

The Tale of a Canadian CAT, or, Less Preciousness and More Permeability:

Credit Transfer and Student Mobility across Post-Secondary Boundaries in British Columbia

Calls for credit transfer networks are being made with greater imperative as post-secondary systems and the jurisdictions that support them address challenges of massification and globalism. Recently, David Watson noted that “arguably the most serious single piece of unfinished business in UK higher education . . . is the failure to make Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATs) work . . . [inhibiting] the UK’s progress towards a genuinely lifelong learning society, a goal increasingly recognized as important for social, cultural and economic reasons” (p. 2). It is important to observe that in addition to the cost effectiveness and flexibility that credit transfer networks can provide, they can also facilitate greater access and equity across social class lines. Considering recent studies on the California post-secondary system, Brownstein suggests that “improving the transfer process . . . may be an underappreciated opportunity to broaden opportunity in a higher education system that many critics fear is evolving into a stratified two-tier structure that does more to harden than dissolve class divides” (p.1).

The changing contexts of post-secondary education have signalled the need for institutions to respond to pressures from competing knowledge development and recognition systems inside and outside the academy—in forms such as MOOCs, badges, corporate credentialing—which have made it “more difficult [for universities] to explain what they do that is distinctive,” (Considine, p. 256). Relatedly, governments around the world have emphasized system-level coordination. The Bologna Agreement has informed the European Qualifications Framework, European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning, and the European Credit Transfer System. Similar initiatives have produced the Australian and New Zealand Qualifications Frameworks. In the US, many state systems have emphasized structured laddering across institutional types and credentials. Even the Carnegie credit hour has become subject of review. At a general level, these initiatives share a focus on mapping local, regional, and national educational outcomes, credits, and pathways so that commensurability can be determined.

Considine argues that universities must maintain educational practice boundaries for “What establishes the [university] as a system are the distinctions actors use” (p. 258). This reminder is important, for some boundaries between post-secondary and other sectors of knowledge development and delivery are necessary for maintaining credibility. However, across post-secondary institutions and systems, boundaries are often manifest in unexamined criteria distinguishing one institution or group from others. What is needed, according to Alex Usher, is not greater distinction but greater “permeability” for universities to be open, “not only to the outside world, but also to new ways of achieving things . . . thinking of universities as being embedded in a vast variety of networks” (p. 1).

In relation to credit transfer and mobility, unexamined assumptions regarding educational quality can reinforce impermeable boundaries for students. Drawing upon British Columbia (BC) post-secondary experiences and research over the past few decades, since the establishment of BC’s CAT (BC Council on Admissions and Transfer), this paper examines how some post-secondary boundaries have been effectively crossed to facilitate “possibly the most extensive credit accumulation and transfer arrangement in the world” (Bekhradnia, p. 19), while preserving educational integrity among autonomous institutions. Foundational to the success of the BC Transfer System has been overcoming institutional “[preciousness] about the linking of their status with that of the prior experience of their

student body” (Watson, p. 22). The relative parity of esteem is informed by principles of fairness, understanding, transparency, and trust—supported by collaborative research on student performance, transfer effectiveness, and mobility. The result is a transfer system model that enables access, flexibility, efficiency, and success for diverse learners to accommodate their life-long educational needs, while maintaining quality, for BC transfer students “are just as successful at university as are direct entrants, and have the grades to prove it” (Lambert-Maberly, p. 7).

In an era when society expects post-secondary to be universally accessible, when in BC approximately 53% of graduates transition to public post-secondary directly after high school, and almost 78% have transitioned after eight years (Heslop, 2014, p. 1), and when individuals will experience multiple jobs in multiple regions over the course of their lifetime, transferability of knowledge and appropriate credit recognition are necessary for sustainability. The efficiencies in terms of direct and indirect costs to students, institutions, and society are clear. In BC, approximately 56,000 or 18% of the students taking credit programs in public institutions moved between institutions in 2012 (Heslop, 2013, p. 1). Data for four research-intensive universities indicate that large volumes of credit were previously completed by the almost 5,000 students moving to those universities (Heslop, 2013, p. 5). The exponential growth in participation rates since the 1960s; the increase in aboriginal, immigrant, international as well as part-time and life-long learners; and their need for mobility to participate in global society inform the need for more flexible pathways: “An important finding of BCCAT’s research is that the pathways taken by individual students are highly variable. While many follow the ladder programs designed by institutions, changing objectives and circumstances lead many to choose more creative pathways” (Cowin, p. 37).

Commitment to principles-based practices requires leadership from academic staff, for institutions, not governments, make decisions regarding admissions and credit transfer awards. We should ensure that educational frameworks are understandable, transparent, and fairly assessed. In doing so, the university can continue to be “defined by *place*, and by local constituencies . . . while [responding] to global pressures *and* serving national interests, as it has done for centuries” (Nelson and Strohl, p. 11). These are not simple challenges, but they must be addressed, for “Most countries no longer consider higher education as the training of an exclusive elite” and society is focused less on the university as a singular institution and more on systems, “[including] all the components that today constitute post-secondary education” (Bleiklie, Laredo, and Sorlin, p. 365). In viewing individual institutions as interrelated parts of a system(s), we can create more comprehensive and flexible pathways for post-secondary education, while preserving institutional integrity—serving not only our students, but also our institutions and our countries well.

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