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Backgrounder: Principles for Credit Transfer Policies and Procedures

1. Introduction

Working with our members, ONCAT supported the creation of a proposed made-in-Ontario set of Principles for Credit Transfer Policies and Procedures. The Principles are intended to act as goals for institutions to achieve.

The development of these Principles is a key step in ensuring consistency and transparency in credit transfer assessment and communication processes across Ontario colleges and universities. As it stands, students often report that they find it difficult to navigate the credit transfer system, in particular because institutions use a wide range of different policies and procedures.

2. Background

In August 2013, the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities held a roundtable with Ontario college and university presidents to discuss Ontario's credit transfer initiative. One of the key priorities communicated through the meeting was the creation of an Operational Framework to guide credit transfer policies and procedures in Ontario, and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities tasked ONCAT to work with institutions on the development of this framework.

The Ministry's initial conception of the framework involved creating a more standardized set of policies and procedures which all institutions would be required to implement. However, in keeping with our collaborative approach, ONCAT redefined the framework, shifting the focus to the creation of general principles for credit transfer that would act as goals which institutional policies and procedures should achieve. A review of policies in other jurisdictions, such as the BC transfer system, which includes such principles, informs this approach.

Under this re-envisioned framework, individual institutions are able to evaluate whether their policies and procedures successfully meet the collective goals for credit transfer, and have the flexibility to adjust their policies and procedures to create a more seamless transfer experience for students within their own institutional context.

3. Consultation process

To begin, in 2014 we worked with institutions to conduct an environmental scan of existing policies and practices for credit transfer. The information collected was collated into FAQ-style

institutional profiles and posted on ONTransfer.ca. This allowed students, for the first time in Ontario, to easily read and compare institutions' transfer policies so they could make more informed decisions about transferring. At the same time, it provided further insight into the varied operational contexts of institutions, and supported our conclusion that developing general principles for credit transfer would best address the needs of both students and institutions.

To move forward, a working group of member representatives was created to identify and recommend general principles for credit transfer that would translate into institutional goals. After agreeing to the overall approach, the working group separated into three sub-groups consisting of student representatives, college representatives, and university representatives. The sub-groups met in stages to work through a parallel process of determining the scope of discussion and principles. Each group met at each stage, and revisions to the principles were shared with each group at the following stage, resulting in the collaboratively created set of draft Principles.

Many thanks to the working group members, who contributed significant time and effort to developing the Principles:

Mary Blanchard, Associate Vice-President Academic, Durham College

Matt Caron, Director of Advocacy, College Student Alliance

Jonathan Christie, Manager, Client Services, Ryerson University

Julia Colyar, Senior Policy Analyst, Council of Ontario Universities

Ray Darling, Registrar, Wilfrid Laurier University

Amir Eftekarpour, President, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Tyler Epp, Director of Advocacy, College Student Alliance

Lynne Gaudet, Associate Registrar, Fanshawe College

Peter Gooch, Senior Director, Policy and Analysis, Council of Ontario Universities

John Horrox, Research and Policy Analyst, College Student Alliance

Kaley Kennedy, Communications and Government Relations Coordinator,
Canadian Federation of Students - Ontario

Rylan Kinnon, Executive Director, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Brad MacIsaac, Assistant Vice-President, Planning & Analysis and Registrar, UOIT

Julia Mackenzie, student representative, ONCAT Board of Directors

Sean Madden, Executive Director, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance

Joy McKinnon, Vice-President Academic, Seneca College

Jeannette Miron, Registrar and Manager of Institutional Research, Canadore College

Shari Nash, Manager, Admissions and Waterloo Recruitment, Wilfrid Laurier University

Julie Parna, Director, Strategic Academic Initiatives, York University

Lidia Pirraglia, Associate Registrar, George Brown College

Lisa Rae, Senior Policy Analyst, Council of Ontario Universities

Luke Speers, student representative, ONCAT Board of Directors

Once the draft Principles were complete, a consultation paper was composed that outlined the background and rationale for the Principles, as well as the process for their development. The consultation paper was circulated to college and university Presidents, Vice-Presidents Academic, Registrars, and ONCAT credit transfer contacts, and was also shared with stakeholder groups such as Colleges Ontario (CO), the Council for Ontario Universities (COU), the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), the College Student Alliance (CSA), and the Canadian Federation of Students – Ontario (CFS-Ontario), in addition to other credit transfer experts. Feedback received was compiled and synthesized into the Principles, and the updated version was then circulated to the entire working group for review before finalizing.

4. Key issues

Generally speaking, the key issues discussed through developing the Principles speak to the heart of why overall Principles for Credit Transfer are more appropriate than standardized policies and procedures. Institutions operate in very specific contexts, which vary widely, and implementing one set approach across all institutions is untenable. At the same time, students need to be able to inform themselves of their options, to compare approaches at different institutions, and to reliably predict how credit transfer decisions will be made. Establishing Principles creates the flexibility for both of these perspectives to be acknowledged and addressed.

Given the complexities of credit transfer and the diversity of operational contexts, the Principles are broadly stated so that the resulting goals can be achieved in a variety of ways. For example, different institutions currently take widely different approaches towards applications for transfer credit. Some institutions automatically evaluate for transfer credit based on submitted transcripts, whereas other institutions require a separate transfer credit application. The Principles are general enough so that both of these approaches can be understood as meeting the goals for credit transfer.

The emphasis is on creating aspirational goals, or stretch targets, rather than requirements. This acknowledges the reality that institutions are striving to improve processes for students in an environment of competing priorities and scarce resources. For example, the principle “institutions should respond to requests for transfer decisions in a timely manner, preferably at the time of offer” includes a goal that may be challenging for institutions. Credit transfer decisions are often labour-intensive. At the same time, to meet enrolment targets institutions must admit as many as quadruple the number of students as will eventually attend. Obliging institutions to conduct a resource-intensive evaluation of students unlikely to attend would put an unreasonable strain on resources. Yet students would clearly benefit from obtaining a credit transfer decision with their offer of admission. To balance these perspectives, the

Principle is stated flexibly. Although the time of offer is preferred, the focus is on responding “in a timely manner.” This allows the aspiration to be stated, the institution to fulfill the Principle through operating to the best of its ability, and the overall goal to focus on getting information to students as soon as possible.

Balance is also achieved through focusing the Principles on making current information about credit transfer transparent as opposed to cataloging requirements for what should be in place at institutions. Only a few key types of information are specifically highlighted as being important to promote. This encourages institutions to share information about their own operations while not obliging them to create new processes in order to adhere to a set list. The Principles are worded so as not to require perfect information, but to recognize institutions for their efforts in providing the information currently available. For example, one type of information listed as important to provide is course equivalencies. However, there is no requirement that all course equivalencies be provided – institutions which provide even preliminary information about equivalencies could be deemed as adhering to this goal.

Similarly, considerable time was spent discussing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). There was general agreement that the landscape around PLAR is uneven, but that where institutions do use PLAR information on PLAR processes is key for students. Therefore, although PLAR was included in one of the Principles, that Principle specifically states that it does not apply to all institutions. In other words, the Principles generally strive to balance institutional flexibility and autonomy with student needs to have as much information as possible about credit transfer processes.

Taken together, the Principles cover the spectrum of institutional and student activities during the application and enrolment processes, and provide guidance on how those activities should be managed in order to provide the best possible service for students while also acknowledging the reality of unique organizational contexts.

5. Principles for Credit Transfer and Institutional Profiles

The full set of finalized Ontario Principles for Credit Transfer was sent to institutions in summer 2015 for their formal sign-on and support, and is posted on the ONTransfer.ca website at: <http://ontransfer.ca/principlesforcredittransfer>.

After general support for the Principles was established, institutional profiles were created to help demonstrate how the policies and procedures at individual institutions align with the Principles. The intent of these profiles is not to evaluate institutions as much as it is to provide information about what each institution is doing so students can make informed decisions about their education. We created a draft document for each institution that detailed how that institution’s policies and procedures align with the Principles. The draft was shared with key contacts at the institution, who had the opportunity to review it and make adjustments. Once approved, the profile was posted on ONTransfer.ca.

The finalized institutional profiles can be found on the ONTransfer.ca website at: <http://ontransfer.ca/institutionalprofiles>. Moving forward, institutions will be asked to review and update the profiles annually in order to capture any changes in policy and procedures that occurred over the year.