

Transfer Literacy: Assessing Informational Symmetries and Asymmetries

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Outline of the Study

This research examines the extent to which the Ontario college-to-university transfer information system is performing efficiently and identifies symmetries (*congruities*) and asymmetries (*incongruities*) in stakeholders' (Government, agencies, institutional administrators and students) understanding of this process (p. 9). Specifically, the study focuses on 'transfer literacy' – *"The ability to comprehend credit transfer procedures, policies and outcomes. It refers to a set of knowledge and skills that allow individuals to advise and/or make informed decisions about admission and the mobilization of academic credits between colleges and universities to avoid the repetition of coursework, lack of financial assistance and misaligned institutional and program fit"* (p. 8-9).

As a lens to analyze and interpret results, the study utilizes concepts from contract theory, "a branch of economic research which investigates how stakeholders interact and form contractual arrangements often in the presence of asymmetric information" (p. 19). A qualitative methodology was employed, which included both a review of over 70 documents representative of credit transfer deliberations in the province from 1999-2012, as well as focus groups with institutional administrators involved in the advisement of students and/or the evaluation of transfer credit. Overall, 13 Ontario postsecondary institutions (six colleges and seven universities) participated in this research (p. 16). The process involved:

- 1) "Documentation of information needs and responsibilities",
- 2) "Analysis of the degree of completeness in terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of existing and relevant information",
- 3) "Identification of internal and external factors that impact on performance and the formation of an action plan" (p. 20).

The research establishes a "baseline of credit transfer information that Government, agencies and institutions view as being necessary to navigate the transfer system" (p. 14). In areas where information/knowledge problems were found to exist among Government, agencies, institutions and students, strategies have been recommended to address the imbalances.

Findings

Symmetries: Similar credit transfer arguments, concepts and priorities were named and elaborated upon by *Government/agencies and institutional administrators*. The documents reviewed outline guidelines for the acceptance of college coursework, timelines for completion and strategies for the creation and maintenance of college-university relations (p. 28). Institutional administrators also collectively discussed these guiding principles. Symmetries were further identified with regard to information about admissions, articulation and transfer models in Ontario. Institutional responsibility to offer admission to “those students whose academic backgrounds indicate that they are likely to succeed in university programs was discussed in detail” (p. 28). The elements identified as being necessary for admission by both stakeholder groups include: GPA, program-specific criteria, external accreditation requirements, workplace demands and available seats in university programs (p. 28). Symmetries regarding articulation and transfer models centered on programming, learning outcomes, innovation, trust and respect, governance and shared resources (p. 28-29).

Additionally, this research identified a few specific symmetries existent between *institutional administrators and students* that contribute to the success of some transfer pathways. This appears to be particularly true for pathways defined by well-publicized articulation agreements. Typically, students in successful pathways that have been informed of GPA requirements and transfer expectations during their diploma studies recognize the value of combining diploma and degree coursework and appreciate that transferring under an agreement will optimize their transferable academic credits. However, even in these instances, the inconsistent provision of information and use of varying terminology can be “difficult for students to comprehend and apply” (p. 32).

Asymmetries: The study also identified a number of asymmetries in which different levels of knowledge appear to erode the effectiveness of the transfer process. Asymmetries were identified between *government/agencies and institutional administrators* in areas where administrators (Government) would directly benefit from additional information about the credit transfer process from Government (administrators). These incongruities would be addressed by:

- Expansion of “institutional credit review procedures via internal centralized databases for course-to-course transfer” and posting on the *Ontario Postsecondary Transfer Guide*, which will require annual review for the distribution of accurate credit evaluation information (p. 30);
- Provision of informational resources regarding “electronic administrative management systems/degree planning tools” (p. 30) to streamline the “submission of credit transfer

applications and required documentation, posting of evaluation results, viewing of academic history and degree planning in consideration of awarded credit” (p. 30);

- Implementation of a comprehensive research agenda including the “institutional tracking of transfer students” across all colleges and universities (p. 30).

Since this research concluded, Government and ONCAT have worked with institutions to construct, populate and disseminate information regarding course-to-course transfer. What once was a sizeable asymmetry is now being partially remedied. Management systems/planning tools and data initiatives are receiving attention but will require much work.

Asymmetries were identified between *institutional administrators and students* in areas where students would directly benefit from additional information about the credit transfer process from administrators (Government). While there is an expectation that students should have well-developed transfer literacy in order to navigate the admissions and transfer process, administrators revealed that increased and clarifying information is required at times. As a result, the report notes that students can find the credit transfer process to be “baffling” (p. 25). Asymmetries between administrators and transfer students that contribute to confusion were identified in eight overarching areas:

- 1) Evaluation of Credits (Advanced Standing, Direct Entry, Equivalency, etc.);
- 2) Application Process and Required Documentation;
- 3) Credit Transfer Portfolio (Location, Unit[s] and Personnel Involved);
- 4) GPA Calculation;
- 5) Reach Backs;
- 6) Degree and Program Requirements;
- 7) Variations in Structure (Program and Institution Type);
- 8) Policies and Affiliated Terminology (p. 34).

Administrators provided several examples of items students struggle to comprehend within each area. These include:

- Limitations to the acceptability of college diploma/degree credits for university credit. Credits “will generally not be accepted on a one-for-one basis”, and typically must meet affinity, prerequisite and GPA requirements (p. 6);
- “Credit transfer terminology used by universities” (p. 5), a requirement which would be aided by enhancing the “clarity and consistency in the various credit transfer terms used within the system” (p. 20);
- Location of “sites where information is housed” (p. 5);

- Nature of the process – “competitive” and “multistage” with “unique demands at each juncture” (p. 5). Each course and/or program choice can potentially limit the use of transfer credits (p. 50);
- Relationships among program options, “future graduate education and career goals” (p. 5);
- Greater flexibility inherent in university programs compared to college and the attendant obligation to take “responsibility for enrolling in all coursework, selecting electives and meeting breadth requirements” (p. 6).

The study identifies several challenges that need to be considered when framing a plan of action. First, protocols governing students’ private information and institutional program records can have the effect of limiting the retrieval of academic documentation that would round out and verify a student’s past education and credit transfer application(s) (p. 46). Second, academic regulations such as those that inhibit the transfer of college degree credits for university credit, “are generally not posted publicly” (p. 47). Third, “heterogeneity in academic regulations across institutions”, (including those related to “grading scales, GPA calculations, credit values/weight, credit evaluation fees and timing, course repeats and declarations of previous postsecondary education”) often results in disconnected advising practices (p. 47). Lastly, high school guidance counsellors are a critical link in the communications channel and may not always possess current and complete information required to assist students’ with their postsecondary education choices (p. 49).

The report details the themes summarized above and adds insight by including supporting statements from the focus groups.

Recommendations

The study offers six substantial recommendations for the improvement of transfer literacy among stakeholders:

- 1) “Develop a searchable centralized database for identifying previous student registrations and the electronic archiving of course outlines/descriptions” to “assist advisors when conducting transfer credit evaluations”.
- 2) “Institute and publicly post policies regarding the evaluation of applied degree credits at Ontario universities” to reflect the changing degree granting role and responsibilities of colleges.
- 3) Establish “more transparent and system-wide academic regulations across institutions to assist both institutional administrators and students” in their efforts to bridge disconnected institutional practices.

- 4) "Educate students about credit transfer pathways and institutional offerings earlier in their educational careers" so both high school guidance counsellors and students understand the function and flexibility of a postsecondary education.
- 5) "Create standard credit transfer terminology" as a key step in the clarification of articulation agreements and transfer models.
- 6) "Open communication lines and resource sharing among college and university credit transfer advisors/counsellors" to enhance understanding of the relationship between degree and program requirements and the application of transfer credits earned through prior study (p. 7).