(s) and has obtained grade levels that would normally be required of continuing students; and
- The credits earned are related to the program of study in which the transfer student will register, or the credits can be counted as electives for the program of study."⁵⁵

Students fully endorse the recommendation from this protocol. First, it will be a change affecting those students who need it most as demonstrated from OUSA's. The data gathered from OUSA'S Post-secondary Student Survey indicates that a significant proportion of students will transfer at some point in their university career. Though it is difficult to say based on this data in which years additional support for transfer is needed, it does illustrate how many

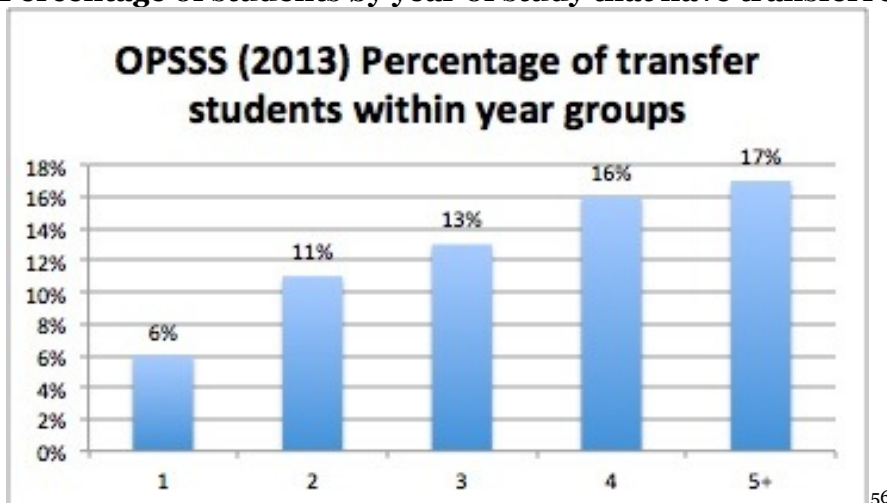
⁵³ Jo Stewart and Felice Martinello, "Are Transfer Students Different? First Year Grades and Course Withdrawals." *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 42:1 (2012) 25-42.

⁵⁴ Karen Menard, "A Longitudinal Analysis of the College Transfer Pathway at McMaster University." presentation to Student Pathways in Education Conference, Toronto (2012).

⁵⁵ *Pan-Canadian Protocol on the Transferability of University Credits*. Council of Ministers of Education Canada. Toronto, 1995.

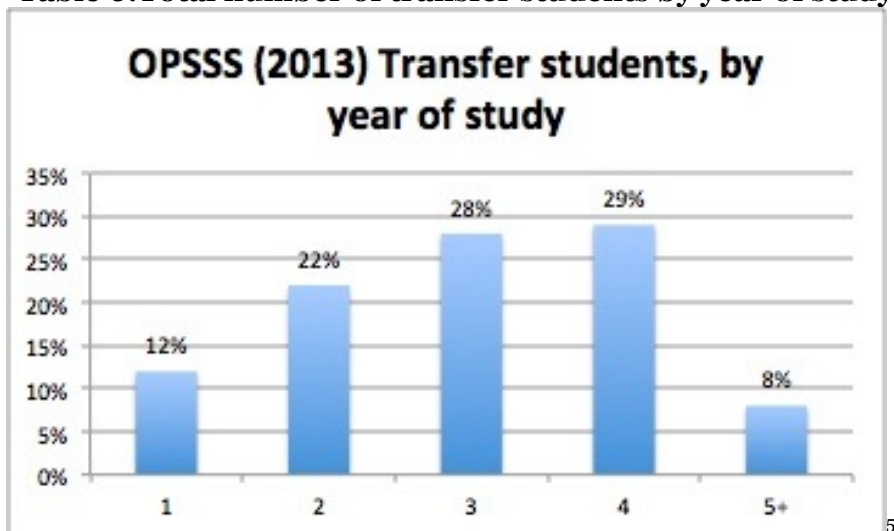
students will transfer at some point, and thus the need for systemic improvements such as the one above.

Table 5: Percentage of students by year of study that have transferred credits



56

Table 6: Total number of transfer students by year of study



57

The idea that the first two years of university should be fully transferrable between credit transfer pathways represents an effective compromise between the responsibilities of the public post-secondary system to offer a certain degree of student mobility and its responsibility to allow universities the freedom to differentiate in courses of study. Particularly in the early years of a degree, knowledge should be foundational, with common concepts taught in similar courses of study across from institution. However, as students specialize in upper years, it is understandable that transfer credit may be harder to grant. Early credit recognition between

⁵⁶ OUSA, survey, 2013.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

similar programs of study will also be useful to students due to the fact that has been found that more transfer takes place between similar programs than different ones.⁵⁸

Second, the creation of a broad credit transfer standard in the university sector will create a degree of certainty amongst university-to-university transfer students where none exists currently, despite the fact that university-to-university is the most common type of transfer. The process currently is such that no transfer student knows exactly how many of their credits will transfer. This system would allow students a broad understanding of how the credit transfer system works, allowing a degree of consistency and predictability currently lacking.

It is important to note that the recognized transfer credits would be applied as elective credit upon entering the accredited institution. The credits can be applied to the student's chosen field of study at the discretion of that institution. OUSA understands and respects that institutions will ultimately decide if the transferred credits can be applied to the student's chosen field of study. However, if the courses cannot be recognized at a student's chosen field of study it should at the very least be recognized as a general elective. If a student is granted more elective credits for their previous experience then their new respective chosen degree/program allows, these credits will be kept on their academic records but cannot be applied towards the completion of the program's degree if it does not meet their new program's criteria.

While students are broadly supportive of the goal of near-complete transferability in the first and second years of post-secondary education, this should not be taken as an indication that third and fourth year credits should have zero transferability. Rather, institutions should place most of their emphasis on development of pathways should take place in the first two years of education, since this is when the majority of transfers happen.

Recommendation Seven: The government or the Council of Ontario Universities should facilitate regularly scheduled meetings for program chairs of similar programs to work towards identifying common content and learning outcomes for first- and second-year undergraduate courses at Ontario Universities.

University credit transfer should only happen where equivalency in student learning can be found. However, where non-equivalencies are found, universities should act to create them. In high-demand areas, particularly science and engineering courses where residency requirements and additional documentation often act as barriers to transfer, it is recommended that university program chairs and deans meet annually to discuss opportunities to standardize first- and second-year course offerings or design common content in order to facilitate as much mobility in the early years of post-secondary education as possible. Students believe that this is precisely the sort of initiative that the government's credit transfer innovation fund could be utilized to support given its mandate to "support the development of new credit transfer models in student pathways, particularly in high-demand program areas." While this fund has initially been used towards college-to-university transfer, it could be expanded to university-to-university cases.

As the innovation fund is continued into the future students believe that fostering program equivalencies in first and second-year programs would be a tangible step towards the kind of broad multi-lateral agreement laid out in the CMEC protocol.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Even if these efforts are successful, institutional differences in individual course content will undoubtedly persist in some cases. For example, some universities will choose to cover a particular topic or skill in their first-year introductory course, when others will choose to cover it in an upper-year course. Granting full credit for required introductory courses to transfer students in these cases could negatively impact their performance in upper-year courses if the material covered was sufficiently inconsistent. In these cases, having the student repeat the entire course to learn one particular topic or skill seems an inefficient use of public and student resources. Instead, students urge program chairs and universities to work together to identify these significant gaps. Where the gaps cannot be overcome, universities must develop short bridge units for transfer students or have the students learn the material on their own and be assessed for full credit. The default response should not be for students to repeat entire courses or years of study.

Undoubtedly, some university programs will become more specialized even in the second year curriculum. OUSA does not wish to hinder innovative programs or advocate that these programs accept credits from other institutions to fill their first or second year program requirements if no other universities offer learning outcomes or content which is applicable to these programs. Rather, students believe that their credits should simply be recognized as an elective credit whether it be considered a first year or second year elective course to fulfilling a student's degree. For the first and second year courses that can be identified by program chairs in existing programs and similar learning outcomes can be found, these courses should be able to be transferred as long as they meet that respective institutions passing grade requirements. If the student wishes to have these credits applied to their chosen degree, then these credits are subject to the respective honours program requirements.

In 2012, the potential possibilities of credit recognition were demonstrated as seven universities in Ontario partnered to create the *University Credit Transfer Consortium*, an initiative that saw first year arts and science credit from a participating university recognized as a general credit at their home university. This partnership was between McMaster University, University of Guelph, University of Waterloo, Queen's University, University of Ottawa, and Western University.⁵⁹ This agreement has allowed for clarity and enhanced flexibility for students working towards their bachelor's degree at any of these institutions. With all seven institutions agreeing on equivalencies across more than 20 of their most popular and high enrolment courses, students who have successfully completed one at a participating institution are given credit for the equivalent course at their home university. While OUSA is strongly supportive of the progress of this initiative, students outside of arts and science programs at these respective institutions receive no benefit from this initiative. Furthermore, thirteen other universities have no involvement in the arrangement. It is important to note that this agreement demonstrates that institutions can work together to create a common commitment to academic programming. As such, Ontario institutions and program chairs should continue to strive towards identifying common academic learning outcomes in existing programs to facilitate credit transfer in respective university programs.

Recommendation Eight: The government should mandate that all per-course minimum grade requirements be set at the passing grade, as defined by the receiving institution.

⁵⁹ "Seven Ontario Universities Launch Sweeping Credit Transfer Initiative" *NewsWire* (Sep. 25 2012).
<http://www.newswire.ca/en/story/1042119/seven-ontario-universities-launch-sweeping-credit-transfer-initiative>

For Ontario's credit transfer system to be fair to all participants, accredited post-secondary institutions must respect the academic rigour of all other post-secondary institutions. At nearly every Ontario University the minimum grade requirement is substantially higher for college transfer students than university transfer students. Additionally, between universities the minimum grade requirement varies between 60 and 75 per cent for transfer.

While students agree that institutions should be able to retain control over their admissions criteria, most minimum grade requirements refer not to an entrance average, but rather the individual mark associated with a transfer credit. For students who have already received an offer of admission, transfer credit should not be denied because of a minimum grade requirement set to a standard higher than the passing grade at the receiving institution. For example, if a student is accepted into Brock University from Mohawk College, they should not be denied credit for a course they achieved a 69 per cent grade in. If they were to take that class at Brock University and achieve a 69 per cent, they would receive the credit. This transfer credit would only be able to be applied to a student's specific program at the new institution if the credit meets that respective program's grade requirements for its honours programs. The credit will simply be applied as an elective credit if it does not meet the respective program's requirements for its honours students.

In a few select cases, universities set per-course minimum grade requirements above the passing grade (60 per cent at most universities) for university transfer students. This is particularly frustrating for students since universities themselves have agreed that they are approximately equal in terms of academic rigour.⁶⁰ Students believe that institutions should be allowed to set entrance averages at whatever standard they deem necessary, but that per-course transfers should adhere only to the passing grade.

Recommendation Nine: To better facilitate student mobility, Ontario universities must develop robust learning outcome measurements that are consistent across institutions.

One element that has hindered the progress of credit transfer system-wide has been a lack of understanding regarding the learning outcomes of Ontario higher education. For both universities and colleges, rhetoric on learning outcomes is long, but proof of student learning is short.⁶¹

Given that courses across universities are non-cumulative in nature, students believe that credit transfer decisions should be based upon learning outcomes more so than content where possible. Unfortunately this sort of system is currently not implementable at Ontario universities due to a lack of universally recognized ways to measure learning outcomes. These learning outcomes should be applied to programs holistically, as opposed to individual courses.

However, if credit transfer were to be based on measured learning outcomes of programs, the measurements would have to be inclusive of the diverse learning styles across programs and disciplines, particularly between colleges and universities. To date, very little detailed analysis has been completed on the learning outcomes of college diploma programs, particularly with regards to compatibility with the skillset required to succeed in university programs. Until this

⁶⁰ *Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities*. Council of Ontario Universities, accessed October 2014, <http://www.cou.on.ca/getattachment/Policy-Advocacy/Credit-Transfer/Credit-Transfer-Ontario-Universities-%281%29.pdf>

⁶¹ Richard Arum and Josipa Roska. *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011).

work is done, inter-system transfer should be pursued where adequate compatibilities can be found.

Recommendation Ten: To facilitate credit transfer, Ontario universities should develop a mechanism to collectively share all course descriptions and syllabi while also supporting the development and adoption of electronic transcript exchange standards.

In the digital era, it is time to put an end to the current practices of students submitting course syllabi and descriptions to have their credits assessed for transfer. This is a time-consuming and unnecessary requirement. If ONCAT or the Council of Ontario Universities were to establish the online means for institutions to share this information the system would improve dramatically. While it would be logistically challenging to maintain current information considering the multitude of learning management systems in place, a long-term priority for ONCAT and Ontario's institutions must be to move past the era of students submitting paper copies of syllabi for credit recognition. A database that faculty could actively populate with course syllabi to in order to facilitate transfer would be greatly helpful to this end.

To further improve the speed at which transcripts are processed by the institutions, all universities should also develop capacity to both send and receive transcripts from students and other universities electronically, as submitting transcripts by mail is more time-consuming for both parties. In a recent report from the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions & Transfer and the Association of Registrars of the Universities & Colleges of Canada, OUSA's recommendation to support the development of electronic transcript exchange was supported as one of their six points for enhancing transcript and transfer credits in Canada.⁶² By developing a mechanism for sharing this information electronically, it will not only fulfill the MTCU's suggestion to increase transparency and access to information about pathways and credit transfer as recommended in their 2011 publication *Policy Statement for Ontario's Credit Transfer System*, but will also improve efficiency and consistency of decision-making while saving time and money for students, faculty, and staff alike.⁶³

Recommendation Eleven: The government should audit institutional residency requirements in all programs, and mandate reductions of those above 50 per cent.

Residency requirements set at 50 per cent guarantee that a student completes at least 50 per cent of their learning at the institution that is granting their degree. Any requirement beyond 50 per cent is too great a barrier to credit transfer and the requirements should be lower as they already are at some universities. Any student should be able to transfer to a similar university program at the end of second year and not have to complete more than two additional years to get a four-year degree. Anything more costs both the province and student inordinate time and resources. Residency requirements beyond two years create a dynamic where that goal is impossible. Currently Queen's University is the only institution with a residency requirement greater than 50 per cent. However, both Nipissing University and York University require a student to complete at least 50 per cent of required courses at the degree-granting institution.

⁶² ARUCC/PCCAT National Project Transcript Guidelines and Transfer Credit Nomenclature Study. The Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions & Transfer and the Association of Registrars of the Universities & Colleges of Canada (2014). p 117.

⁶³ MTCU, Policy Statement for Ontario's Credit Transfer System, (2011)

The government should state publicly its position on the matter and monitor compliance with this principle. If an institution or program has a residency requirement above 50 per cent, appropriate action should be taken to bring the requirement in line with provincial policy. However, if a particular, purpose-built program exists that cannot function effectively without a high residency requirement, institutions should be under no obligation to accept transfer students to these programs in the first place.

Recommendation Twelve: To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must offer the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition free of assessment costs to all students.

To ensure that all students are not unfairly forced to spend time and money on completing courses with content they have already mastered through prior learning or work, all Ontario universities must integrate PLAR into their academic programs. As the demographics of university students evolve to include more students who are returning to school, or who are moving between educational pathways, to upgrade their skillset, it is in the interest of all post-secondary institutions in Ontario to offer them PLAR. Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition can include enhanced application processes involving life experience essays, work experience assessments or, as Athabasca University does, credit ‘challenges’ where a student can demonstrate appropriate skills and outcomes in order to earn credit in a particular subject area.

As previously noted, it is also critical to ensure that students are not charged mandatory assessment fees which can be extremely high and do not guarantee that the requested credit will be granted. As students already face financial burdens, and students who are transferring may have to deal with additional costs in comparison to other students (e.g. relocation costs), it is important not to add additional strain.

Recommendation Thirteen: To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must standardize their credit requirements for IB/AP credits and exam scores.

To ensure that all IB and AP high school students can access consistent information related to credit recognition prior to their application and to help ensure that AP and IB students are not unfairly denied credits for choosing to study specific undergraduate programs at specific universities, Ontario universities must standardize their grade/exam score requirements for IB/AP credits. Specifically for AP Credits, these credits should be recognized as a specific course at post-secondary institutions. For example, if an AP Biology class meets the grade requirements of an accredited institution, this class should be applicable

The fact that an IB/AP student applying to an undergraduate program such as business may be granted a drastically different number of first or second year credits depending on where they apply can prevent a student from studying at specific universities, even if they are the most accessible or convenient to that student. For example, while some universities will accept a score of 3 as AP transfer credit, some institutions require scores of 4 or 5 for that same introductory class. By standardizing credit requirements and scores for IB/AP courses/exams, all universities can have equal opportunities to attract IB/AP students while also ensuring that students are provided with consistent information related to their credit recognition prior to their admission to university.

Recommendation Fourteen: While the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer should continue to fund research projects on all aspects of student

mobility, there must be an emphasis on researching university-to-university transfer.

At a conference in 2012, the College-University Consortium Council unveiled some of its first preliminary sponsored research projects, which provided the higher education community with a limited, but important, understanding of the success rates of college transfer students. The findings of these studies, including that “transfer shock” exists (i.e. some transfer students are more likely to drop out than other students, and that in some cases, they might be more likely to graduate), are greatly indicative of the need for further study on transfer students across all types of transfer. For instance, almost nothing is currently known about university-to-university transfer students, university to college transfer students, or college-to-college transfer students. Much of the available research focuses on college-university transfer, with the research posing as many important further questions as answers to current policy issues.

Students are glad that the CUCC has funded a swath of research projects related to credit transfer and looks forward to ONCAT continuing this legacy.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Principles

Principle Ten: Institutional recognition of prior learning at an accredited post-secondary institution should not require the payment of additional fees.

Students understand that prior learning recognition is not a cost-free venture and in some cases requires universities to create tests, assignments, or exams for a potential student. This is particularly relevant for students applying for advanced placement or those who wish to have outside-the-classroom learning recognized in a post-secondary context. It is understandable that for the extra effort of creating an extra assignment, test, or exam, an institution might charge a nominal fee to cover the cost of assessment for a student who may not even be registered for classes yet.

However, for students who simply wish to transfer credit from a previous accredited post-secondary institution without any learning outcomes evaluation, the prospect of paying fees for transfer credit is completely unacceptable. Transfer students have already paid full tuition and ancillary fees at their previous institutions, which have been recognized in multiple agreements to be valid by all Ontario universities. Paying extra fees to a new institution to have this prior learning recognized simply reinforces the kind of double payment that an improved credit transfer system is supposed to avoid.

Given the system-wide benefits of increased credit recognition to universities, students and the government, it is puzzling that universities continue to pose financial disincentives for students to pursue transfer pathways.

Principle Eleven: Students must be adequately supported throughout their transfer experience, as well as throughout their time at the new institution.

The credit transfer process often places the student as an individual actor in a complex system, which for a variety of reasons does not always recognize the validity or quality of prior learning. It is important that students receive assistance throughout the process of transferring to

university, from application to orientation. The application process varies drastically for college and university transfer students. Transfer credit professionals at receiving institutions should be able to guide students through each step of the process, offering advice for common hurdles.

In July 2014, Seneca College announced that they were establishing the first Ontario Centre dedicated to research in student mobility. The Centre for Research in Student Mobility will be investigating “student movement within postsecondary education provincially, nationally and internationally to help inform policy, program and pathway development, student advising, student support services and institutional partnerships.”⁶⁴ OUSA supports this development as it aligns with our belief that students should be adequately supported throughout their transfer experience. It will be important to monitor the research findings of the Centre, as examining student mobility within postsecondary sector provincially, nationally and internationally will help inform policy, program and pathway development for transfer students in the future.

Principle Twelve: Students participating in bridging programs should be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for success at receiving institutions.

Two types of bridging programs exist to help students transfer into and out of education systems: college-university transition bridges and participation-related bridges. While college-university transition bridging programs work to equip transferring college students with the skills necessary to succeed in university, participation-related bridges assist those students who might otherwise not participate in university at all.

College-University Transition

College-university transition bridges exist to facilitate greater system-to-system transfer between colleges and universities. Often, they exist to fill in the gaps between college and university learning in similar programs, facilitating entry from a college diploma into an upper year of a university program. For example, in 2010, the University of Ottawa set up a bridging program with Algonquin and Cité Colleges, allowing students to graduate in engineering programs, take a summer bridging course and transfer into second year engineering at uOttawa.⁶⁵

Participation-Related Bridging Programs

Students who have been out of the education system for an extended period of time often face challenges in meeting the entrance requirements for university, which can be higher than the passing grade for college graduates. Given the need for higher education to act as a tool for social mobility, as well as the increasing labour market demand for university graduates, it is increasingly important that government and universities find innovative and effective ways of training students on the margins for success in university. While credits should not transfer where poor academic performance prevented a student from entering university in the first place, students on the margins should not be shut out of university indefinitely, nor be made to repeat another costly post-secondary credential.

⁶⁴ “Seneca establishing first Ontario Centre dedicated to research in student mobility,” *Seneca College*, accessed October 2014, <http://www.senecacollege.ca/media/2014/2014-07-16.html>

⁶⁵ “Engineering ‘Bridge’ program with Algonquin College and Cite College,” *University of Ottawa Faculty of Engineering*. Accessed October 2010, <http://www.engineering.uottawa.ca/en//undergraduate/bridgeprogram>

Bridging programs can be an important means of giving students who lack the prerequisites for university or college an opportunity to qualify for entry and credit transfer. These programs also provide potential students with a foundational experience involving coursework in a university or college environment, and can be particularly valuable for those who have abandoned or disrupted their secondary studies. They differ in design but typically involve advanced academic support, reduced tuition, and often a chance to automatically enroll in the host institution upon completion of the program. The estimated 5.8 million Canadians who lack credentials beyond the secondary school level could benefit greatly from second chance educational opportunities. This is especially true as there is an increasing need for many Canadians to go back to school to take courses to upgrade their skillset in order to re-enter the labour market. This includes many individuals from underrepresented groups with lower than average secondary school completion rates, such as Aboriginal students, certain groups of immigrants, and male students.⁶⁶

Concerns

Concern Twelve: Some institutions currently charge students ancillary fees for credit transfer.

At many institutions across Ontario, students face a variety of fees associated with credit transfer. These fees generally fall into one of two categories:

- *Assessment Fees:* Assessment fees are fees charged to a student in order to have their transcript assessed for credit transfer.
- *Per-Credit Transfer Fees:* Transfer fees are charged to a student after an assessment has been made, and are required for a student's credits to successfully transfer. Generally the fees are charged for each credit recognized by the new institution.

Table 7: Ancillary fees charged to transfer students

Institution	Assessment Fee
Laurentian University	\$50.00*
Nipissing University	\$50.00
Ryerson University	\$50.00**
University of Toronto	\$30.00
University of Windsor	\$50.00

*Assessment fee only applies to students enrolling part-time

** A \$50.00 Transfer Credit Late Fee is charged for each credit transfer request a student requests after April 1, 2015 for any transfer credits requested for the 14/15 academic year.

Examples of transfer assessment fees can be found at five of Ontario's twenty universities, ranging from \$30 to \$50 for a transfer assessment. It is important to note that these fees come in addition to application fees levied by either the Ontario University Applicant Centre or the receiving institution itself. This is likely not a comprehensive list of the fees associated with credit transfer, but were the only clear available examples of fees charged simply for the purpose of assessing transfer credit. Previously, Brock University had charged a \$40.00 credit transfer

⁶⁶ Lynne Bezanson, Peter Dietsche, Glen Jones, and Alan Wright. *Neither a moment nor a mind to waste*. (Montreal: Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2008.)

assessment fee but has since eliminated it and instead assessment is covered under Brock's general application fee.

Fees for transfer credit assessment are particularly troubling in a context where Ontario has set a goal to "build on the foundation of student mobility and accessibility for all students... including underrepresented groups."⁶⁷ Though the cost of a small administrative fee is perhaps not equivalent to the amount saved by not repeating a course, it can still represent a significant financial barrier when added to other application fees charged to students, which are often well in excess of \$100 dollars.

Table 8: Summary of Fees for OUAC 105 (All Other Undergraduate Applicants) 2014-2015	
Base Application Fee	\$145
International Service Fee (only if mailing is outside of Canada)	\$10
Additional Choice Fee (for each program outside of initial three)	\$47
Transcript Request Fee	\$12

Similarly, the authors of this paper were only able to find one example of a true per-credit transfer fee at OCAD, where students pay \$25 dollars per credit transferred. However, institutional schedules for administrative user fees often use a variety of terms to describe similar fees and are often incomplete. Anecdotal evidence suggests that other institutions also charge per-credit transfer fees.

Table 9 illustrates the general costs that a transfer student encounters in applying to different institutions—each institution additionally requires their own individual fees, the average of which is \$71 (the most expensive fee is \$90 from York University, University of Toronto, and Queen's University, and the least expensive at \$50 from Nipissing University, Laurentian University, and the University of Windsor).

Table 9: OUAC Supplemental/ Documentation Evaluation Fee	Fee
Institution	
Brock University	\$70
Carleton University	\$61.75
University of Guelph/Guelph-Humber	\$70*
University of Guelph Veterinary Medicine	\$100**
Lakehead University	\$55

⁶⁷ MTCU, Policy Statement for Ontario's Credit Transfer System, (2011)

Laurentian University	\$50
McMaster University	\$85
Nipissing University	\$50
OCAD University	\$65
University of Ottawa.	\$70
Queen's University	\$90

* Applicants to programs other than the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) remit \$70.

** Applicants seeking admission to DVM (alone or in combination with other program choices) are required to remit \$100.

*** The fee for Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada is \$65. The fee for all other applicants is \$90.

Concern Thirteen: Bridging programs are not available to every student that needs them, and financial assistance is not always available to those that do.

Many academic preparation or bridging programs exist in Ontario's colleges. For example, Mohawk College offers a tuition-free program that gives potential students an opportunity to earn English and Math credits needed to enter college. Both Humber College and Seneca College offer academic upgrading programs to meet entrance requirements. The availability of bridging programs is more limited in Ontario's universities. The University of Toronto offers the Millie Rotman Shime Academic Bridging Program at its Woodsworth College to students who have been out of formal education for some time and do not meet the entrance requirements for the university. The University of Guelph similarly offers the Open Learning Program that allows students open access to the university and guarantees admission to some degree programs once they have completed a number of prerequisites. Finally, the Chang School at Ryerson University offers Academic Bridging Courses or ABCs in a number of disciplines to help students meet the entrance requirements of university. However, many universities offer limited opportunities for students with inadequate entrance requirements to find a path into university. Furthermore, those looking to transfer from college are often simply denied credits and forced to start over in first year, rather than being given an avenue to demonstrate prior learning and then upgrade where there are gaps.

While the bridging programs that exist are important steps in increasing accessibility, certain key factors also may make it difficult for potential students to enrol. Little information is provided to students in secondary school about bridging programs as a pathway to post-secondary education. As a result, many individuals looking to enter post-secondary education later in life or upgrade marks to get in may be unaware that bridging programs exist. Several of these programs also have high tuition levels: the Millie Rotman program costs \$1,400 in tuition, while Ryerson's ABC courses are \$550 each. The ABC courses also are typically non-transferable, so credit cannot later count towards a university degree.

Students in these programs are also usually considered part-time and not eligible for many of the financial assistance programs available to full-time students. Even if the students are studying full-time, OSAP only grants assistance to those in programs that are longer than 12 weeks and eligible for provincial operating funding – which can exclude most bridging programs. In terms of the overall availability of bridging programs and the financial assistance available to students completing programs, Ontario lags behind many jurisdictions.

Concern Fourteen: Many universities in Ontario do not offer specific orientation week programming for transfer students despite their needs being vastly different from a majority of the student body.

Transfer students often have vastly different student experiences from the typical 17-18 year old high-school entrant. Students transitioning from college diploma programs are often educated in different ways, and may possess slightly different skillsets from typical first- and second-year university students. Furthermore, they are more likely to hail from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in universities.⁶⁸ Available data indicates that entrants are more likely to be mature and have attained high school grades that would not have sufficed for admission into university.⁶⁹ University transfer students are far more likely to enter university in an upper year where few orientation opportunities exist to facilitate successful transition into campus life. There is even evidence that transfer students from college to university often face a decline in marks upon reaching university, indicating that adjustment to university learning is needed.⁷⁰

Coming from a plethora of diverse backgrounds, it stands to reason that transfer students face unique barriers and obstacles proceeding through the course of a degree at a receiving university. If transfer entrants are more likely to be mature or from underrepresented backgrounds, traditional campus orientation programs may not meet their particular needs. Ontario universities have an obligation to facilitate a welcoming and supportive campus environment for all incoming students, even those who do not enter the university in traditional ways.

Recommendations

Recommendation Fifteen: To ensure system-wide mobility, the government must mandate that all credit transfer administration fees be removed through its existing ancillary fee regulations.

The Ontario government already has robust ancillary fee regulations in place that prevent institutions from charging compulsory fees to students without the approval of the student government, with some exceptions. Fees for credit transfer typically fall outside of the scope of these regulations, which only regulate fees “imposed or administered by a given institution, or one of its constituent parts or its federated or affiliated institutions, in addition to regular tuition fees, which a student is required to pay in order to enrol in, or successfully complete, any credit course.”⁷¹ If the government is serious about removing barriers to transfer and making a more seamless post-secondary system, the existing regulations should be strengthened to eliminate all fees associated with transferring.

Recommendation Sixteen: Adequate bridging programs must be developed at all Ontario post-secondary institutions.

The implementation of bridging programs should be encouraged and directly funded by the Ontario government’s credit transfer innovation fund in order to help students with insufficient credits or inadequate entrance averages enter post-secondary education. Only a few institutions currently have such programs. For instance, bridging programs at University of Toronto and York University are completed over the summer for college students who have graduated with a

⁶⁸ Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *Third Annual Research & Review Plan* (Toronto, 2010).

⁶⁹ Henry Decock, Ursula McCloy, Shuping Liu and Bin Hu, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, *The Transfer Experience of Ontario College Graduates who Further Their Education* (Toronto, 2010).

⁷⁰ Stewart and Martinello. *Are Transfer Students Different*, 2012

⁷¹ Government of Ontario. Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities: Postsecondary Finance and Information Management Branch. *The Ontario Operating Fund Distribution Manual (Universities)*, 2009. 135.

two-year Liberal Arts diploma at Seneca College. The program equips the student with skills required for university and eases transition.

Recommendation Seventeen: Program eligibility requirements for the Ontario Student Assistance Program should be amended to grant financial assistance to students enrolled in bridging programs.

In addition, students with financial need who are enrolled in bridging programs should be made eligible for OSAP assistance by modifying the requirements for program eligibility and full-time status. Currently, these students are not eligible for public financial assistance. Bridging programs must be recognized as an important step for improving student mobility and addressing participation gaps for underrepresented groups in post-secondary education.

Recommendation Eighteen: Universities should use direct funding from government to hire credit transfer advisors that guide students throughout the transfer system

The government is currently providing direct grants to institutions to improve the credit transfer experience. One of the priorities for these new funds should be hiring credit transfer advisors. These staff members can not only help students navigate the process of transferring credits, but can also provide orientation programming to aid students through the transition. Alternatively, these funds could be put towards training current staff in individual programs or departments in order to better serve transfer students. The institutional grants for credit transfer were a big step forward in this regard, and we encourage the government to continue to build on the progress that has already been made.

Recommendation Nineteen: Universities should investigate the feasibility of developing specific orientation week programs directed at transfer students to help facilitate their integration into campus life.

One university that does offer specific orientation for transfer students is Queens University. Queens' New Exchange and Worldly Transfer Students (NEWTS) Orientation Week offers comprehensive student-led orientation week programming for transfer students. The week is structured to provide less focus on academic orientation, as all the students participating are new to Queen's, but not new to University. NEWTS week provides students with necessary information regarding opportunities, services, and resources available at Queen's. Transfer students participating in this orientation week are provided with everything they need in order to make the most of their time at University. It allows students the opportunity to meet and foster relationships with other transfer students as well as Queen's students in a "welcoming, vibrant, and relaxed environment."⁷²

While some universities may be skeptical of investing in a program directed solely at transfer students, the NEWTS week is unique in that it offers orientation not only for transfer students, but also for incoming exchange and international students. As universities across Ontario continue to expand to attract transfer students, students from out of province, and international students, investing into a specific orientation week programming aimed at all of these groups is

⁷² "NEWTS Orientation Week," *NEWTS*. <http://www.newtsorientation.ca/newts/> (accessed October 2013).

a cost effective way at ensuring that all these groups are integrated into campus life as they all face similar transition difficulties when coming to a new university.

Policy Statement

WHEREAS the credit transfer process should be as transparent and predictable for students as possible.

WHEREAS institutions must be responsible for providing students with an explanation for denied credit transfers

WHEREAS students should have the resources to understand their credit transfer options before being required to make decisions on post-secondary pathways

WHEREAS students should be able to appeal credit transfer decisions through a transparent and open process

WHEREAS Post-secondary institutions in Ontario should work together to remove unnecessary barriers to transfer and make decisions as consistent as possible

WHEREAS credit transfers should be reflective of a student's prior learning, both in terms of skills gained and content learned

WHEREAS similar undergraduate courses at the first or second year level at Ontario's universities should have enough equivalent content and learning outcomes to facilitate transfer.

WHEREAS institutional autonomy to develop distinct courses with diverse learning outcomes should not be hindered during the final years of study.

WHEREAS clear, consistent, and wide ranging credit transfer pathways should be built for all types of transfer

WHEREAS institutional recognition of prior learning at an accredited post-secondary institution should not require the payment of additional fees

WHEREAS students must be adequately supported throughout their transfer experience, as well as throughout their time at the new institution

WHEREAS students participating in bridging programs should be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for success at receiving institutions.

BE IT RESOLVED THAT Students should be offered an explanation if courses fail to transfer.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED THAT Students must be able to appeal credit transfer decisions to a higher and/or external authority.

BIFRT Offers of admission should include a list of credits that will transfer.

BIFRT Institutions and ONTransfer should continue to work together to create a thorough credit database for Ontario university students.

BIFRT Institutions should work together to develop a common format for their credit transfer policies, utilizing consistent language.

BIFRT Ontario universities should fully recognize any first or second year level credit courses successfully completed at another accredited Ontario university. These credits should count towards a student's chosen field of study unless they do not meet the respective grade requirements of that institution's program requirements.

BIFRT The government or the Council of Ontario Universities should facilitate regularly scheduled meetings for chairpersons of similar programs to work towards identifying common content and learning outcomes for first- and second-year undergraduate courses at Ontario Universities.

BIFRT The government should mandate that all per-course minimum grade requirements be set at the passing grade, as defined by the receiving institution.

BIFRT To better facilitate student mobility, Ontario universities should develop robust learning outcome measurements that could be consistent across institutions.

BIFRT To facilitate credit transfer, Ontario universities should develop a mechanism to collectively share all course descriptions and syllabi while also supporting the development and adoption of electronic transcript exchange standards.

BIFRT The government should audit institutional residency requirements in all programs and encourage or mandate reductions of those above 50 per cent.

BIFRT To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must offer the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition free of assessment costs to all students.

BIFRT To facilitate a fair credit transfer process, all universities must standardize their credit requirements for IB/AP credits and exam scores.

BIFRT While the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer should continue to fund research projects on all aspects of student mobility, there must be an emphasis on researching university-to-university transfer.

BIFRT To ensure system-wide mobility, the government must mandate that all credit transfer administration fees be removed and covered instead by the existing ancillary fee regulations.

BIFRT Adequate bridging programs must be developed at all Ontario post-secondary institutions.

BIFRT Program eligibility requirements for the Ontario Student Assistance Program should be amended to grant financial assistance to students enrolled in bridging programs.

BIFRT Universities should use direct funding from government to hire credit transfer advisors that guide students throughout the transfer system.

BIFRT Universities should investigate the feasibility of developing specific orientation week programs directed at transfer students to help facilitate their integration into campus life.