



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: ADVANCING STUDENT TRANSFER THROUGH ENHANCED DATA EXCHANGE

Project led by: Association of Registrars of the Universities and
Colleges of Canada (ARUCC)



Primary Investigator and Report Author: Joanne Duklas
Duklas Cornerstone Consulting
March 2019

Executive Summary

The research and this report explore the practices and potential opportunities for improving transfer and mobility by enhancing digitization and exchange of students' official academic credentials, transcripts, and documents. It summarizes the findings from a comprehensive study of data exchange practices and perspectives at post-secondary institutions and their partners in Ontario conducted in the summer, fall, and winter of 2018/19.

The impetus for this research stems in part from broader efforts to create a national student data exchange network. Called the *ARUCC Groningen Project*,¹ the goal of that larger initiative includes enabling students to move seamlessly into and between Canadian post-secondary institutions and into the workforce by improving official credential, transcript, and academic document exchange. These aspirations directly align with the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer's (ONCAT) stated intention of understanding and removing systemic barriers that impede seamless transfer.

Research Questions

The project explored the following primary and secondary research questions:

1. What broader context, current practices, and associated gaps face Ontario post-secondary institutions with respect to student data exchange?
2. What recommendations do Ontario post-secondary registrarial leadership and supporting organizations have for advancing institutional capacities and change readiness for data exchange to advance transfer?
3. Sub-research questions:
 - a) Are there any notable exemplars to help guide change?
 - b) What benefits will result from a national network to advance seamless inter- and intra-provincial transfer for Ontario post-secondary institutions and their students?

For the purposes of this project, transfer encompasses that which occurs when students move between post-secondary institutions both within Canada and internationally. Mobility focuses on easing students' access to funding and transition into regulatory professions, trades, and the workforce by enhancing trusted sharing of official academic documents with other third parties.

Research Approach

A multi-layered approach guided the research to address the above questions. An environmental scan including literature and website reviews provided the context and an opportunity to identify promising practices. The next stage of primary research involved three components: a national bilingual (French, English) survey, qualitative interviews, and inter-institutional regional meetings. The national scope of the research provided opportunities to compare Ontario findings to other jurisdictions. The target audience for the primary research included registrarial and data exchange leaders at colleges, institutes, and universities and other supporting organizations across Canada including application centres and the seven councils on articulation/admissions and transfer. An external evaluator, Joanna Pesaro, supported the research process through all its various stages. Appendix A contains her summative report.

The national, bilingual survey collected 117 responses from 86 public and private post-secondary institutions and experienced an 85% completion rate. Of these, respondents from 76 publicly funded

¹ <http://arucc.ca/en/projects/task-force-groningen.html>

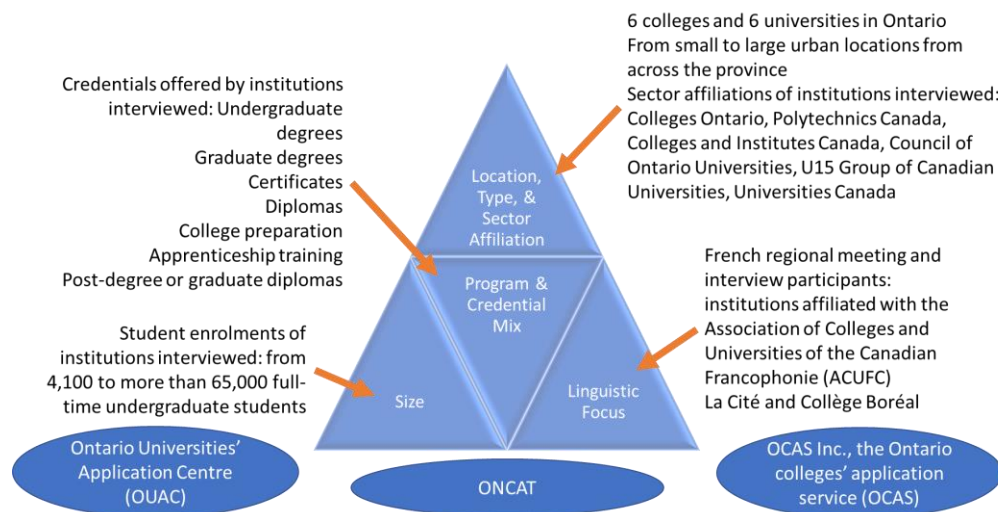
institutions participated, which represents 37% (76/204) of the total pool of Canadian public post-secondary institutions. For Ontario, respondents participated from 53% (24/45) of the publicly funded institutions, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT), and the two application centres (OCAS - the Ontario college application service; Ontario Universities' Application Centre - OUAC). Of the 24 institutions, 42% represented colleges/institutes (10/24) and 67% represented universities (14/21).

The research process benefitted from the participation of registrarial leaders representing each of the 45 publicly funded post-secondary institutions in Ontario and from the partnering support of the Ontario College Committee of Registrars, Admissions, and Liaison Officers (CRALO) and the Ontario University Registrars' Association (OURA). These two organizations formally endorsed this research and the national *ARUCC Groningen Project*. In addition to the above, interviews occurred with the leadership and staff at ONCAT, OCAS, and OUAC.

In total, the researcher consulted with more than 270 people both in Ontario and across Canada in the interviews and regional meetings (see Appendices B, C, and D for specific organizations contacted). Included in this total are those that participated in 11 inter-organizational regional meetings involving 231 people, of which ten were delivered in Ontario. Some of these were delivered virtually; however, most occurred in person and included meetings in the following regions: Toronto, Durham (virtually), Ottawa, Sudbury, and Kitchener-Waterloo. Fifteen organizationally specific interviews occurred with staff from ONCAT, OCAS, OUAC, and six colleges and six universities from Ontario. The post-secondary institutions involved reflect the diversity that exists in the province across several dimensions such as type of institution, the range of credentials offered, enrolment size, sector affiliation, linguistic focus, and geographical location (Figure 1). A student focused consultation meeting occurred with representatives from the three Ontario student groups, which included the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), the College Student Alliance, and the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA).

The collaborative approach to engaging the Ontario higher education community in the consultation research process for this project represented a core strength and was necessary due to its complexity. It would not have been possible to conduct this study without this full participation; therefore, gratitude is extended to all these people for their expertise and support.

Figure 1: Diversity of Post-secondary Institutions and Organizations Interviewed in Ontario



Data Limitations

The primary challenge impacting the project was the lack of data available regarding the scope of provincial and national transfer, mobility, and document exchange. Improving these gaps would be important to fully understand the trends and volumes and subsequent pressures. For example, transfer in Ontario includes intra-provincial, national, and international learners; therefore, identifying the volumes and trends across all these cohorts would better serve post-secondary institutions, future policy development, and other research projects. Most research and analysis tend to focus on specific transfer communities within a province, limiting the potential for fully understanding and addressing needs.

Increasing applications, enrolments, and graduations are driving requests for a host of services across the entire student life cycle. Given the above-mentioned data gap, proxy indicators undergird the findings and subsequent recommendations. These include the growth in document and identity fraud, international students, and requests for official outgoing document validation to support students accessing funding, opportunities to study in Canada, and the workforce. The transfer volumes are identified to the extent the publicly available data allows. The report provides specific examples of these and other change drivers in Section 3.0.

Rationale for Change

Post-secondary institutional representatives raised concerns regarding growing document and identity fraud in most of the interviews and regional meetings conducted for this project. They indicated that providing trusted exchange of incoming and outgoing academic documents supports quality assured practices and helps to maintain the Canadian higher education brand.

Many also cited the increasing volume pressures which they indicated were adversely affecting service. As an illustrative example, Canadian post-secondary institutions have seen a 47% increase from 2015 to 2018 in international student study permits granted by the federal government. In 2018, Ontario bound international students represented 64% of the overall volume. Other data indicates most of these students are coming from countries such as China, India, South Korea, France, and the United States. At least four of these regions maintain trusted institutionally supported and/or government mandated

official credential repositories. If Canadian post-secondary institutions connected electronically to these entities through a national network for the purpose of official academic document exchange, the improvements to international admissions and transfer processing would be enormous, as would the reduction in the potential for document fraud. At minimum, staff would no longer need to verify the official nature of a document or its source. The report shares other indicators in Section 3.0 that demonstrate the need for better methods for document exchange that leverage technology.

Challenges and Gaps

To address the first research question, Section 4.0 provides an overview of the current data exchange capacities at Ontario post-secondary institutions and beyond. The findings suggest the lack of electronic exchange of academic documents presents challenges for transfer and mobility. Potential risks include reduced student service (e.g., quality, timeliness), impediments to efficiency for both students and institutions, and untimely decisions including those related to transfer credit allocations. Unfortunately, document and identity fraud represent additional concerns. The research revealed several gaps in Ontario including the following: (i) insufficient connectivity with recognized institutions and trusted credential repositories across Canada and internationally, (ii) a lack of capacity within institutions to automatically assess transcripts, even those that arrive electronically, resulting in manual document assessment, and (iii) growing demands to officially verify incoming and outgoing documents (e.g., documents required for admissions and transfer, offers of admission, and confirmations of enrolment, fees paid, pending graduation, and graduation).

For the first gap, students applying from outside of Ontario submit documents by mail or in-person that staff subsequently hand review, evaluate, and assess manually for both admissions and transfer credit. Institutions typically verify these documents with former institutions, a process that takes time. With respect to the second gap, not all institutions are able to identify the transfer equivalencies awarded at the point of making an offer. This happens for a host of reasons including a lack of trusted official academic document exchange, program specific policies and practices that impede automation of processes, resource limitations, and internal institutional prioritization practices related to technology projects. While some of these areas fall outside of the scope of this project, it is important to understand their inter-relationship and impact on best practice in relation to assessing documents for admission and transfer. For example, it is considered best practice to identify awarded transfer equivalencies at the point of making an offer as it is a time of key decision making for students; therefore, it is important for institutions to enhance capacities in this area. The third gap results from increasing requests for official verification of documents. These likely result from growing concerns about document and identity fraud.

Exemplars

To address the research question focused on identifying potential exemplars, the report highlights international and Canadian application centres and data hubs that offer access to trusted electronic academic results (Section 3.0). These represent potential partners for a national data exchange network for Ontario post-secondary institutions. Most of the Canadian ones, including those in Ontario, focus primarily on exchange of academic credentials within their respective regions to support application into local post-secondary institutions. Some, including OUAC and OCAS, have made initial forays into establishing connectivity across borders. However, the research indicates there are many international regions where the centralized credential repositories exist for ensuring official academic document

verification and exchange in support of student's transferring between post-secondary institutions and beyond. The report highlights promising exemplars to inform next steps and possibilities.

With respect to the aforementioned data limitations affecting this project, exemplar models to consider to improve data collection include the work of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC),² British Columbia's Student Transition Project,³ Burbidge and Finnie's (Burbidge & Finnie, 2000) earlier research regarding Canadian post-secondary student mobility, and the transfer and mobility research of the US-based National Student Clearinghouse (the *Clearinghouse*). Through the latter organization's Research Centre,⁴ institutions access extensive regional and national level transfer and mobility data. The *Clearinghouse* offers its members national data exchange and verification services to thousands of institutions, secondary schools, and students. It represents an exemplar model for the future Canadian national data exchange network contemplated by the *ARUCC Groningen Project*. Other exemplars related to better understanding the volume of student movement and perspectives include the recent transcript exchange volume study conducted by ONCAT and OCAS with OUAC's support (Weins & Fritz, M., 2018) and OUSA's student-led study of 1,300 transfer students (2017).

Recommendations

The last research objective included identifying recommendations for moving forward with the establishment of a national data exchange network to support efficiencies as student move into, between, and beyond Canadian post-secondary institutions. The core benefits cited included improvement opportunities for efficiency, transfer, and learner mobility.

The Ontario post-secondary institutions had previously and formally voted at the 2019 ARUCC annual meeting to continue developing a national student data exchange network to support both domestic and international students.⁵ None during the Ontario consultation disagreed with this position. Therefore, the recommendations from the Ontario higher education community in Section 6.0 provide specific suggestions on how to implement the national data exchange network. The following represent a thematic sampling:

- Ensure the network addresses top priority needs
 - For Ontario, the participants identified improving service, enhancing efficiencies for students and institutions, and mitigating document fraud by establishing trusted, official academic document exchange. The community advised that successfully establishing a national data exchange network requires a prioritized focus on developing the capacity to serve learner transfer and mobility across institutions.
- Ensure adherence to privacy regulations and other relevant statutes
- Help institutional registrarial and technology leaders at post-secondary institutions to obtain support from provosts and presidents for the national data exchange network (i.e., through system wide advocacy and project endorsement efforts)
- Seek out project funding from governments, partners, post-secondary institutions, and others to set up the network

² <http://www.mphec.ca/research/trendsmaritimehighereducation.aspx>

³ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/data-research/student-transitions-project>

⁴ <https://nscresearchcenter.org/>

⁵ <http://arucc.ca/en/projects/task-force-groningen.html>

- Consult further with the post-secondary institutions regarding the operating structure and governance framework for the national network and ensure support for provincial and institutional diversity, autonomy, and authority
- Carefully consider and adopt cost recovery revenue models when creating the national data exchange network
- Ensure front-facing components and data exchange capacities support Canadian bilingualism
- Establish a phased implementation plan
 - The community provided extensive implementation suggestions which are captured in the report.
- Provide support for onboarding Canadian post-secondary institutions and application centres to the network

Enhancing Student Transfer and Mobility through Trusted Data Portability

The Ontario research validates the conclusion previously reached by the community that creating a national student data exchange network represents a viable next step to support Canadian higher education and student transfer and mobility. The findings suggest that tying accessible student data portability to learner mobility needs to be a strategic intention supported by the highest levels of leadership. While there are many competing priorities, Ontario post-secondary institutions are well positioned to both benefit from and contribute to a national student data exchange network.

The research indicates that the various aspects of registrarial service delivery consider both the academic and student needs at the core of the activities; however, the registrarial community signalled more is needed as the institutions and students require greater speed, transparency, efficiency, and coherence. Providing trusted connections to facilitate seamless and direct electronic academic document exchange (e.g., transcripts, credentials, confirmations of status) from across Canada and internationally represents an important first step. Supporting further automation and scalable practices within institutions by using electronic student information and next generational technology to reduce burdens on students represents an important next step which will be well served by enhancing official student document exchange. While changing internal institutional practices sits outside the scope of this project, further research is encouraged to assist institutions with identifying ways to enhance internal processes as these relate to automation to support student transfer and mobility.

With respect to Ontario, additional research and consultation are recommended to help develop the connectivity to a national data exchange network. Important next steps include (i) identifying a service provider, (ii) creating a model for exchange that works for the context and diversity that exists in Ontario, and (iii) identifying pilot institutions with which to partner on specific data exchange projects.

These findings will be of use to ONCAT, the post-secondary community, and ARUCC as they collaborate to create better supports for students and institutions. Furthermore, the report will inform policy development and resource prioritization discussions related to transfer and student mobility.

The national network holds the promise of ensuring quality assured, official electronic exchange of students' academic credentials, transcripts and documents through trusted connections. With growing volumes juxtaposed against resource constraints, new and more scalable methods that embrace trusted and secure connectivity, technology, and different approaches to service delivery are not easily achieved but hold the promise of addressing core challenges. The findings from this Ontario research indicate a

national student data exchange network collaboratively built and coordinated holds the promise of meeting students in their space and supporting their long-term educational journey as they move into or between institutions and into the workforce.

The findings from this Ontario research indicate a national student data exchange network to support official electronic academic document sharing that is collaboratively built and coordinated holds the promise of meeting students in their space and supporting their long-term educational journey as they move into, between, and beyond Canadian post-secondary institutions.
