



Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

The Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance is a non-partisan advocacy organization that represents the interests of over 150,000 undergraduate and professional, full-time and part-time university students at seven student associations across Ontario.

# STUDENT MOBILITY & CREDIT TRANSFER

Post-secondary credentials support social mobility and equity by preparing students for the labour market or further studies; and a strong credit transfer system is an important element of an equitable, accessible, and diverse post-secondary sector. With the quickly evolving post-secondary landscape and growing transfer needs that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a perfect opportunity to revisit student mobility and credit transfer through investments in supports, growing and strengthening transfer pathways, and better understanding the needs of transfer students in the province.

## THE PROBLEM

### **Inconsistent, Non-Transparent Fees**

Students have raised concerns about inconsistent and non-transparent fees that mean transfer students are forced to pay fees that may amount to more than just their transfer process and that students are paying different amounts for the same or similar transfer services across Ontario. They have also raised concerns that by having transfer fees through both the Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC) and universities, students may end up paying additional fees for the same documentation or work. They are also concerned about the three-application minimum for OUAC application fees that fail to consider transfer students who typically apply to less than three programs. Necessary documentation and/or evaluations, as well as commonly used credit recognition processes, may be financially inaccessible to students. Students are also concerned about the unforeseen financial, emotional, and academic stressors faced by students who are unexpectedly forced to transfer due to the closure of their institution or program.

### **Gaps in Credit Recognition Processes**

Universities in Ontario do not use a consistent credit or prior learning recognition process, and students are concerned that not all transferable credits are course equivalencies, which can result in students being required to take additional courses and/or graduate with more credits than necessary. They are also concerned about unstandardized elements of course outlines that limit the ability to establish consistent course equivalencies across institutions. Students have

also raised concerns that Faculty have significant autonomy in granting credit transfers which can create inconsistencies in credit recognition and threatens student stability, and there is no independent, clear, consistent, and accessible process for challenging a credit recognition decision. They are further concerned about the current gap in guidelines for recognizing microcredentials.

### **Delayed and Inaccessible Information**

Students have told us that some institutions do not tell students which of their credits will be recognized until after they have accepted their offer of admission, and delayed information about what credits transfer may result in students changing or settling on different transfer plans. Transfer decisions are often made on a case-by-case basis which results in inconsistent information and academic support regarding the transfer process. Many students are concerned that they are unsure of where to find information about transferring, including, but not limited to, fees, deadlines, and grade expectations, and that they are confused and misled by conflicting and unclear information in a confusing system. There are additional concerns that students who need to transfer due to campus climate issues or personal circumstances may not meet the grade requirements necessary to do so.

### **Barrier for International Transfer Students**

Students are also concerned about the barriers that international transfer students face, especially given the fact that there is little research on these barriers and international students face

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unique challenges when it comes to understanding and navigating complex transfer and credit recognition processes. They are also concerned that there are limited resources to support credit assessments for international transfer students, accreditation or recognition of international transfer credits, and access to verifiable and sufficient international documents. This is exacerbated by the fact that international students who do not inform Immigration and Citizenship Canada that they are transferring between institutions within Canada risk being asked to leave the country and may not be approved for future study or work permits.

### **Lack of Transfer-Specific Supports**

Transfer pathways and credit recognition processes are complex, institution-, program-, and student-specific, and can be difficult to navigate for transfer students and potential transfer students who are often accessing these pathways for the first time, and students are concerned that there are little transfer-specific supports available. There is also concern that important province-wide resources like ONTransfer.ca are not well-known and are therefore underutilized by transfer students. Students are also concerned that Indigenous students, particularly those from Indigenous Institutes, may have more limited options and may be forced to take on additional labour to educate and advocate for themselves throughout the transfer process, especially in an environment where there may not be many people with similar lived experiences.

### **Gaps and Barriers in Transfer Pathways**

Students are concerned about the gaps and barriers in transfer pathways, especially given that universities often do not consider college credits equivalent to university credits, even when the course content and learning outcomes are the same. They are also concerned that students who receive credits earned through PLAR processes in college may be unable to transfer the credit to university, forcing them to take additional courses in an area where it has already been proven they have sufficient knowledge. Further, students transferring between colleges and universities are often not aware of which resources are available to them and how to access the support they need, which is challenging considering the limited number of transfer pathways, particularly in fields with fewer transfer options. There is also a lack of consistent, relevant, and time-

ly data on the success of transfer students and transfer pathways which means stakeholders are often unaware of barriers to, and successes in, the transfer process.

For transfer students from Indigenous Institutes, and private and Francophone institutions, to publicly assisted universities in Ontario, there is minimal, if any, data discussing the barriers, supports, and potential solutions. However, we do know that students from Indigenous Institutes, and private and Francophone institutions, are not given the option to select their current place of study on ONTransfer.ca, as the program search only provides options for college or university; that there are limited transfer pathways or articulation agreements between Indigenous Institutes and public universities and colleges; that Indigenous Institutes are not present in policies relevant to transferring institutions; and that there is a lack of funding for Indigenous Institutes to develop and provide the support and resources that students need to transfer institutions. Students are additionally concerned about these barriers given that there is a lack of institutions that provide relevant programs for Francophone students in Ontario, and as a result students may wish to transfer outside of the province but often have a difficult time doing so.

### **Lack of Data**

The current lack of available data on who transfers, why, and student outcomes after transferring can detrimentally hurt students' ability to make informed choices and understand how the transfer process can impact their success in post-secondary, while also hindering the ability to make informed decisions to support broader sector sustainability. The limited data on credit transfer pathways that does exist is either not publicly available or it is inaccessible to sector stakeholders. These data gaps have a detrimental impact on funding, which negatively impacts post-secondary institutions' abilities to meet transfer student needs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Consistent and Transparent Fees

To address concerns about the affordability of credit transfer processes, students recommend that the provincial government mandate that post-secondary institutions include a breakdown of what is included in transfer fees, including supplemental documentation/evaluation fees, to students before they are charged; all universities in Ontario include any transfer-related fees as part of the supplemental/document evaluation fee paid via OUAC or [ontariocolleges.ca](http://ontariocolleges.ca); and the application fee for students seeking to transfer is not tied to a minimum number of applications or exceed the number of programs to which a student may choose to apply.

The provincial government should also provide funding for registrars' offices to cover the cost associated with providing students with official documentation, such as official transcripts and enrollment verification forms; to post-secondary institutions under the mandate that all post-secondary institutions commit to offering affordable PLAR in accordance with best practices to ensure the process is transparent to students; and to all students who are forced to transfer due to the closure of their institution or program to assist with application, relocation, and other transfer-related costs.

#### Improving Credit Recognition Processes

To strengthen credit recognition processes and address barriers, student recommend that the provincial government develop and host a digital repository for PLAR practitioners to share resources and best practices across institutions. The provincial government should also develop, standardize, and host a public repository of course outlines at all post-secondary institutions in the province; and work with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA), the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), and Colleges Ontario (CO), to develop standardized language for syllabi and course outlines to assist with transfer decisions and develop key learning outcomes and skills aimed at first- and second-year foundational courses to assist with transfer decisions.

Additionally, the provincial government should develop an accountability framework to encourage university and college faculty to collaborate

and discuss disciplinary articulation as well as develop guidelines to support institutions to outline an independent, clear, consistent, and accessible process for challenging a credit recognition decision that includes who can and cannot make decisions as well as support systems for students throughout the appeal process. The provincial government should also establish credit articulation and recognition guidelines for assessing the transferability of microcredentials.

#### Timely and Accessible Information

To ensure students have timely and accessible information about their transfer pathway, the provincial government should incentivize universities to inform transfer students of transfer credit decisions alongside students' offers of admission. Additionally, the provincial government should mandate that post-secondary institutions develop appeal processes for students who believe the credit transfer timeline negatively impacted their ability to make a transfer decision and that post-secondary institutions share information regarding credit decisions and timelines be publicly available to all stakeholders. The provincial government should also provide envelope funding for post-secondary institutions to hire additional academic support services staff to work specifically with transfer students; provide funding to the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) to combine [oncat.ca](http://oncat.ca) and [ONTransfer.ca](http://ONTransfer.ca) for student ease and understanding, as well as funding to ensure the information is maintained, updated, and promoted in a timely manner to institutions and students; and mandate and provide funding for post-secondary institutions to develop an extenuating circumstances procedure for students looking to transfer who do not meet grade or program requirements due to circumstances beyond their control.

#### Supporting International Transfer Students

To support international transfer students, the provincial government should provide additional funding to ONCAT to support system-level research into the experiences and barriers faced by international students related to credit recognition and transfer; fund the development and maintenance of a system-wide equivalency and agreement database for international transfer; and provide funding for post-secondary institutions to hire student outreach, support staff, and advisors for international students looking to transfer within Ontario.

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### Improving Transfer-Specific Supports

To ensure students have access to transfer-specific supports, the provincial government should provide funding for post-secondary institutions to hire student outreach and support staff and advisors for transfer students; increase funding to ONCAT to continue maintaining, strengthening, and advertising ONTransfer.ca; and mandate that all frontline staff, including academic advisors, have cultural competency training regarding how to best support and advise Indigenous transfer students, particularly those who are transferring from Indigenous Institutes and may be at higher risk experiencing cultural shock.

### Strengthening Transfer Pathways

To strengthen transfer pathways, the provincial government should mandate universities to work with ONACT in building consistent and appropriate tools to fairly consider transfer credits. The provincial government should also provide funding to institutions to implement and advertise additional support services for students looking to transfer to a different type of post-secondary institution and to ONCAT to research and publish information regarding the barriers and successes of students transferring between colleges and universities and transfer pathways. Further, the provincial government should encourage universities and colleges to develop transfer pathways, particularly in fields and/or programs that have a limited number of existing pathways.

The provincial government should also provide funding to ONCAT to research and publish a report and make recommendations on demographics, reasons for transfer, barriers, and supports for students transferring from Indigenous Institutes, private, or Francophone institutions to publicly assisted post-secondary institutions in Ontario, and then adopt the recommendations made by ONCAT. They should also provide ONCAT with funding to update Ontario Postsecondary Transfer Guide with relevant and specific information for students from Indigenous Institute, private and Francophone institutions looking to transfer to publicly assisted post-secondary institutions in Ontario.

To support students who transform to or from Indigenous Institutes specifically, the provincial government should encourage publicly assisted post-secondary institutions to work with Indigenous Institutes to develop specific pathway

programs to facilitate transferring; and, upon the development and review of existing government policies related to transfer, the provincial government should work with Indigenous Institutes to ensure that they are represented in policies and eligible for related funding. They should also provide funding to Indigenous Institutes to develop resources necessary to build transfer systems and pathways.

Finally, the provincial government should expand ONCAT's mandate to include working outside the province where necessary, particularly for Francophone students looking to transfer to continue their bilingual/French education.

### Data Collection for Transfer Student Success and Sector Sustainability

To fill data and information gaps, COU and the Ontario College Application Service should develop and implement a non-compulsory survey through OUAC and ontariocolleges.ca to gather demographic information on students, including transfer students, when they apply to universities and colleges and the provincial government should task and fund ONCAT to collect data and publicly report on why students transfer, which students transfer, what credits were successfully transferred, and student success rates (including, but not limited to: graduation rates, sense of belonging, GPAs, etc.) once they have transferred. The provincial government should also change the Credit Transfer Institutional Grant to be based on application and need, rather than solely the number of transfer students.