My Experience with University Transfer and Credit Mobility
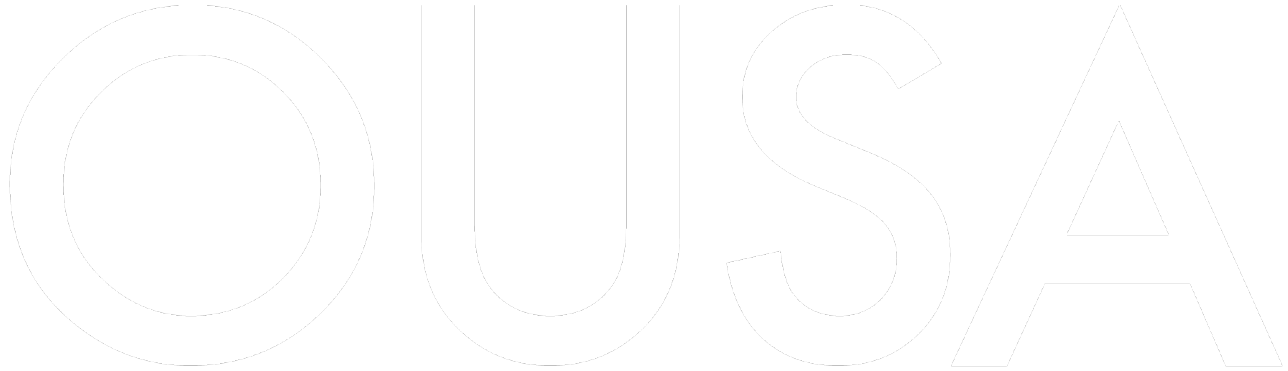
ousa.ca/blog_credit_transfer_experience

Written by Kathryn Kettle on December 13, 2017

Every year, some 55,000 students make transfers between post-secondary institutions within Ontario (ONCAT Annual Report 2016-17). Some students decide to transfer mid-degree to enter specific programs with courses they could not take elsewhere. Others may transfer for a variety of reasons, whether it be to make university more affordable, to be closer to family, or to improve the student's mental health. The choice to transfer institutions is one made with the student's academic and personal best interests in mind, and oftentimes the student has little to no control over the circumstances driving their decision.

Transferring credits between universities is, at best, a straightforward and exciting process; and at worst, a costly nightmare of credit incompatibility and registrar miscommunication. The student must complete an online application through the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) website, providing their transcripts from their previous post-secondary institution(s), and possibly their high school. There are fees associated with the application itself, and with the sharing of transcripts between schools. Upon being accepted, the student can see which of their courses received equivalencies, and review the total number of credits that would follow them to their new institution.

My university transfer process began midway through my third year studying Biomedical Sciences at the University of Ottawa, a fair distance away from my hometown in Sudbury. I had an uneventful three years of my undergrad, experiencing the regular ups and downs of academics, roommates, and newfound independence; however I missed the support system and routine feel of my life in Sudbury, and returning to Ottawa became harder with every trip home that passed. This compelled me to transfer universities, and I applied to Laurentian University during the winter semester of my third year. I chose to apply to the same program to maximize the amount of transfer credits that I could receive. I had looked at ontransfer.ca

before applying in hopes of estimating the number of courses which would be transferable, but the majority of my uOttawa courses were not recognized by the website with respect to Laurentian's classes – all I could do was wait for my transcript to be adjudicated by the admissions office at Laurentian.

A few weeks after applying to transfer, I received word that 66 of my uOttawa credits, or a little over two years of a full-time class schedule, could be transferred to Laurentian. Although losing almost a year of my schooling was not ideal, I knew that going through with this transfer would still be worth the improvements to my academics and mental health in the long run. Many of my uOttawa courses which did not have equivalencies were my mandatory first-year science classes, forcing me to take repeat classes once I started studying at Laurentian. Since I did not have many of these prerequisite first-year courses, I required permission from professors and the head of my program to register in upper-year courses – only adding to the waiting process of my transfer.

A few months later, in the middle of my first semester at my new university, I emailed Laurentian's registrar office inquiring about challenging a first-year biology course. Instead, the response I received informed me that upon additional review of my transfer, the university registrar had granted me an extra 15 credits (five classes) based on a technicality that the unguided admissions officer dealing with my specific case had failed to catch earlier in the year. This mistake would have cost me upwards of $3000 in repeat classes – luckily, I had not yet taken or paid for any of these classes in my first semester. Because of this extra staff member reviewing my transcript, I will not be learning about the function of the mitochondria for the nth time, and for this I am thankful.

I believe there is much room for improvement when looking at university transfer within Ontario. The material presented in first- and second-year classes should be more standardized to maximize the number of equivalent courses that students may receive between universities. Standardizing courses could also create a more equal evaluation system when looking at the grades that students are receiving from university to university. Standardization of courses would make the already useful ONTransfer website more easily navigable, and it would make admissions officers' and academic advisors' jobs easier with respect to transfer students. Transfer students may end up paying thousands of dollars more in tuition for courses that they were not granted equivalent credits for, even when looking at transfers to the same program. The circumstances leading them to transfer are often beyond their control, and this isn't something they should be punished for.