
Council of Ontario Universities 287th Council Meeting

Held on Thursday April 2 and Friday April 3, 2009 at York University

ACADEMIC COLLEAGUE'S REPORT TO SENATE

As usual the overall meeting involved an Executive Heads' Round Table, two Academic Colleagues' Meetings, and the Council Meeting itself. The main topics that were discussed at these meetings were:

1. University Operating Funding: This issue continues to be the number one priority for universities. During the late fall, financial market turmoil decreased the value of pension plans and endowments and in so doing, severely compounded the existing pressure on operating budgets. The 2009 Ontario Budget provided some needed operating relief - \$150 million for the Post Secondary Education (PSE) sector through the government allocated 55% of this to universities and 45% to colleges, even though the split in the past has been 2/3 to 1/3. The

Council of Ontario Universities

Academic Colleagues' Working Paper Series

The Ontario Transfer Credit System
A Situation Report

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The universities' response to these unorthodox educational paths has come traditionally under two headings: Transfer Credits (TC) and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR), although, conceptually, it could be argued that both should be under a single heading, since in both cases we are dealing with prior learning assessment and recognition.

The following Working Paper offers a situation report on the Transfer Credit System in Canada in general and in Ontario in particular. More specifically, it will address the situation with regard to Transfer Credits (TC) between universities, universities and colleges, and to assessment and recognition (PLAR) of professional development courses, but will not address the situation with regard to international postsecondary credentials for university credit, although this is for another paper to focus on. When addressing the issue of Transfer Credits in Ontario, it will do so in general terms only, by providing some historical background to explain why the situation in Ontario is somewhat different from the situation in

learning that took place at a community college or technical institute, following a request by a college student to have such prior learning recognized for university credit, since the credibility of the institution's programmes of study is then on the line.

2. Issues with Transfer Credits from other universities and from community colleges.

Universities across Canada belong, without exception, to the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). Like membership in the UN, membership in the AUCC implies mutual

It should be noted that, while university courses are fairly standardized across the country, making them relatively easy to assess with regard to level and across the disciplines, the same cannot be said about community college courses. These will vary from one province to the next, and often from one community college to the next, as each college attempts to respond to the educational needs of its

the MTCU⁶. While there are a number of these agreements in Arts and Business Administration, most, as one would expect, relate to professional college diplomas that can be laddered into professional undergraduate degrees, e.g. in Nursing or Criminology. Typically, a college concludes such agreements with a university located in the same region with a mission to serve students within the same community. It is safe to say that such partnerships are viewed positively by the target audience and the public at large, and figure prominently in the outreach material issued by the college. The partnering university will accept to bear the up front costs of prior assessment of the college diploma programme and of negotiating the agreement if it can expect that the number of students the programme will draw in the future will bring in enough revenues to offset the start-up costs. There is also, for the university, the added bonus of free and highly positive publicity with the local regional community as target audience. And surely, the college would not have sought such partnership and chosen to bear the negotiation and implementation costs for the transfer agreement if it did not believe that it would not be recovering all of its costs through the offer of such a diploma programme that ladders into an undergraduate degree programme.

In summary, one might say that the Ontario Transfer Credit system can be characterized as resulting from a kind of entrepreneurial response to the phenomenon of student mobility, when compared to the B.C. and Alberta Transfer Credit system which, since its inception, driven by state planning: there community college programmes designed to ladder into university programmes, and individual courses have a predefined credit value within the university programmes. In Ontario, this kind of design has so far only been incidental.

Apart from these two systems, there is a third, which one might call student-directed, that is offered by universities that have made their hallmark with in-plane and distance studies. These universities, and there are of course a few of them in Ontario, offer assessment services for individual courses, whether taken at a university or at a community college. In some cases, the prior learning portfolio of a mature student will also include professional development courses that may have been given at a university level, but without being tied to a university credit. There is a fee for all such assessments, either a flat fee for the whole portfolio, or a fee based on the number of courses to be assessed for university credit. These assessments will result in the denial or granting of credits, whether as equivalent to mandatory or optional courses in a given programme, or as unallocated

above. These are: 1) state-driven, where the Provincial Government sees to the college-university articulation in the design of the provincial postsecondary education system; 2) entrepreneurial, where in most cases community colleges take the initiative in approaching a university administration, most often serving the same local community, with a view to establishing a degree-articulation agreement; and 3) student-driven, where universities respond to the particular requests of generally more mature students with a more varied learning path than the “normal” students who enter university after finishing high school and usually complete a program of study at that same university.

In the wake of the Rae Report, the MTCU has asked the postsecondary institutions of Ontario to establish an integrated postsecondary education system like the one found in B.C. and Alberta. To this end, a joint Colleges Ontario (CO) and Council of Ontario Universities (COU) task force has been put together “to develop shared principles, goals and approaches that would help students make informed decisions on their postsecondary options.” This CO-COU task force was established in January 2008. So far, it has found it hard to come up with a formula, beyond the one that all the stakeholders could live with.

Essentially, the way ahead for Ontario's postsecondary institutions consists in adopting one of the three approaches indicated above, which are not mutually exclusive. That being said, the student-driven approach rather than the state-driven or even the entrepreneurial, would be best suited to the Ontario Transfer Credit system insofar as it avoids the high costs of a multiyear project for a systematic assessment of all community college courses for university credit, which would be required by a state-ordained fully integrated system. It would seem indeed to be a formidable undertaking to duplicate the kind of system B.C. and Alberta have established, and have all the available college courses systematically assessed for university credit. Instead, if we were to seek to achieve similar results, in an environment that is different because of its history, it would appear to be wiser, and also more economical, to support the best practices of the universities that have been responding to student requests for prior learning assessment and recognition, to consolidate the results of the assessments – including the rejections, which will account for the majority – conducted by these universities in an accessible database, and hope that it will be used more widely as time goes by and that most, if not all, universities in Ontario will eventually contribute to it. A quick perusal of the over 850 online community college courses offered through OntarioLearn.com, the courses of 22 community colleges of Ontario that offer complete diploma programmes online, representing a mere fraction of the programmes and courses these colleges offer on campus, will convey a sense of the magnitude of the task of assessing systematically each and every course offered by the community colleges of Ontario. Instead, the incremental addition of assessments requested by students as they are filed within the participating institutions, to a provincially funded database would be more in tune with the Ontario postsecondary system and its particular situation, given its history and the wide variety of institutional cultures it displays today.

If a protocol for the assessment of community college and professional development courses were to be agreed upon and if, for instance, assessments were to be conducted by faculty members from more than one university, e.g. from three different universities, this would only enhance the credibility of the assessments of individual courses to be consigned to the provincial database. A logical starting point would be to expand the existing Ontario College University Transfer Guide to include individual and block college course assessments, and eventually assessments of other types of courses, such as professional development courses and foreign credentials. Currently, the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions & Transfer, with strong representation from all parts of Canada, except Québec – presumably because of the language barrier – is working towards ways to facilitate the implementation of policies and

