



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

## **POLICY PAPER**

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### ***Student Mobility & Credit Transfer***

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## **ABOUT OUSA**

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OUSA represents the interests of 150,000 professional and undergraduate, full-time and part-time university students at eight student associations across Ontario. Our vision is for an accessible, affordable, accountable, and high quality post-secondary education in Ontario. To achieve this vision we've come together to develop solutions to challenges facing higher education, build broad consensus for our policy options, and lobby government to implement them.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### ***The Problem***

#### ***Insufficient data collection and resources***

Students have raised concern over the lack of data collected and made available about transfer activities. More specifically, there is worry that the raw data collected through Ontario Education Number (OEN) tracking is not being utilized to its fullest potential to inform policy and support student mobility. Additionally students worry that not all institutions have the administrative capacity to effectively support transfer activity, and without additional information, this may become even more challenging for institutions.

#### ***Lack of system design towards student mobility and transfer***

Students worry that Ontario's post-secondary system is not designed in a way that strengthens transfer pathways and student mobility. The provincial government's commitment to differentiation is important to both students and their institutions, however, students worry that such efforts might undermine transfer pathways and student mobility. Courses unique to individual institutions may be negatively affected by the facilitation of credit transfer and increased student mobility, and on the other hand, the learning outcomes of similar courses may differ, making it difficult for students to successfully pursue credit transfer. Students are also concerned about learning duplication and the additional cost of retaking courses.

Students have also expressed concerns over OSAP's Distance Grant requirements that may impede student mobility and choice. Currently, Ontario students must be able to prove that their family home address is located at least 80km away from the closest publicly assisted post-secondary institution they are attending. Moreover, students are concerned that without the completed transfer credit assessments available prior to OSAP assessments, students may not have the capacity to make fully informed decisions.

Despite evidence that joint university and college programs are cost efficient, the provincial government has yet to recommend this approach as an integral component in Ontario's post-secondary education system. Additionally, students raised concern over the fact that most joint college and university programs are currently clustered in south central Ontario, limiting options and accessibility for students located outside this geographic area, as such students worry that opportunities are limited for students who wish to pursue joint college and university programs that are not located in the same region.

#### ***Inconsistency in fees, timelines, and procedures***

Students know that the process of transferring institutions can be costly, and while they understand that certain costs are necessary in order for universities to facilitate transfer pathways, there is concern that high and unpredictable costs may deter student mobility.

Supplementary document fees for credit transfer assessments and applications differ across institutions, creating complexity and an inaccessible transfer system for students. The ranges in prices may significantly impact a student's ability to apply to the institutions and programs they most desire based on their academic needs. Additionally, students are concerned over the lack of information about the true cost of these services and fees and the fact that only some institutions recognize and give credits for PLAR-based experiences, granting students an inconsistent number of transferable credits based on their choice of institution. Depending on what program a student may be seeking to enter, PLAR and additional costs may rise significantly as well.

Universities also vary in the timelines and procedures they set for providing transfer students with information regarding their applications. Students applying to transfer post-secondary institutions may not receive word of their acceptances within the same time frame. There is concern that students receiving offers of admission from various institutions at several different times may feel pressured to choose the institution that sent their letter of admission first. One major issue is that some institutions do not provide transfer credit assessment results when sending out offers of admission, forcing students to make decisions and/or submit payments without knowing how many credits are approved. The evaluation process is timely and as a result can impede a student's ability to enrol and partake in courses available in the first semester of their studies.

On top of inconsistent fees and timelines, students also worry that institutions may not consider accrediting courses if they were not English language based, even if course material is the same, and that not enough information and supports are available for this particular type of transfer.

### ***Uncertainty and missing student support***

Students worry about a lack transparency as well as unpredictability within the transfer system, and particularly related to the available supports and resources, such as Ontario's transfer guide website. Students worry that while the ONtransfer.ca website provides program and course pathway searches, it does not specify the number of approved transferable credits. Additionally, because ONCAT relies on its member institutions to provide updated information about transfer pathways, students are worried that they may be misguided if the website is not regularly updated and maintained.

Currently, students are not provided with definitive reasoning as to why some credits are transferable and others are not, which negatively impacts the transfer experience of students. Furthermore, the criteria used for assessing credit transfer eligibility varies across post-secondary institutions, making it challenging for students to decide which institution would be best suited to their academic path.

For college-to-university transfer students, students worry that during assessment process, universities may evaluate and weigh college credits unfavourably in comparison to university credits and that universities may rely more heavily on numerical grading in assessing college credit transfers, instead of taking a more balanced approach, focused on ability and learning outcomes. Additionally, college students transferring into universities are facing difficulties adapting to the university environment and some institutions do not have additional supports specifically for those students transferring from college.

## ***Recommendations***

### ***Improving data collection and utilizing resources***

Students stress the need to improve data collection on transfer and student mobility in Ontario, and to effectively utilize already existing tools. As such, students recommend that the raw data collected through OEN tracking of transfer students be provided to ONCAT in order to identify student pathways and ensure students are able to access, persist, and succeed in their post-secondary careers. ONCAT should also develop an online portal to clearly indicate transfer pathways, access, and success rates. In addition to this, the provincial government should mandate Ontario post-secondary institutions to collect qualitative data about the experiences of transfer students leaving their institutions, producing reports to ONCAT annually. This can include efforts such as conducting exit interviews with outgoing transfer students.

### ***Student transfer as a component of Ontario's post-secondary system***

Students want to see the credit transfer system as a component of Ontario's post-secondary system, and recommend taking steps that would improve system design towards credit transfer. As such, students suggest that the provincial government mandate that all non-specialized direct-entry courses at institutions have set common learning outcomes. Furthermore, HEQCO should maintain a database of

standardized learning outcomes for non-specialized direct-entry courses available for institutions to use in course development. Students understand the importance of pursuing a policy of moderate differentiation, and therefore, also recommend that the provincial government encourage institutions to develop unique courses with diverse learning outcomes for specialized courses as well.

To further improve student mobility within Ontario's post-secondary system, students recommend that OSAP's Distance Grant should be amended to require a student's home address to be located 40km or more away from the closest post-secondary institution, however, it should not require an institution with similar program offering be offered within 80km as this limits student mobility. MAESD should also ensure that transfer credit assessments are completed prior to the OSAP application deadline.

To further foster transfer pathways, encourage post-secondary entrance, and build Ontario's transfer system, MAESD should encourage the development of articulation agreements between colleges and universities that provide joint degree-granting programs where they do not already exist outside of south central Ontario. Additionally, MAESD should urge institutions to pursue articulation agreements with those institutions located in different geographical communities from their own, and to outline specific measures that will be taken to do so in their SMAs. To aid this process, MAESD should develop standardized articulation agreements that can serve as resources to facilitate collaboration between institutions offering joint programs.

### ***Improving consistency and setting common goals***

Students want to ensure institutional autonomy, however, they also see that there is a need for more cross-institutional standards and recognize the benefits in doing so. As such, students recommend that the provincial government set certain standards to guide institutions and develop a stronger transfer system for Ontario, where costliness and inconsistency do not prevent a student from pursuing their education. This includes mandating the implementation and use of PLAR in post-secondary institutions, while also subsidizing PLAR costs and collecting data on the average cost of current supplementary document fees to develop a standard fee applicable across all institutions.

MAESD should also develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario creating bridging programs to facilitate successful transfer pathways and supports for non-English learners, whereas ONCAT should enable research and data collection on the experiences of these transfer students in order to remove barriers. Additionally, to remove barriers and set common timelines, MAESD should mandate that all admissions offices have credit transfer assessments results complete and sent to students before the acceptance deadline.

### ***Improving transparency and student resources***

As a key resource for students seeking to transfer, students want to ensure that the Ontario transfer website is of the highest quality and easy to navigate. As such, students recommend that the provincial government allocate funding to ONCAT to regularly acquire and maintain transfer pathway information on their website. ONCAT should also be mandated to develop a clear list of transferable courses with their credit equivalencies, made available on the ONtransfer.ca website.

Students also believe that the provincial government can help improve transparency and support students by establishing guidelines that ensure all credit transfer activities, including transfer decisions, are clear and that this information is directly accessible to students. Additionally students suggest that ONCAT develop best practices based on BCCAT's recommended transfer appeals model, providing institutions with guidelines to follow in their own procedures to improve student resources.

To support college transfer students, HEQCO should develop a common language that facilitates the use of learning outcomes in the credit transfer process between colleges and universities. In addition to this, MAESD should develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario so as to help institutions create transitioning programs to better support and retain college transfer students at universities.

## INTRODUCTION

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Ontario's post-secondary institutions continue to provide students with exciting and diverse learning opportunities across various fields of study. From work-integrated and experiential learning opportunities, to research and skills development, students are faced with a growing number of educational possibilities, shaping the academic decisions and paths they choose to take. Today, many students are choosing to pursue non-traditional pathways in education, relying on the possibility of mobility and credit transfer to help them achieve their unique goals and complete their degree on time. Consequently, there is an increased need for student mobility and transfer opportunities between post-secondary institutions. With over 55,000 students transferring between Ontario's publically assisted post-secondary institutions each year, and 1 in 2 students considering the option of transferring institutions, it is necessary to provide students with a comprehensive transfer system that will ensure they have access to institutions and programs where they can succeed.<sup>1</sup>

There are numerous reasons as to why students choose to transfer institutions, including personal and academic circumstances, as well as educational and career goals.<sup>2</sup> Students may transfer due to financial concerns, to have better access to support systems, to utilize unique program and learning opportunities, and to gain additional post-secondary credentials. In some cases students may choose to transfer institutions and change programs entirely because they discovered a more suitable field of study. Enhancing or continuing education to improve opportunities in the job market without repeating prior or relevant learning is another reason why students enter the transfer system.<sup>3</sup> Successfully transitioning from one post-secondary institution to another also involves the ability to transfer previously earned credits in order for a student to be able to complete their degree in a timely way, and preventing course duplication as well as additional costs.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, an effective transfer and student mobility system also includes the capacity to support lifelong learning by providing potential students with services like Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, there are 4 common transfer pathways: university-to-university, university-to-college, college-to-university, and college-to-college. Each pathway is characterized by different student needs and set at different stages of development. Historically, university-to-university transfers within Ontario have been the most prevalent transfer pathway, with university-to-college transfers steadily increasing as well.<sup>6</sup> Combined college and university '2+2' programs are also becoming popular and less-costly options for students seeking to acquire an undergraduate degree too.<sup>7</sup> Effective student mobility and credit transfer can also yield thousands of dollars in personal savings for students, as well as savings for the government, as the province stands to save on per-student operating grants whenever a student does not have to duplicate learning. At this time, the most popular subject areas for transfer include Business, Social Sciences, Liberal Arts, Engineering, and Health.<sup>8</sup> Demographically speaking, groups most likely to transfer institutions include mature students, part-time students, Indigenous students, first generation students, students with disabilities, students with dependents, and students from the lowest income brackets.<sup>9</sup> It is important to recognize the growing number of students transferring, as well as the potential a comprehensive transfer system has to increase accessibility, particularly for marginalized students, as well as the overall academic and career possibilities for students.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, *Annual Report, 2016-17*, (Toronto: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> COU: Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities (2015)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Data gathered from 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey, OUSA; McCloy, Ursula, Steffler, Mitchell & Henry Decock. *The Changing Patterns of College-to-University Transfer: Examination of Ontario's Graduate Satisfaction Survey 2007-2015*, (Toronto: Centre for Research in Student Mobility, Seneca College, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Trick, David, *College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> ONCAT: Principles for Credit Transfer Policies and Procedures (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Data gathered from 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey, OUSA.

The Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was established in 2011 to work in partnership with Ontario's 45 post-secondary institutions to enhance pathways and remove barriers to transfer for students as well as develop new transfer agreements.<sup>10</sup> ONCAT has developed resources like the Ontario Transfer website (ONtransfer.ca), which provides information and assistance for students seeking to transfer. On top of providing resources, ONCAT also enables various research initiatives and projects related to student mobility and transfer, an important component in developing evidence-based policies and guidelines that can improve Ontario's credit transfer system. In addition to establishing ONCAT, in 2011 the provincial government also announced \$73.7 million in funding for transfer credit expansion and supports, provided over five years, recognizing the growing importance of transfer in Ontario.<sup>11</sup> Such supports can help facilitate life-long learning opportunities as well as unique gateways for students to reach their academic and career goals.

While the efforts coming from the provincial government and its relevant bodies, including the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) has been meaningful, in a changing and competitive job market and economy, post-secondary education and skills development are areas that the provincial government must continue to actively support. In this environment, flexible programs, pathways, and learning opportunities within the post-secondary sector are essential to ensure students can flourish and find their best paths to success.<sup>12</sup> Working to advance student mobility and the credit transfer system means not only investing in our students today, but also prospective students, and improving access to education for all Ontarians.

This paper will offer a series of recommendations that are representative of the principles and concerns of Ontario's undergraduate students. These recommendations will be aimed at the Ontario government and other sector stakeholders, with a respect for evidence-based policy maintained throughout. This paper will highlight and advocate for the following overarching goals: improving transparency and predictability in credit transfer pathways, improving consistency within terminology, standards, and fees, developing substantial supports for transfer students, and enabling student mobility and credit transfer as a component of system design. It is our hope that these evidence-based policy recommendations are seriously considered by the provincial government and that we can work together to improve the accessibility, affordability, quality and accountability of the university sector for students across Ontario.

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<sup>10</sup> Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, <http://www.oncat.ca/>.

<sup>11</sup> Van Paassen, Kevin, "Ontario to make it easier for students to switch schools," *The Globe and Mail* (January 16, 2011), <https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/ontario-to-make-it-easier-for-students-to-switch-schools/article562137/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&>

<sup>12</sup> Institutite for Competitiveness & Prosperity, Highlights from Working Paper 29, ". The Labour Market Shift: Training a highly skilled and resilient workforce for Ontario," (September 2017).

## COMPONENT OF SYSTEM DESIGN

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### DATA COLLECTION

**Principle:** Data regarding credit transfer pathways should be made openly available to properly assess student mobility, access, persistence, and success in post-secondary education.

**Principle:** All transfer students, both incoming and outgoing, should be supported by institutions.

**Concern:** The raw data collected through Ontario Education Number (OEN) tracking is not utilized to its fullest potential to ensure transfer students are able to access, persist, and succeed in their post-secondary paths.

**Concern:** Not all institutions have administrative portfolios, personnel, or offices dedicated to supporting transfer students.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should provide ONCAT with the raw data collected through OEN tracking of transfer students to identify student pathways and ensure students are able to access, persist, and succeed in their post-secondary careers.

**Recommendation:** ONCAT should develop an online portal to clearly indicate transfer pathways, access, and success rates.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should mandate Ontario post-secondary institutions to collect qualitative data about the experiences of transfer students leaving their institutions, producing reports to ONCAT annually.

Ontario's credit transfer system aims to develop and expand new credit transfer pathways for students. The credit transfer system is guided by a centralized body (ONCAT), which oversees and provides information to students and institutions about mobility and transfer. In order to better achieve these goals, and produce more complete statistics that can be utilized for policy development and analysis, data about credit transfer pathways needs to be made available in order to properly assess student mobility, access, persistence, and success throughout the post-secondary journeys of students.<sup>13</sup>

Currently the province is extending its use of the OEN to acquire academic information about post-secondary students, gathering insights about their undergraduate experiences.<sup>14</sup> This data should be more readily available in order to ensure that the credit transfer system is fulfilling its mandate, and to find potential gaps. To do so, OUSA recommends that the provincial government provide the raw data collected by the OEN to ONCAT. The data collected from OEN tracking should focus on capturing several key areas relevant to student mobility and credit transfer, including student access, persistence, and success rates. All other personal information, including student sex/gender self-identity, should be kept confidential and not be considered/administered. However, it is important to note that mature students, part-time students, Indigenous students, and students from lowest income brackets, are key demographic groups most likely to transfer.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is important that ONCAT have access to transfer student data to gain better insights about the experiences of these students and make evidence-based decisions.

Once this data is provided to ONCAT, the council can use the information collected to better identify student pathways, access, persistence, and success rates. Additionally, ONCAT should further utilize this

<sup>13</sup> Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, "Report of the CMEC Working Group on Credit Transfer", (April 2011), <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/263/wgct-report2011-en.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development, "Ontario Education Number (OEN)", (January 2013), <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/publications/oen.html>

<sup>15</sup> OUSA, Accessibility: Results from the 2015 Ontario Post-Secondary Student Survey, (Toronto: 2015).

[https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/ousa/pages/392/attachments/original/1486572815/Accessibility\\_OPSSS2015\\_document.pdf?1486572815](https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/ousa/pages/392/attachments/original/1486572815/Accessibility_OPSSS2015_document.pdf?1486572815)

data to develop an online portal that clearly indicates potential transfer pathways, while also producing statistics and information about student achievement, which will be open to all, including students. Through the acquisition of this data, Ontario's credit transfer system, including bodies like ONCAT, can gain a better understanding of current trends and student needs, and in turn, build guidelines and policies that effectively fill gaps and resolve system problems.

The Ontario credit transfer system aims to encourage accessible and lifelong learning, while also improving and widening post-secondary participation rates.<sup>16</sup> In order to do so, information sharing, research, and data collection in this area must continue to grow, providing more robust indicators of success and failure within the credit transfer system. This goal is paramount as the post-secondary education sector becomes increasingly vital to building opportunities for all Ontarians. Students are transferring institutions not only to meet their personal and academic needs, but also to develop their professional skills and qualifications in order to meet the demands of a changing labour market.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, post-secondary institutions and the provincial government need to work together to provide support for all students as their needs and goals change.<sup>18</sup>

To ensure that the gaps in the credit transfer system are identified and remedied, the provincial government should mandate Ontario post-secondary institutions to collect qualitative data regarding the experiences of transfer students as they exit their institution. While ONCAT is making efforts to address the lack of data about transfer students, launching its *Student Transfer Experience Survey* in February 2018, efforts to collect such data must be ongoing, and involve institutional initiatives.<sup>19</sup> This can include efforts like conducting exit interviews with outgoing students before they leave the institution they are transferring from. As part of this process, each institution should produce an annual research report to ONCAT, highlighting areas of success and improvement to help determine best practices. This data should be gathered through the use of a standardized *Student Experience Survey*, and modeled on an exiting survey provided by ONCAT.<sup>20</sup> The survey should include questions regarding the type of student supports available for transfer students at each institution. This will ensure that students are able to provide meaningful feedback regarding their transfer experiences, and in turn will inform policy decisions as more students continue to enter Ontario's credit transfer system.

## DIFFERENTIATION

**Principle:** Institutions should have the autonomy to develop distinct and unique courses with diverse learning outcomes.

**Principle:** Efforts to facilitate credit transfer and student mobility should not limit institutional differentiation.

**Principle:** Students who decide to transfer institutions partway through their program should be recognized for courses and content knowledge that they have already obtained at their initial institution.

**Concern:** The standardization of learning outcomes across post-secondary institutions in Ontario, in order to ease the credit transfer process, may contradict differentiation efforts.

**Concern:** Courses unique to individual institutions may be negatively affected by the facilitation of credit transfer and increased student mobility.

**Concern:** The learning outcomes of similar courses across institutions may differ, making it difficult for students to successfully pursue the credit transfer process.

<sup>16</sup> Junor, Sean, and Alex Usher, *Student Mobility & Credit Transfer: A National and Global Survey*, (Toronto: Educational Policy Institute, 2008). Pg. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Lennon, Mary Catherine, Amanda Brijmohan, Eric Lavigne, Jinli Yang, Gavin Moodie, and Leesa Wheelahan, *Ontario Student Mobility: Carving Paths of Desire*, (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Junor, Sean, and Alex Usher, *Student Mobility & Credit Transfer: A National and Global Survey*, (Toronto: Educational Policy Institute, 2008). Pg. 19.

<sup>19</sup> ONCAT. <https://cci-survey.ca/ONCAT/>

**Concern:** When learning outcomes between institutions differ, students may be less likely to receive credit for courses that have already been taken and need to retake courses as a result.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should mandate that non-specialized direct-entry courses at institutions have common learning outcomes.

**Recommendation:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) should maintain a database of standardized learning outcomes for non-specialized direct-entry courses available for institutions to use.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should encourage institutions to develop distinct and unique courses with diverse learning outcomes for specialized courses in the pursuit of moderate differentiation in Ontario postsecondary education.

In recent years, there have been increased efforts taken by the provincial government to encourage and incentivize the process of differentiation among post-secondary institutions. As a core principle guiding the government's *Differentiation Policy*, differentiation encourages the development of unique learning opportunities and experiences for students that are distinct to each post-secondary institution in Ontario.<sup>21</sup> As a result, universities have developed specialized courses and programs, exclusive to their institutions. This includes developing distinct course requirements for specific programs, making university programs structurally different across Ontario. The development of such specific programs has been important to the evolution of each institution's unique identity.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, safeguarding such efforts is important to both institutions and students. However, facilitating credit transfer pathways is also important to students, but in some cases, efforts to do so seem to directly contradict the province's differentiation framework.

To improve student mobility and transfer, one proposed mechanism has been to standardize learning outcomes for certain courses and develop learning equivalencies across various institutions that offer common programs.<sup>23</sup> Such efforts tend to focus on facilitating better pathways for the most popular undergraduate programs that students are transferring from, including business and arts programs.<sup>24</sup> For example, the course content and learning outcomes for a first-year Biology course at Brock University would be equivalent to a first-year Biology course at Laurentian University. For many students, the course credits they earn are considered unique to individual institutions, either through novel delivery methods, course topics, or learning outcomes, and as a result are rarely approved as transferrable.<sup>25</sup> As a result of differentiation efforts, courses that can appear to be similar, including introductory courses, may in many cases differ in terms of approach, content, learning outcomes, and requirements.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, developing a set of common learning outcomes that can be applicable in these areas would be useful in mediating course duplication. Furthermore, these standardized learning outcomes should be provincially-housed by HEQCO, as the development and assessment of learning outcomes is a core priority.

While efforts to develop a common language and learning outcomes within the credit transfer system is important, institutions should not be discouraged from developing specialized courses with unique learning outcomes in this effort to ease student mobility. This includes in specialized programs and in areas such as upper-year seminar courses. These opportunities play an integral part in providing distinct

<sup>21</sup> The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development. *Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education* (Toronto: November 2013), Pg.6

<sup>22</sup> COU: Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities (2015), Pg. 3

<sup>23</sup> Trick, David, *College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Junor, Sean, and Alex Usher, *Student Mobility & Credit Transfer: A National and Global Survey*, (Toronto: Educational Policy Institute, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> COU: Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities (2015), Pg. 3

and enriching learning opportunities for students at particular institutions. In order to help achieve a balance between differentiation efforts and the need for increased mobility and transfer pathways, it is necessary that the provincial government maintain this commitment to moderate differentiation.

## STUDENT FINANCIAL AID

**Principle:** Students should not have to choose an institution based on their financial means.

**Principle:** Transfer students should know the outcomes of their credit transfer assessments when applying for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).

**Principle:** Institutions should be able to support transfer students who indicate financial need.

**Concern:** OSAP's *Distance Grant* requirements limit student mobility and choice.

**Concern:** Ontario Student Assistance Program assessments and credit transfer assessments are not completed in tandem, which greatly impacts OSAP eligibility after the fact.

**Recommendation:** The Ontario Student Assistance Program's *Distance Grant* should require a student's home address to be located 40km or more away from the closest post-secondary institution, however, it should not require an institution with similar program offering be offered within 80km as this limits student mobility, access, and choice.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should ensure that transfer credit assessments are completed prior to the OSAP application deadline.

All willing and qualified students in Ontario should be able to access and excel within Ontario's post-secondary education system. Students should not have to choose an institution based on their financial standing. Having a system that facilitates the ability of students to move between post-secondary institutions when necessary, illustrates a system designed to maximize choice and learning opportunities for students, as well as for those seeking to enter higher education for the first time. This is particularly important for students who are living in remote and rural areas where post-secondary participation rates remain low and can be costly.<sup>27</sup> Improving financial aid and expanding mobility would better support these students. Therefore, it is essential that steps are taken to ensure Ontario's mobility and credit transfer system is accessible to all Ontario students, regardless of their financial means and location.

Currently, in order to be eligible for OSAP's *Distance Grant*, Ontario students must be able to prove that their family home address is located at least 80km away from the closest publicly assisted post-secondary institution they are attending.<sup>28</sup> Essentially, this places students in a position where they must demonstrate that the program they are attending is not offered within 80km of their home, leaving out several key factors that affect a student's decision and need to attend an institution not within these set boundaries.<sup>29</sup> On top of this, the grant should be reflective of the true cost of living away from home, and should not limit Ontario students to attend a program offered at an institution closest to their family home.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the distance requirement component of the grant should be adjusted to 40km so as to encourage student mobility and choice, rather than set limitations based on geographic proximity. Additionally, the grant should not require that an institution with a similar program offering be located within 80km.

To support transparency, access, and quality in Ontario's transfer system, OUSA maintains that all students should be aware of the outcomes of their credit transfer assessments when applying for the OSAP

<sup>27</sup> Grenke, Kraymr, Jacob Wihlidal, Petek Yurt, and Marc Gurrissi. Policy Paper: Rural & Northern Students. Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2016. Pg. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Young, Stacey, Pierre Piche, and Glen Jones, *The Two Towers of Transformation: The Compatibility of the Policy Goals of Differentiation and Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Centre for the Study of Canadian and Higher Education, 2017). Pg. 23.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

and prior to the OSAP application deadline. Currently, for many students OSAP assessments take place prior to the completion of credit transfer assessments, which greatly impacts OSAP eligibility after the fact. Unless students are aware of how many courses will be transferrable, they are unable to accurately assess the cost of their education when applying for financial assistance.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, OUSA recommends that credit transfer assessments are completed by institutions prior to the OSAP application deadline. In doing so, Ontario students will be able to more accurately determine their financial need, while also better facilitating student mobility within the sector.

## JOINT COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

**Principle:** Joint college and university programs should enable students to acquire both practical and theoretical skills in their educational area of interest.

**Principle:** Students should benefit from the distinct strengths and values that colleges and universities individually provide.

**Principle:** Domestic partnerships between colleges and universities that offer joint programs should provide meaningful experiences to both students in the program and for their surrounding community that would not be offered at one sole institution

**Concern:** Despite evidence that joint programs are cost efficient, the provincial government has yet to recommend this approach as an integral component in Ontario's post-secondary education system.

**Concern:** Most joint college and university programs are currently clustered in south central Ontario, limiting options and accessibility for students located outside this geographic area.

**Concern:** Opportunities are limited for students who wish to pursue joint college and university programs that are not located in the same region.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should encourage the development of articulation agreements between colleges and universities that provide joint degree-granting programs where they do not already exist outside of south central Ontario.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should encourage post-secondary institutions to pursue articulation agreements with institutions located in different geographical communities from their own, and to outline specific measures that will be taken in their Strategic Mandate Agreements.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop standardized articulation agreements that serve as resources to facilitate collaboration between institutions offering joint programs.

Colleges and universities differ in their teaching and learning styles, curriculum structure, course types, and learning outcomes. Colleges generally focus on providing students with practical experience and learning opportunities that are most beneficial for direct entry into the workforce. Universities, on the other hand, enable students to gain deeper theoretical knowledge in their field, and tend to focus on utilizing traditional learning styles.<sup>32</sup> Despite differences and contrary to the historical dichotomy that once persisted between college and university, a rising number of students are participating in educational pathways that combine both college and university experiences together.<sup>33</sup> Students are transferring from college to university, seeking to advance their qualifications, and many university

<sup>31</sup> User, Alex, Paul Jarvey, *Student Experiences in Credit Transfer at Ontario Colleges* (Toronto: Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012), Pg. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Fallon, Nicole, *Learning Outcomes in Credit Transfer: A Key Tool for Innovation in Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2015), Pg. 3

<sup>33</sup> COU: *Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities* (2015).

students are entering college programs to gain skills that will help them become career-ready.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, there are several career fields and jobs that necessitate a combination of both university and college credentials. As a result, to advantage both students and potential employers, joint college and university programs, or “2+2 programs” are becoming increasingly popular.<sup>35</sup> 2+ 2 programs involve merging college and university experiences together by offering students time to gain skills and knowledge at each institution over a period of four years. Such programs include, for example, the many collaborative nursing programs offered across Ontario. The Western-Fanshawe Collaborative BScN program allows students to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing after two years of study at Fanshawe College followed by two years of study at Western University.<sup>36</sup> Degree programs offered jointly by colleges and universities provide students within the meaningful experiences that would not have been obtained had they attended only one institution, including pedagogy, cultural experiences, and extracurricular activities.

Traditionally, universities do not accept college credits on a course-by-course basis, due to differences in teaching, evaluation standards, and curriculums.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> The specifics of a block transfer are usually determined through an articulation agreement made between a university and college. Independent institutional policies also outline such possibilities as well, as is the case at York, Brock, and Ryerson University. More frequently, however, colleges have begun entering into agreements with Ontario universities in which students complete a college diploma and transfer to a university for the final years of their education.

The process for applying to university from a college program often depends on the nature of the transfer agreement. As of June 30, 2014, there are over 590 active college-to-university pathways and over 90,000 course specific equivalencies in Ontario established between institutions for different programs. Furthermore, there are over 700 articulation/block transfer agreements between colleges and universities.<sup>39</sup> These pathways give students the opportunity to eventually receive both a college diploma and a university degree. Joint programs also benefit institutions by allowing post-secondary institutions to maximize the utility of existing infrastructure, as opposed to building new infrastructure, to support programs requiring unique learning environments, such as a welding lab, collaborating schools are able to use the existing spaces on each campus to the benefit of student learning and experience.

On top of facilitating new educational opportunities for students and helping students become career-ready, 2+2 programs are also cost-efficient alternatives. When compared to the traditional four-year university program, the combined cost of the government and the student is significantly less than the university path.<sup>40</sup> In a vast province like Ontario, students in a differentiated post-secondary education system require sufficient and direct support to have access to programs offered outside of their local community. This includes both the ability to pursue additional credential opportunities, as well as to allow students to correct an initial program choice.<sup>41</sup>

In recognizing the various benefits of joint-degree granting programs, the provincial government should encourage the development of articulation agreements between colleges and universities to provide such programs. This can be further facilitated through the development of standardized articulation agreements, made available to institutions for their implementation. While not mandated, these standardized articulation agreements can serve as resources for institutions developing partnerships where it has not existed before. These joint programs should exist at institutions outside of south central

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Trick, David, *College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013), Pg. 4

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.uwo.ca/fhs/nursing/undergrad/bscn/index.html>

<sup>37</sup> Constantineau, Philippe. *The Ontario Credit Transfer System*, (Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities, 2009)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> OUSA data request to ONCAT October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Trick, David, *College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013), Pg. 4

<sup>41</sup> Young, Stacey, Pierre Piche, and Glen Jones, *The Two Towers of Transformation: The Compatibility of the Policy Goals of Differentiation and Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Centre for the Study of Canadian and Higher Education, 2017).

Ontario where both institutions are located in the same geographic region, as well as within institutions that are not in the same geographic region.<sup>42</sup>

These collaborations, especially within the same region, should be created to benefit the specific community in which they are located. For example, Sudbury is a mining hub, with many institutions offering programs uniquely relevant to this community, such as mining engineering at Laurentian University and mining engineering technician at Cambrian College.<sup>43</sup> Although not formally offered as a joint program, many students transfer between these two programs in order to learn the content and skills necessary to succeed in this field after degree completion. The creation of an official joint program between this university and college would benefit students in facilitating and supporting this transfer.

Joint programs located in different geographic regions provide students increased choice to explore new opportunities. While students traditionally attend one institution for four years, the creation of these programs enable students to have the option should they wish to live and study in more than one location without the added time and cost associated with completing two degree programs at two institutions.

## CONSISTENCY

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### CREDIT TRANSFER STANDARDIZATION

**Principle:** Post-secondary institutions should use Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR).

**Principle:** Students should pay the same amount for a supplementary documentation fee for post-secondary transfer, regardless of their choice of institution.

**Concern:** Supplementary document fees for credit transfer assessments and applications differ across institutions in Ontario, creating complexity and an inaccessible system for students.

**Concern:** Only some institutions recognize and give credits for PLAR-based experiences, granting students an inconsistent number of transferable credits based on their choice of institution.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should mandate the implementation and use of PLAR in post-secondary institutions, while also subsidizing PLAR costs.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should collect data on the average cost of current supplementary document fees and use this data to develop a standard fee applicable across all institutions.

Post-secondary students seeking to transfer institutions face several challenges along the way and even after they enter their new institutions. Many of these challenges are related to the lack of consistency and clarity in the credit transfer system, particularly when students are going through the application process. Ontario's credit transfer system is built on divided institutional policies, ranging in the requirements and criteria used to assess transfer applications. The per-course minimum grade requirements, supplementary document fees, and the methods used to recognize and accredit student eligibility based on their prior knowledge and learning, vary across institutions, creating an unpredictable and inconsistent transfer process.

For institutions that charge students the additional assessment fee, the fee price ranges from \$50.00 to \$90.00, as illustrated by Table 1. This evaluation fee is charged in addition to OUAC domestic application fees as well. With inconsistent fees across institutions, students may be discouraged from applying to

<sup>42</sup> Ontario Universities, <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-universities#section-3>

<sup>43</sup> Cambrian College, Mining Engineering Technician. <http://cambriancollege.ca/programs/mining-engineering-technician/>

certain institutions solely based on application costs and supplementary document fees. Ontario students already face many financial burdens, and students who are transferring institutions may have to deal with additional costs in comparison to other students (ex. relocation costs), therefore, it is important not to add additional strain that may additionally discourage students to pursue transfer options. It is 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. There should be a standard, set supplemental/document evaluation fee applicable to all institutions to ensure better consistency within the transfer process.

**Table 1: OUAC Supplemental/Document Evaluation Fees, 2017-18**

Institution	Fee	Institution	Fee
<b>Brock</b>	\$70	<b>Queen's</b>	\$90
<b>Laurentian</b>	\$60	<b>Trent</b>	\$65
<b>Laurier</b>	\$70	<b>Waterloo</b>	\$85
<b>McMaster</b>	\$90	<b>Western</b>	\$90

PLAR is a model used to evaluate the prior learning experiences, formal and informal, of an applicant, determining whether they may receive accreditation for their previously gained knowledge and skills.<sup>44</sup> PLAR provides prospective students with a way for institutions to recognize previous work, life, volunteer, and other experiences relevant toward a postsecondary program a student is interested in. In many cases, those applying to post-secondary institutions through the PLAR framework are mature students or independent students, however, PLAR is not exclusive to these students. A mature student can be defined as either an individual who is a single “independent” student, married/common-law, or a sole support parent. An “independent” student is currently classified as someone who has been out of high school for four years or longer.<sup>45</sup>

For example, an individual who has worked in a role where they gained significant graphic design experience may apply for PLAR to receive credit and omit taking particular courses that would result in unnecessary learning replication. While some Ontario institutions have adopted this evaluation process and allow for PLAR applications, many have not yet accepted PLAR as a form of legitimate assessment. For the institutions that do recognize PLAR-based assessments, fees for PLAR evaluation range from \$0 to \$498.70. There is a substantial difference in fees and as a result financial factors can again heavily influence where a PLAR student may apply. To ensure accessible education for all Ontarians, it is necessary to subsidize and standardize PLAR fees while also mandating institutions to use PLAR, when applicable, as a form of assessment and credit recognition. In doing so, PLAR applicants can also be guaranteed consistency throughout the application process as well as access and mobility within Ontario's post-secondary institutions can be improved.<sup>46</sup>

**Table 2: Institutional PLAR Fees Per Course, 2017-18**

Institution	Fee	Institution	Fee
<b>Algoma</b>	\$20	<b>Ottawa</b>	\$275**
<b>Brock</b>	\$498.70	<b>Queen's</b>	N/A

<sup>44</sup>Government of Ontario, “Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)”, (Ontario: 2017) <https://www.ontario.ca/data/prior-learning-assessment-recognition-plar>.

<sup>45</sup> Macleans, “New OSAP Rules Mean Free Tuition for Mature Students”, (Ontario: 2017). <http://www.macleans.ca/education/new-osap-rules-mean-free-tuition-for-mature-students/>.

<sup>46</sup> OUSA, policy paper on *Indigenous Students*, (Toronto: November 2016).

<b>Carleton</b>	\$205.75	<b>Ryerson</b>	\$175
<b>Guelph</b>	\$50*	<b>Toronto</b>	N/A
<b>Lakehead</b>	\$0	<b>Trent</b>	N/A
<b>Laurentian</b>	\$0	<b>UOIT</b>	\$0*
<b>Laurier</b>	N/A	<b>Waterloo</b>	N/A
<b>McMaster</b>	N/A	<b>Western</b>	N/A
<b>Nipissing</b>	N/A	<b>Windsor</b>	N/A
<b>OCAD</b>	\$100*	<b>York</b>	N/A

\*Plus 50% of the applicable tuition fee

\*\*Fee to determine eligibility and for whole application

There is inconsistency surrounding the cost and availability of PLAR evaluations and eligibility within Ontario's post-secondary institutions. In majority of cases, students are obligated to pay a supplementary evaluation fee if they wish to have their previous learning and experiences assessed for credit transfer eligibility. Table 2 highlights the range of prices as well as a number of schools where PLAR data is either unavailable due to out-dated or lacking information online, or because PLAR is not offered. This is the case with Queen's University and Western University, where PLAR is not an option offered.<sup>47</sup>

## NON-ENGLISH COURSES

**Principle:** Post-secondary institutions should grant students the ability to transfer credits between programs that are based on different languages and where course material is deemed equivalent.

**Concern:** Some institutions may not consider accrediting courses if they were not English language based, even if course material is the same.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario creating bridging programs to facilitate successful transfer pathways and supports for non-English learners.

**Recommendation:** ONCAT should enable research and data collection on the experiences of transfer students seeking credit equivalencies for non-English language based courses to remove barriers that students studying in non-English languages face.

As a province, Ontario has the second largest French-speaking community outside of Quebec, with 11% of citizens speaking both English and French, and a significant population of French speakers residing in northern Ontario.<sup>48</sup> There are many students in Ontario who are completing various post-secondary programs and courses based on the French language. Currently there 11 French based, post-secondary institutions in Ontario.<sup>49</sup> Many institutions also offer students the possibility of completing a degree in both English and French.<sup>50</sup> As a province with a significant French-speaking population, language should not be a barrier to higher education.

For various reasons, students may transfer and change the primary language they are studying in, whether this is personal choice or out of necessity. Despite language, if courses produce equivalent

<sup>47</sup> Ontransfer.ca, Transfer Guide, [https://www.ontransfer.ca/index\\_en.php?page=transfer\\_profile\\_list](https://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=transfer_profile_list)

<sup>48</sup> Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. "The French Presence in Ontario" (2017), <http://www.officiallanguages.gc.ca/en/statistics/infographics/french-presence-ontario>, 2017-09-18

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

learning outcomes, students should be able to receive course credits for work they already completed. When institutions do not approve equivalent courses solely on the basis of language, additional barriers are created within the transfer system. One key initiative being undertaken to address the role of language is ONCAT's research proposal on the development of French and Indigenous-language transfer pathways.<sup>51</sup> Such initiatives are important in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issues non-English speaking transfer students face.

Ideally, post-secondary students undergoing credit transfer should be granted equivalent credits for every course taken at their prior institution. This would allow students to continue their educational paths without having to take additional time and rendering further costs to complete their degrees. However, this is not often the case, as the learning outcomes outlined in courses are inconsistent for many programs across different institutions, even within programs offering the same degree.<sup>52</sup> Although there are policies set in place to improve consistency in post-secondary learning outcomes, many transfer students continue to retake courses with material that they have already learned.<sup>53</sup> On top of this, students may also require additional supports to help them transition, even when transfer is approved, as those students in particularly technical fields may have difficulty in grasping translated and unfamiliar terms.

Using learning outcomes to evaluate credit equivalencies for transfer has proven to be more effective in allocating credit, and preparing transfer students for academic success, and allows for a greater number of transfer pathways.<sup>54</sup> Learning outcomes are used to outline the knowledge and skills a student should acquire once they have successfully completed a course/program/degree.<sup>55</sup> If post-secondary programs across Ontario followed clearly defined learning outcomes, it would be easier for admissions offices to determine what material a student has learned prior to transferring to their new institution. Learning outcomes also provide more flexibility for students and increase the number of non-traditional pathways available.<sup>56</sup> When learning outcomes are not clearly defined, prior learning and courses become more difficult to assess. As a result, many students end up having to retake courses they have already successfully completed elsewhere. This also means that students are burdened with additional finances of having to retake a course as well.

ONCAT should enable research and data collection on the experiences of transfer students seeking credit equivalencies for non-English language based courses in order to remove barriers that students studying in non-English programs may face. Additionally, MAESD should develop a guide based on best practise in Ontario to help create bridging programs to facilitate successful transfer pathways and supports. Easing transfer for non-English based learners involves not only improving pathways but also ensuring the right supports are in place as well.

## ACCEPTABLE TIMELINES

**Principle:** Post-secondary institutions should provide an online portal or list that details which credits are transferable upon acceptance to the institution.

**Principle:** Students seeking to transfer institutions should be provided with a clear confirmation of approved credits before accepting an offer of admission and/or paying a deposit fee.

**Concern:** Students applying to transfer post-secondary institutions may not receive word of their acceptances within the same time frame.

**Concern:** Students receiving offers of admission from various institutions at several different times may feel pressured to choose the institution that sent their letter of admission first.

<sup>51</sup> ONCAT, Postsecondary Pathway Development Projects (2017), [http://www.oncat.ca/files\\_docs/content/pdf/en/news\\_1611/2016-17\\_ONCAT\\_RFP-Pathway\\_Development.pdf](http://www.oncat.ca/files_docs/content/pdf/en/news_1611/2016-17_ONCAT_RFP-Pathway_Development.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> COU: *Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities (2015)*, p.3

<sup>53</sup> Fallon, Nicole, *Learning Outcomes in Credit Transfer: A Key Tool for Innovation in Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2015). p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

**Concern:** Some institutions do not provide transfer credit assessment results when sending out offers of admission, forcing students to make decisions and/or submit payments without knowing how many credits are approved.

**Concern:** The evaluation process is timely and can impede a student's ability to enrol and partake in courses available in the first semester of their studies.

**Concern:** Students are accepting offers of admission and paying fees prior to receiving confirmation of their transferrable credits.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should mandate that all admissions offices have credit transfer assessments results before an institution's acceptance deadline.

Post-secondary transfer students applying to several different institutions may often not hear back from each institution at the same time. Depending on the institution, the timeline for application responses could take weeks. While some students may receive early acceptance in January from one chosen institution, they may also receive an acceptance letter from another institution in May. The inconsistency surrounding admission letters leaves students in precarious situations as they try to navigate potential choices and pathways they should take. On top of this, transfer eligibility assessments may not be provided with the admission letter at the same time. Students are left with limited time and ability to make informed decisions about where they would like to study. In turn, this may force students to accept offers based on the time and/or order they received their offers in, rather than picking their top choice or a school that works best for their educational path and goals.

As illustrated by table 3, about half of Ontario's universities provide a list of credits that will be transferable to the student with a letter of admission, while the other half of institutions do not guarantee this. Many institutions require students to accept their offers of admission before the credit assessment process even begins, as is the case with the University of Waterloo, where the credit transfer evaluation process only begins at the time of offer. As a result, this creates inconsistent timelines for those seeking to transfer and students may feel that they should make their educational decisions based on which institution that creates the easiest transfer process, downgrading other factors that are relevant to making an education decision.

**Table 3: Credit Transfer Assessment and Admission at Ontario Universities, 2017-2018**

Institution	Transfer Status Timing
<b>Brock</b>	Received On Admission Offer
<b>Laurentian</b>	Received On Admission Offer
<b>McMaster</b>	Received On Admission Offer
<b>Queen's</b>	Received After Acceptance
<b>Trent</b>	Received After Acceptance
<b>Waterloo</b>	Received After Acceptance
<b>Western</b>	Received On Admission Offer
<b>Laurier</b>	Received On Admission Offer

Students are also experiencing uncertainty related to the application process itself and the amount of credits that are eligible for transfer, including assessment criteria. Although most undergraduate universities in Ontario offer a transfer credit assessment within the application process, institutions such as Queen's University, as well as the Ontario College of Art and Design, the University of Toronto, and Ryerson University, do not automatically assess prospective student's post-secondary courses for

transfer.<sup>57</sup> On top of this, many institutions require students to provide a receipt of official transcripts and course syllabi before processing transfer requests as well.<sup>58</sup> In these cases, students need go through a separate process, making their transfer experience more complex, timely, and unclear. Under such circumstances, students are also entering positions where they are accepting offers of admission and paying deposit fees without confirmation of the amount of their PSE credentials that are transferrable. It is necessary to build a credit transfer system that is easy to access and simple to navigate, as well as to reduce bureaucratic hoops, additional costs, and barriers, as they may deter prospective transfer students from partaking in the experience.<sup>59</sup>

To improve access, transparency, and predictability, students interested in transferring institutions should be provided with confirmation of transferable credits before they can accept an offer of admission and before they must pay any deposit fees. The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should mandate that all admissions offices have credit transfer assessments results complete before an institution's acceptance deadline. In the spring and summer terms, these dates should be planned in accordance with the vacation days of administrative staff which are dictated through collective agreements.

## TRANSPERANCY & PREDICTABILITY

### ONTRANSFER.CA

**Principle:** Students should have access to an updated web portal that provides a detailed and comprehensive list of transferable courses and pathways.

**Concern:** The ONtransfer.ca website provides program and course pathway searches, but does not specify the number of approved transferable credits.

**Concern:** The ONtransfer.ca website content is not updated on a regular basis, and relies on institutions to make relevant changes to transfer information.

**Recommendation:** The government of Ontario should increase funding for ONCAT resources in order to expand and improve the transparency and predictability of student mobility services online, modeled on the British Columbia Transfer Guide and Transfer Alberta websites.

**Recommendation:** The provincial government should allocate funding to ONCAT to regularly acquire and maintain transfer pathway information on their website.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should require that ONCAT develop a clear list of transferable courses with their credit equivalencies, made available on the ONtransfer.ca website.

ONtransfer.ca is a service provided by ONCAT, which allows students to digitally explore and navigate possible post-secondary transfer pathways through a centralized platform.<sup>60</sup> The website provides students in Ontario with a Transfer Guide that outlines key areas students should consider when planning their transfer, directing students to institutional transfer policies. This includes, transfer application requirements, deadlines, assessment timelines, among other essential information. Students rely on the resources and services provided by ONCAT to help inform them and guide their transfer process. As such, there should be a high regard for transparency and predictability within the services offered. To provide

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Lennon, Mary Catherine, Amanda Brijmohan, Eric Lavigne, Jinli Yang, Gavin Moodie, and Leesa Wheelahan, *Ontario Student Mobility: Carving Paths of Desire*, (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2016), p.38.

<sup>60</sup> ONCAT, ontransfer.ca, [https://www.ontransfer.ca/index\\_en.php?page=transfer\\_profile\\_list](https://www.ontransfer.ca/index_en.php?page=transfer_profile_list)

greater transparency and predictability, available online resources should be modeled after best practices coming from British Columbia, whose credit transfer processes have paved the way for the accessibility of pathway databases.<sup>61</sup> British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer states that students must be given transparent access to information regarding course equivalencies, specific program prerequisites, levels of achievement on which admission and transfer credit will be awarded, and that they implement such practices within their database.<sup>62</sup> This is particular important to consider for the framework, function, and content of the ONtransfer.ca website.

ONCAT requires its member institutions to provide information regarding available and emerging pathways.<sup>63</sup> As such, institutions must contact ONCAT to share any changes and updates to new or changing credit transfer pathways and transfer policies. A concern for students is that the website, as a result, may not be updated in a timely enough manner and therefore may not provide them with accurate or new information. The online credit transfer resources available in British Columbia provide a good framework to follow as to mediate such concerns. The BCTransferGuide website gives students the option to view all approved transferable courses in their area of study with listed credit equivalencies, on top of all potential pathway options and agreements. Furthermore, it provides students with an easy guide to follow to prepare them before transfer, during transfer, and once they find themselves in their new institutions. Most importantly, the website content is also updated daily by BCTransfer staff, as indicated on the site.<sup>64</sup> The course search option also provides students with information about particular articulation agreements and possible transfer pathways related to their fields of interest and selected course.<sup>65</sup> In addition to being given a list of transferable credits, students are also informed of agreements and transfer pathways available to them when particular courses are searched. For example, when students search certain first or second-year courses they will be prompted to find out more about their eligibility for 'Flexible Pre-Major' options (transfer agreements developed specifically for first and second year students in several general programs).<sup>66</sup>

Currently, within the ONtransfer.ca website, the available information database is lacking specific features that would improve transparency and predictability for students. Without these features, it is difficult for students to thoroughly plan their transfer and be informed about potential credits and program pathways. Although the website provides students with the ability to research potential programs and pathways, detailed information about approved courses and transferable credits is missing. Due to some of this vagueness and complexity in navigating the site, students may be deterred from taking this course of action if they feel there are barriers present, even before beginning the formal transfer application process.<sup>67</sup> It is essential that the website be organized in a way that is user friendly and provides students with an effective guide that makes the transfer process clear.

As students continue to embark on diverse educational paths and the demand for transfer pathways grows, the development of articulation agreements will increase. As a result, the need for universities and colleges across Ontario to formulate clear standards will require significant support.<sup>68</sup> On top of this, if funding for the development of transfer pathways increases as well, government standards can further influence how universities and colleges develop their policies and transfer pathways.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, it is important for the provincial government to invest in resources like the ONTransfer website to not only aid students but to also effectively guide institutions in the long term. For the credit transfer system to be

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<sup>61</sup> Brown, Louise, "Transferring credits between and university can be rocky," *Maclean's* (November 28, 2016), <http://www.macleans.ca/education/college/transferring-credits-between-college-and-university-can-be-rocky/>

<sup>62</sup> British Columbia Council on Articulation and Transfer, "Principles & guidelines for transfer" <http://www.bccat.ca/system/principles>

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> BCtransferguide.ca, "How Transfer Works", <http://www.bctransferguide.ca/transfer/how>

<sup>65</sup> ONCAT: Principles for Credit Transfer Policies and Procedures (2015)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Carter, I., Coyle, J., & Leslie, D. (2011). Easing the transfer students from college to university programs: How can learning outcomes help? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 22(1), 21–37.

<sup>68</sup> Gawley, T., & McGowan, R. A. (2006). Learning the ropes: A case study of the academic and social experiences of college transfer students within a developing university— college articulation framework. *College Quarterly*, 9(3)

<sup>69</sup> Carter, I., Coyle, J., & Leslie, D. (2011). Easing the transfer students from college to university programs: How can learning outcomes help? *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 22(1), 21–37.

flexible and effective in Ontario, building a comprehensive and centralized information platform that students and their institutions can rely on is necessary.

To improve ONTransfer.ca as a reliable service for students, MAESD should increase funding to ONCAT in order to expand online services for transfer students as well as provide funding to ensure ONCAT can work to regularly acquire and maintain transfer pathway information on their website. Furthermore, ONCAT should also develop a list of transferable courses with their approved credit equivalencies available on the ONtransfer.ca.

## RATIONALE & ACCOUNTABILITY

**Principle:** There should be a clear line of communication between students and their potential receiving institutions.

**Principle:** Each institution should provide students with a rationale explaining credit transfer decisions in detail.

**Concern:** Students are not provided with definitive reasoning as to why some credits are transferable and others are not.

**Concern:** The criteria used for assessing credit transfer eligibility varies across post-secondary institutions, making it challenging for students to decide which institution would be best suited to their academic path.

**Recommendation:** The government should establish guidelines that ensure all credit transfer activities, including transfer decisions, are transparent and information is directly accessible to students.

**Recommendation:** ONCAT should develop best practices based on BCCAT's recommended transfer appeals model, providing institutions with guidelines to follow in their own procedures.

For many transfer students, the lack of clear and timely communication with their desired institutions is a primary concern and area that needs to be improved.<sup>70</sup> This lack of communication is negatively affecting transfer students, particularly in relation to the process of credit assessment and transfer decisions. When students receive their assessment results, they are often left with limited information as to why certain credits successfully transferred and other credits did not.<sup>71</sup> Due to the lack of symmetry within Ontario's credit transfer system, post-secondary institutions place different standards for assessing student transcripts and making eligibility decisions.<sup>72</sup> As such, students can receive multiple varying decisions from the institutions they are applying to about their credit eligibility. Usually institutions will provide students with some general criteria about transfer credit assessments and decisions, but in many cases this criteria is vague and students do not receive direct explanation in the end. For example, Brock University lists 4 components that transfer credit assessment are based primarily on, including level of similarity, course content, and grade achieved in the course. The student transfer website also mentions that in some cases transfer credit may not be awarded, but offers no specifics about why or the possibility of reassessments or appealing transfer decisions.<sup>73</sup> On top of this, there is no indication that students will even receive direct explanation about transfer decisions after assessments are made.

Students should be able to know how eligibility decisions were made, why they were made, and who made them. When credits fail to transfer, it is often unclear how students can appeal decisions, if at all. In many

<sup>70</sup> Trick, David, *College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2013). Pg. 4.

<sup>71</sup> User, Alex, Paul Jarvey, *Student Experiences in Credit Transfer at Ontario Colleges*, (Toronto: Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012), Pg. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Council of Ontario Universities: *Credit Transfer at Ontario Universities*, (Toronto: 2015)

<sup>73</sup> Brock University: *Transfer Students* (2018) <https://brocku.ca/registrar/transfer-students/university-transfer-credit#understanding>

cases the options are both timely and costly with students having to go through an entire appeals process or apply for reassessment.<sup>74</sup> Students should not have to repay in the process that denied them the credit.

One model to look to is highlighted in BCCAT's special report on transfer appeals, which outlines key principles, guidelines, requirements, and recommendations for institutions so that they are best equipped with how to handle a transfer credit appeal.<sup>75</sup> While BCCAT recommends that institutions have the right to finalize a decision as they have access to highly qualified faculty members, this special report also states that students must also have access to paths where they can appeal credit decisions as well.<sup>76</sup> On top of this, BCCAT emphasizes that the more transparent the transfer process is, the less likely students will need to take avenues to appeal transfer decisions.<sup>77</sup> ONCAT should develop guidelines similar to BCCAT with recommendations and guidelines that outlines processes and procedures, along with recommendations, made available for institutions to implement.

Students need to be able to trust the decisions their institutions are making, especially when decisions such as transfer eligibility can profoundly change the educational path of a student.<sup>78</sup> To do so, the credit transfer system needs to be more direct and transparent for students. By providing students with definitive information about the assessment process and eligibility decisions, as well as providing easily accessible pathways to gain this information, it is possible to reduce the barriers that make credit transfer timely, costly, and stressful. <sup>79</sup> The provincial government should establish guidelines that ensure all credit transfer activities, including transfer decisions, are transparent and that information is made directly available to students. On top of this, ONCAT should develop best practices based on BCCAT's recommended transfer appeals model, providing institutions with guidelines to follow in establishing transfer appeals procedures.

#### COLLEGE-TO-UNIVERSITY TRANSFER

**Principle:** Universities should place a larger emphasis on evaluating learning outcomes gained in college courses when assessing transfer eligibility.

**Principle:** College students planning to or transferring into universities should have the ability to access transitioning programs that will help them adjust and succeed in a university environment.

**Concern:** During the credit transfer assessment process, universities may evaluate and weigh college credits unfavourably in comparison to university credits.

**Concern:** Universities may rely more heavily on numerical grading in assessing college credit transfers.

**Concern:** College students transferring into universities are facing difficulties adapting to the university environment.

**Concern:** Some institutions do not have additional supports for students transferring from colleges to universities.

**Recommendation:** HECQO should develop a common language that facilitates the use of learning outcomes in the credit transfer process between colleges and universities.

**Recommendation:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario creating transitioning programs to facilitate successful transfer and adjust into university.

<sup>74</sup> Lennon, Mary Catherine, Amanda Brijmohan, Eric Lavigne, Jinli Yang, Gavin Moodie, and Leesa Wheelahan, *Ontario Student Mobility: Carving Paths of Desire*, (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2016), Pg. 38.

<sup>75</sup> FitzGibbon, John. *Special Report: Transfer Credit Appeals in BC Post-secondary Institutions*, (BC: British Columbia Council on Admission and Transfer, December 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

The provincial government has the capacity to encourage and facilitate the enrolment of students into universities as well as broaden the access to undergraduate studies in Ontario.<sup>80</sup> It is important that the provincial government support institutions in the development of transfer pathways that extend educational possibilities for not only those students that are already enrolled in universities, but also those seeking to enter post-secondary institutions for the first time. Historically, unlike in Alberta, for example, where the post-secondary system was developed to streamline college to university transfers, Ontario's colleges were never established to prepare their graduates to enter the university system.<sup>81</sup> Therefore current students making this type of transition require significant support from the province and their institutions.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the provincial government must take leadership in establishing guidelines and structures that can fill these gaps within Ontario's post-secondary system, and provide institutions with mechanisms to use in supporting incoming college students.

For many college students, pursuing a university degree once they have completed their college programs is a transfer path of choice, however, this transfer process can be particularly difficult to navigate and college students face significant challenges in adjusting to their new institutions.<sup>83</sup> College graduates found many academic and social challenges in their transitions, which could be attributed to the differences in the campus cultures and missions of the receiving institutions.<sup>84</sup> These challenges included difficulty in adapting to their new university environments, where courses can be much faster paced and heavier in regards to workload.<sup>85</sup> Many students cited feeling unprepared and unaware of potential difficulties that could arise.<sup>86</sup> In some cases students experienced 'transfer shock', which can be described as significant difficulty in adjusting to the particular nature of their post-secondary institution.<sup>87</sup> The support services provided for college-to-university transfer students are not as available in comparison to the supports made available for direct entry students.<sup>88</sup> With proper supports set in place, institutions can promote successful adjustment for students shifting from college to university.<sup>89</sup> The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop a guide made available for institutions in the development and implementation of support services for college students entering university. This can include building on best practices in Ontario, focusing on successes, developing a framework that institutions will be able to use as a potential guide. This includes looking at university preparation programs, bridging programs, and exploration programs. For example, the University of Waterloo offers an Orientation Weeks both in the Fall and Spring specifically geared for college transfer students.<sup>90</sup>

Increasingly, research on college-to-university transfer, as well as within the post-secondary sector more generally, has emphasized the need to balance students' assessments by looking at learning outcomes, the knowledge and skills students gain through the courses they complete, rather than solely considering the numerical grade they receive.<sup>91</sup> In doing so, it is possible to create a more equitable transfer system, especially for college students seeking to enter universities.<sup>92</sup> Learning outcomes aid in the illustration of student capacity, knowledge, and value attained through diverse learning paths. Building more accessible and fair transfer opportunities includes developing shared learning outcomes, as well as common

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<sup>80</sup> Gerhardt, K., & Masakure, O. (2016). Postsecondary Student Mobility from College to University: Academic Performance of Students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 46(2).

<sup>81</sup> Lennon, Mary Catherine, Amanda Brijmohan, Eric Lavigne, Jinli Yang, Gavin Moodie, and Leesa Wheelahan, *Ontario Student Mobility: Carving Paths of Desire*, (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2016).

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Kerr, Angelika, Ursula McCloy, and Shumping Liu. *Forging Pathways: Students Who Transfer Between Ontario Colleges and Universities*, (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Ibid

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Transfer Students, Orientation (Waterloo: University of Waterloo, 2018). <https://uwaterloo.ca/orientation/transfer-students>

<sup>91</sup> Fallon, Nicole, *Learning Outcomes in Credit Transfer: A Key Tool for Innovation in Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2015), Pg. 6.; HEQCO, *Learning Outcomes*, <http://www.heqco.ca/en>.

ca/OurPriorities/LearningOutcomes/Pages/Home.aspx, Wai, Joyce, Read Leask, and Spencer Nestico-Semianiw. Policy Paper: Teaching and Assessment. (Toronto: Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, 2015).

<sup>92</sup> Fallon, Nicole, *Learning Outcomes in Credit Transfer: A Key Tool for Innovation in Student Mobility*, (Toronto: Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, 2015).

terminology, and an ongoing commitment to information sharing and collaboration between institutions and faculty across Ontario.

It is imperative to utilize learning outcomes in transfer processes due to the flexibility they provide when comparing and assessing student credentials, as well as the possibility for improving existing pathways, while also encouraging new ones.<sup>93</sup> However, a key issue in doing so has been insufficient standards and the need to develop a common language that would facilitate the use of learning outcomes in student assessments in the first place.<sup>94</sup> As such, OUSA recommends that HEQCO, develop a common language that facilitates the use of outcomes in the credit transfer process between colleges and universities

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

## POLICY STATEMENT

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### *Student Mobility and Credit Transfer*

**Whereas:** Data regarding credit transfer pathways should be made openly available to properly assess student mobility, access, persistence, and success in post-secondary education;

**Whereas:** All transfer students, both incoming and outgoing, should be supported by institutions;

**Whereas:** Institutions should have the autonomy to develop distinct and unique courses with diverse learning outcomes;

**Whereas:** Efforts to facilitate credit transfer and student mobility should not limit institutional differentiation;

**Whereas:** Students who decide to transfer institutions partway through their program should be recognized for courses and content knowledge that they have already obtained at their initial institution;

**Whereas:** Students should not have to choose an institution based on their financial means;

**Whereas:** Transfer students should know the outcomes of their credit transfer assessments when applying for the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP);

**Whereas:** Institutions should be able to support transfer students who indicate financial need;

**Whereas:** Joint college and university programs should enable students to acquire both practical and theoretical skills in their educational area of interest;

**Whereas:** Students should benefit from the distinct strengths and values that colleges and universities individually provide;

**Whereas:** Domestic partnerships between colleges and universities that offer joint programs should provide meaningful experiences to both students in the program and for their surrounding community that would not be offered at one sole institution;

**Whereas:** Post-secondary institutions should use Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR);

**Whereas:** Students should pay the same amount for a supplementary documentation fee for post-secondary transfer, regardless of their choice of institution;

**Whereas:** Post-secondary institutions should grant students the ability to transfer credits between programs that are based on different languages and where course material is deemed equivalent;

**Whereas:** Post-secondary institutions should provide an online portal or list that details which credits are transferable upon acceptance to the institution;

**Whereas:** Students seeking to transfer institutions should be provided with a clear confirmation of approved credits before accepting an offer of admission and/or paying a deposit fee;

**Whereas:** Students should have access to an updated web portal that provides a detailed and comprehensive list of transferable courses and pathways;

**Whereas:** There should be a clear line of communication between students and their potential receiving institutions;

**Whereas:** Each institution should provide students with a rationale explaining credit transfer decisions in detail;

**Whereas:** Universities should place a larger emphasis on evaluating learning outcomes gained in college courses when assessing transfer eligibility;

**Whereas:** College students planning to or transferring into universities should have the ability to access transitioning programs that will help them adjust and succeed in a university environment.

**Be It Further Resolved That (BIFRT):** The provincial government should provide ONCAT with the raw data collected through OEN tracking of transfer students to identify student pathways and ensure students are able to access, persist, and succeed in their post-secondary careers;

**BIFRT:** ONCAT should develop an online portal to clearly indicate transfer pathways, access, and success rates;

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should mandate Ontario post-secondary institutions to collect qualitative data about the experiences of transfer students leaving their institutions, producing reports to ONCAT annually;

**BIFRT:** The Government of Ontario should mandate that non-specialized direct-entry courses at institutions have common learning outcomes;

**BIFRT:** The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) should maintain a database of standardized learning outcomes for non-specialized direct-entry courses available for institutions to use;

**BIFRT:** The provincial Government should encourage institutions to develop distinct and unique courses with diverse learning outcomes for specialized courses in the pursuit of moderate differentiation in Ontario postsecondary education;

**BIFRT:** The Ontario Student Assistance Program's *Distance Grant* should require a student's home address to be located 40km or more away from the closest post-secondary institution, however, it should not require an institution with similar program offering be offered within 80km as this limits student mobility, access, and choice;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should ensure that transfer credit assessments are completed prior to the OSAP application deadline;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should encourage the development of articulation agreements between colleges and universities that provide joint degree-granting programs where they do not already exist outside of south central Ontario;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should encourage post-secondary institutions to pursue articulation agreements with institutions located in different geographical communities from their own, and to outline specific measures that will be taken in their Strategic Mandate Agreements;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop standardized articulation agreements that serve as resources to facilitate collaboration between institutions offering joint programs;

**BIFRT:** The provincial government should mandate the implementation and use of PLAR in post-secondary institutions, while also subsidizing PLAR costs;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should collect data on the average cost of current supplementary document fees and use this data to develop a standard fee applicable across all institutions;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario creating bridging programs to facilitate successful transfer pathways and supports for non-English learners;

**BIFRT:** ONCAT should enable research and data collection on the experiences of transfer students seeking credit equivalencies for non-English language based courses to remove barriers that students studying in non-English languages face;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should mandate that all admissions offices have credit transfer assessments results before an institution's acceptance deadline;

**BIFRT:** The government of Ontario should increase funding for ONCAT resources in order to expand and improve the transparency and predictability of student mobility services online, modeled on the British Columbia Transfer Guide and Transfer Alberta websites;

**BIFRT:** The government of Ontario should allocate funding to ONCAT to regularly acquire and maintain transfer pathway information on their website;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should require that ONCAT develop a clear list of transferable courses with their credit equivalencies, made available on the ONtransfer.ca website;

**Recommendation:** The government should establish guidelines that ensure all credit transfer activities, including transfer decisions, are transparent and information is directly accessible to students;

**BIFRT:** ONCAT should develop best practices based on BCCAT's recommended transfer appeals model, providing institutions with guidelines to follow in their own procedures;

**BIFRT:** HECQO should develop a common language that facilitates the use of outcomes in the credit transfer process between colleges and universities;

**BIFRT:** The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development should develop a guide based on best practices in Ontario creating transitioning programs to facilitate successful transfer and adjust into university.