

Discussion Paper Response

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Response to Discussion Paper on a Mobile Student Research Framework

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BACKGROUND

In November 2009, the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) hosted a “Visioning Session” to revisit the framework and definitions that have been used to measure the mobility of transfer students in British Columbia. Members of BCCAT’s standing committees participated along with representatives from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (ALMD) and the Student Transitions Project (STP). Among the 25 present from across the province were registrars, institutional research directors, senior administrators, a high school principal, two post-secondary advisors, and a private institutions’ representative.¹

After hearing presentations on the research on student mobility that has been undertaken to date by BCCAT and the STP, the Visioning Session participants were asked to develop a definition of a mobile student and to identify the top subpopulations of mobile students that they felt are worthy of future study. Some of the barriers to research about these subpopulations and policy questions surrounding them were also identified. Finally, support for continuing to focus research on the “traditional” transfer student population (transfers to research universities) was gauged. The outcomes of deliberations are outlined in a discussion paper available at bccat.ca/pubs/mobilitydiscussion.pdf. It is this discussion paper that was then circulated more broadly across the system for further response. Feedback to the paper is outlined below.

RESPONSES TO DISCUSSION PAPER

Six individuals provided feedback to the discussion paper. Represented among the responses were registrars (2), senior academic administrators (3), the Ministry (1), a small regional college, an urban research university, and two private not-for-profit institutions. While the number of respondents is small, they expand on the ideas put forward by the original focus group. Their responses are organized by the four questions posed on page 5 of the discussion paper and are listed in no particular order.

Respondents recommended the addition of international students to the list of priority subpopulations identified by Visioning Session participants. It was not clear whether this group was thought to be included in the English-as-a-Second Language or ESL student subpopulation identified at the Visioning Session; adding them here clarifies their inclusion in the list of subpopulations. The other recommendations below are subsets of the most important subpopulations identified in the discussion paper.

1. Are there top priority subpopulations that should be considered for research that were not included in the Visioning Session participants’ priority groups? Explain rationale.

a. International students

This subpopulation was cited by two respondents and was distinguished by one from ESL students “since some international students speak English as their first language, and some ESL students are Canadian or PR [permanent residents]”. More information about the mobility, goals, experiences, and perspectives of these students was desired given their significant growth as a group across the system.

b. Identifiable subgroups among the approximately 26,000 students moving between BC public post-secondary institutions in a given year. (See Discussion Paper, Figure 1.) These include those moving in multiple directions between sectors and between institutions in the same sector. (The sectors are research universities, colleges, institutes, and special purpose universities.)²

It was felt that a specific set of research questions should be developed for each subgroup. For the group that leaves research universities for other public institutions, research should explore:

- where they are going, what they are enrolling in, and why;
- what their educational goals are, whether these have changed, and if so, why, and in what ways; and
- whether these students earn credentials and then enrol in post-baccalaureate diploma and certificate programs, to what extent they are leaving baccalaureate programs without credentials and enrolling in regular certificate and diploma level programs, and whether they carry transfer credits successfully in so doing.

Another subgroup of the 26,000 students worthy of study is those who “swirl” multiple times among institutions.

c. Students who move into baccalaureate programs at any institution

Study of this group was felt to be a first priority for research and important from a policy perspective to ensure successful transfer for students moving from a college to a teaching-intensive university or college in order to earn a degree. A suggestion was made to consider research at large “receiving” institutions (e.g., BCIT and Kwantlen) to determine the extent to which students receive credit for work previously completed.

¹ For a list of participants and a transcription of Visioning Session deliberations, see bccat.ca/pubs/mobilityappendix.pdf.

² Note: The term Special Purpose University was used in the discussion paper to denote the 5 university colleges, 1 college, and one institute that became universities in fall 2008. The Ministry now refers to these as Teaching-Intensive Universities.

d. Older mid-career students and direct entry students (Are mobility patterns age related?)

One respondent is interested in mobility patterns based on age, a hypothesis being that older students pursuing post-secondary education mid-career would likely take a more traditional path and limit themselves to prescribed study at a single institution whereas younger students are more likely to “shop around” and cobble together a credential from a range of institutions to satisfy individual goals and priorities.

e. Regular Grade 12 students and those with Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate

One respondent would like to test the hypothesis that enriched Grade 12 students would be more likely to start and end at a single university or move between universities only while regular Grade 12 students would be more likely to start at a college and transition to university or to a private institution. A further research question to investigate is whether there are differences in post-secondary success between these two groups.

2. Are there additional policy questions or considerations that would inform research on any of the specific subpopulations described?

a. Private-public mobility

Public-private mobility was identified as a priority by participants in the Visioning Session, although it was recognized that there are obstacles to this research as few private institutions assign Personal Education Numbers (PEN) to their students which would enable the tracking of individual students between institutions. One response to the discussion paper mirrors what has been done to date in BC-CAT’s BC college transfer student profile reports which tell us about students who transfer from BC Transfer System private institutions into BC public research universities (their number, demographic profile, and academic performance at the university). Perhaps the pilot study recommended could expand the number of “receiving” institutions included. Another respondent felt that a study of public-private student mobility which includes student success indicators for each system would in part address concerns that some have about the quality of private education.

b. Movers with credentials and those laddering with credentials

Students with credentials who apply to universities but are not accepted (unable to ladder or continue on) were considered a group worthy of further study. It was felt that a general understanding of laddering patterns would be useful as well as students’ reasons for laddering (e.g., are students laddering as expected, or are they finding/creating their own pathways? If they ladder, what obstacles are they encountering?).

c. Stop-outs

One respondent acknowledged the need to define “stop-outs” and to account for students who leave an institution and attend elsewhere, including out-of-province. It was also felt important to better under-

stand students’ perceptions of “stop-out” definitions and their own expectations for re-entry to the system. Student choices and mobility patterns will likely affect the timeframes for “stop-outs” which has policy and programming implications for institutions.

d. Multiple-institution mobility

It was felt that movement between multiple institutions is becoming more commonplace; therefore, it is important to investigate how prevalent it is and why students choose this route. This research would provide important system-level information about perceived programming gaps and opportunities from the student point of view.

e. Quality as a driver of choice

It was felt that a worthy research project would be to endeavour to understand why students continue to choose unaccredited or unproven schools.

3. Are there additional subpopulations of mobile students not listed that are worthy of future research? (See page 6 of discussion paper.) What are the policy questions that this research would address?

a. International Students (See 1.a above.)

b. Disillusioned or cynical students (overlapping with stop-outs, drop-outs, and mobile students in general)

It was opined by one respondent that “disillusioned” or “cynical” students may pervade the entire population of mobile students but would also be found among drop-outs or stop-outs, the thesis being that students are consumer oriented towards education and have little institutional loyalty. These students want whatever they take to count, even if they stop-out or their program disappears; thus they are more inclined towards laddering, courses and programs that transfer, and credentials that branch out into multiple possibilities.

4. Is there value in continuing to study the traditional transfer student population? What is the relative value of this compared with other subpopulations of mobile students?

All of those respondents who addressed this question felt that the traditional transfer student population should continue to be monitored as it is an important component of the mobile student population and any changes in this group should be studied in relation to other mobile students studied. More emphasis should be placed on groups about which little is known.

WHAT’S NEXT?

This report and the discussion paper it pertains to will be presented to Council at its meeting of March 5, 2010 and will be shared with BCCAT’s standing committees to take into consideration as they deliberate on research projects related to student mobility in 2010/11 and beyond. It will also be shared with the STP Steering Committee and its Mobility of Transfer Students Subcommittee and with those groups who were solicited to respond to the discussion paper. We thank everyone who provided ideas for future research in the area of student mobility.