

The vital role of credit transfers - University World News

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The vital role of credit transfers

Christine Arnold and Grace Karram Stephenson 15 April 2016 Issue No:409

Over the past 30 years, higher education has transitioned from an elite endeavour to an open market. The number of post-secondary institutions around the world has increased exponentially, often through the founding of small-scale, private operations.

In such a climate, scholars and critics debate what role, if any, governments should take in founding, funding and regulating these diverse institutions.

As the Canadian situation shows, a set of diverse institutions requires a thoughtful and intentional approach at the systemic level. An emphasis on consumer protection, harmonisation and degree progression is necessary to align such complex post-secondary systems.

'Occupational vs 'traditional transfer

Post-secondary education in Ontario Canadas most populous province is, for the most part, publicly funded. Despite the presence of private career colleges, the main players are the 22 public universities and 24 public colleges (19 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, and five Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning).

Transferring credits between these institutions has historically been very difficult. There are limited system-wide standards between the binary college and university sectors and subsequently a lack of commitment towards credit transfer systems.

Colleges in Ontario have a unique mandate, purpose and curriculum distinct from that of universities. While the curriculum in most universities is quite generalist (primarily arts and science based) at the undergraduate level, the college curriculum is practical, hands-on and vocationally specific.

As such, Ontario students moving from college to university tend to encounter what Barbara Townsend, Debra Bragg, and Collin Ruud called occupational transfer versus traditional transfer. Only the coursework college students take in general education and language or communications transfers easily when moving on to a university degree.

The result is variation in administration, policies and procedures between the two sectors as well as between individual colleges or universities. Students often struggle when attempting to move between institutions as they face challenges transferring their credits.

New frameworks for transfer

However, in 2011 the ground shifted and the moment many had been waiting for occurred. A provincial transfer framework and the establishment of a new coordinating body, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer or ONCAT, was announced by the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities with a commitment of nearly CAN\$74 million (US\$58 million) over five years.

Since this time, several phases of research have been funded in order to develop clear pathways and information for students transferring between institutions. There are several lessons to be learned from the Ontario context for governments, agencies and institutions that regulate post-secondary education systems with varying institution types, qualifications and programmes. And there are several learning opportunities that still exist for those in the province as the system matures.

Transfer trends and principles

In Ontario, currently available data reveal that 55,000 students transfer within Ontario each year via 1,300 block agreements and 120,000 course transfers. The top five transfer programmes are business, health, social science, engineering and liberal or general arts.

There has been great progress made in the Ontario context. An extensive network of pathways and resources has been developed. However, there are also several questions that remain with regard to students use of pathways, the effect of commuting distances on pathway use and responsive pathway development.

The Pathways to Education and Work research group at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, recently sought to investigate these questions and develop a decision-making tool to help policy-makers, educational institutions and faculties or departments decide where to invest effort in developing and maintaining educational pathways between colleges and universities. Funding for the project was graciously provided by ONCAT.

The project revealed that regional/geographical conversations about pathway development are important as students in Ontario generally transfer within the same region as their sending institution.

In addition, the frequencies with which students transfer between and within sectors was found to be fairly equal, with less than half of college graduates pursuing university study in the same broad field and others choosing complementary broad fields of study.

This is in contrast to current policy, which often assumes that the majority of transfer is linear from college to university and that students first and second qualifications are within the same field of study.

What can we learn from Ontario?

The principle driving transfer research in Ontario is that no degree – except perhaps the PhD – should be terminal. The goal is to increase student transfer from one qualification to another and maximise credit so that students are not left repeating previous coursework with additional costs.

Students need to be savvy consumers when choosing their studies, and government and institutions need to ensure that qualifications are designed with multiple entry points. Educational pathways that connect lower- and higher-level qualifications are important for student progression and social equity and inclusion.

As Ontario continues to refine their credit transfer system, the following must be considered:

- Clear information about eligible transfer credits and their function prior to admission;
- Access to appeals or review procedures for all credit transfer decisions;
- Emphasis on regional/geographic frameworks;
- Increase in alternative entry mechanisms;
- Attention to increasing the number of students transferring versus number of pathways.

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