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Forging new pathways to improve student mobility in the province of Ontario

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	3
Our stock and trade	
<i>Who we are and what we do</i>	
<i>Enhanced information for students</i>	
<i>Helping postsecondary institutions collaborate in building enhanced pathways</i>	
<i>Knowledge gathering</i>	
<i>Enhanced data</i>	
II. ENGAGING THE SECTOR	5
ONCAT's proposal to the community for further work	
<i>New project funding</i>	
<i>Ensuring all Ontario learners have access to pathways</i>	
<i>Research</i>	
<i>Student surveys</i>	
<i>Refining our work on learning outcomes</i>	
<i>Creating professional development opportunities and communities of practice</i>	
<i>Funding for project implementation – how can ONCAT help?</i>	
<i>Building credit transfer capacity, one course at a time</i>	
III. AN INVITATION TO THE COMMUNITY	12
How to forward your advice	
<i>Template for providing advice</i>	12

I. INTRODUCTION – Our stock and trade

Who we are

Established in 2011, the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT) was created to enhance student pathways and reduce barriers for students looking to transfer among Ontario's 44 publicly funded postsecondary institutions. It was created as a member-driven organization to work with all publicly funded colleges and universities to enable the system of credit transfer to develop as rapidly as possible, while also respecting institutional autonomy.

What we do

Enhanced information channels for students

ONCAT continues to work with students to ensure that there is a better understanding of the transfer and mobility opportunities afforded by our system.

- ONCAT maintains the ONTransfer.ca website, which provides students with up-to-date, authoritative information on block credit agreements, and pathways between postsecondary institutions.
- ONCAT continues to work with partner institutions to ensure that all pathways and agreements are available on the ONTransfer.ca website.
- ONCAT is working to develop a course equivalency search tool that will allow students to identify which specific courses will be accepted by institutions for those students who do not qualify for the block credit pathway.

Helping postsecondary institutions collaborate in building enhanced pathways

Through the Credit Transfer Innovation Fund, ONCAT has supported more than 65 projects spanning all types of student transfer, including apprenticeship to diploma; diploma to diploma; and diploma to degree. Most of these projects are multi-institutional by nature, and are designed to identify gaps in the curriculum and develop programming to fill those gaps.

ONCAT also supported three large-scale projects that will allow students to move between programs of both high affinity and among like institutions, so as to improve mobility across the province.

These include:

- Developing a greater ease of movement for those students wishing to transition from college-based general education programs into arts and science programming at the province's universities. With Seneca and McMaster as lead institutions, program partners included: Algoma, Carleton, UOIT, York, Cambrian, Georgian, Mohawk, and Niagara.

- Through the mapping of learning outcomes, create greater synergies between all colleges' programs in business administration and general education. Both of these projects had the participation of almost all of the colleges.

Knowledge gathering

ONCAT is equally committed to knowledge-gathering. There are two essential elements to this work: supporting research, as well as gathering data and creating better mechanisms for its collection. This will help develop more robust indicators of our success, both as an organization and a province, with respect to credit transfer, and will help us measure success against system-level goals.

Broadly speaking, the research projects funded by ONCAT examine and analyze the student experience of transfer on a pre-, during and post-transfer basis. More specifically, much of the research activity sought to better understand. A number of the other research initiatives looked at the characteristics of successful student transfers (e.g., grades and graduation rates) and compared those characteristics to a sample of the larger student population.

Better data

At the request of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, ONCAT has embarked upon a project to develop better data collection and management systems that will help support the creation of a comprehensive Accountability Framework for Credit Transfer (CT) activity in Ontario. To this end, ONCAT undertook two streams of work in support of the development of a framework: first, to work with all colleges and universities to determine the current availability of CT data at each of Ontario's 44 publicly supported postsecondary institutions; and second, to conduct a pilot project with nine institutions to test and refine the Ministry's proposed indicators that have been developed with the Credit Transfer Technical Working Group.

ONCAT has received the preliminary reports from almost all institutions, which outlined the general state of their CT data, and is planning to report some basic metrics for the majority of institutions by the early fall of 2013. It is important to note that this data has never been collected in Ontario. ONCAT is also in the process of developing a plan with all institutions so that they can identify and track the progress of transfer students through their studies.

II. ENGAGING THE SECTOR – ONCAT’s proposal to the community for further work

A. New project funding

Today, students view mobility among, and access to, the different educational experiences as offered by colleges and universities as essential to their success in the workplace; they need to equip themselves with skills in a way that sets them apart from the rest and best speaks to their own interests and aptitude, and move more seamlessly between certificate, diploma, apprenticeship and degree programs.

Ensuring all Ontario learners have access to pathways

In analyzing the work of our pathways projects from the past 14 months, and flowing from the many discussions ONCAT has had with its members, the organization has identified a number of potential gaps with respect to the availability of learner pathways in a number of program clusters. Further work is required in developing a more comprehensive system.

- Engineering (for example, college programs in all engineering programs excluding IT such as automation, biomedical, chemical, civil, construction, electrical, electromechanical, manufacturing, mechanical and welding engineering only lead to a handful of degree programs);
- Health Sciences (the Medical Laboratory Technology program has only four formal pathways to degree opportunities); and
- Social and Community Services (for the Community Worker program, there are degree pathways at only three institutions).

A further example is in the field of social service provision to the elderly. As addressed in a number of strategic mandate agreements, and in conversations with institutions, a number of colleges expressed the opinion that demand for this program will increase given the demographic trends of the Canadian population. These trends, already well underway, will spawn an even greater demand for programs for gerontology professionals who work both in institutional settings, as well as those who support the elderly to live as independently as possible, for as long as possible. Currently, there are only three pathways to degree programs with a focus on gerontology.

Likewise, given the demand for IT and computer programmers – and the particular need for these specialists to have access to ongoing training and professional development as technology continues to change and evolve – the number of pathways that currently exist are likely insufficient.

In order to ensure that bridge programming and pathways projects reflect a demand by students or employers, ONCAT will likely ask that proposals include a section that addresses how that programming fulfills that need or demand for students (as well as a description of how that demand was identified or gauged); and/or reflects institutions’ partnerships and on-going interactions with employers. Value will be placed on demonstrated evidence of either type of demand.

Out of these consultations, ONCAT also foresees a fairly high demand from the institutions to develop bridge programming that includes an online equivalent. Not only will online learning help minimize students' need to bear the financial burden of relocation to attend a postsecondary program, but it will also assist students complete either a portion of the bridge or most of the bridge in an online format.

ONCAT members have also identified a need for further support of partnered programming that grows from the commonalities among two institutions, be it shared regional mandates or similar student characteristics. For example, strong institutional partnerships between two institutions (often a college and a university) have emerged on the basis of common regional-economic, cultural or linguistic grounds. In many cases, partnerships grow on the basis of a shared commitment to common student populations (mature learners and displaced workers, Aboriginal or First Generation students, and/or francophone students). ONCAT wants to find ways to support those naturally evolving partnering arrangements and ultimately help the original parties attract additional partners from around the province.

Proposed next steps: ONCAT will be developing new calls for proposals and expressions of interest to be released in early October following our partners' advice on the above.

B. Research

Our analysis of our initial round of funded and completed research projects provide us with some valuable insights into what types of students transfer, why they do so and the nature and quality of their experience. ONCAT has commissioned a summary report of the research conducted to date that synthesizes the findings reported and the recommendations cited. The report will be available in early fall.

For instance, the majority of transfer students are slightly older than the non-transfer student. The majority of students end up at their receiving institution after two to five years of their initial educational experience ("pre-transfer"). The reasons for transfer as reported by students include to improve their chances of employability; to become "more educated;" to enter a program more to their liking, interest and aptitude; and other factors relating to costs and affordability. Many transfer students also place a high value on an education that provides them with a combination of practical and theoretical skills.

Furthermore, the research also suggests that, at least from one study, the degree of credit granted and formal learning recognized is a strong factor in determining at which receiving institution a student will ultimately enroll.

It is ONCAT's intention to support research proposals that are more targeted at understanding the transfer experience as they relate to particular student attributes. Some of the potential avenues to inquiry may include:

- a. How could the credit transfer system better engage First Generation students?

- b. Is the range of programming choice sufficiently diverse for Francophone students?
- c. Would a greater number of articulation agreements in the north and other remote areas of the province assist Aboriginal students, in particular, to finish their programs of study?
- d. Is the current system of credit transfer sufficient to support mature learners and lifelong learning?
- e. Does the way in which students finance their education play a major role in whether or not they consider transfer (e.g., whether they are supported principally by their parents, through their own work, or through OSAP)?
- f. Given our conventional and evidence-based knowledge of students' tendency toward attending an institution close to their parents' residence, how could the credit transfer system better serve those students who either cannot or choose not to relocate?

Others system-design driven questions may include:

- g. Would there be an increase in productivity if the province of Ontario were to develop a more fully comprehensive and articulated system of credit transfer and pathways among, and between, Ontario's colleges and universities?
- h. How does a more fully developed credit transfer system intersect with and complement a more coherent, on-line learning system?

Proposed next steps: ONCAT will issue new calls for proposals and expressions of interest; the first in the early fall of 2013 and the second in January of 2014, following the provision of our members' advice.

C. Student surveys

As part of ONCAT's interest in better understanding credit transfer student satisfaction rates (which includes an effort to determine if there are identifiable aspects of the experience across the system that require particular attention), as well as motivations behind transfer, ONCAT intends to conduct a number of on-going surveys. There are several central questions that ONCAT is attempting to answer and several premises to probe that require the generation of some reliable baseline data.

Although better credit transfer data is needed, there is at least anecdotal evidence and a simple comparison of the different practices and policies we know to characterize the system at the institutional level, the system is confusing. Through the use of surveys, ONCAT could better determine the more specific ways in which the inconsistent or different policies and practices constitute barriers to mobility – or at least better understand their mobility options.

ONCAT believes the optimal way of assessing the degree of satisfaction of students is to understand, in the first instance, students' expectations of the experience, the level of information to which they have access, and the helpfulness of those who are charged with assisting them in navigating the system; and on the other, how they would rate their experiences in light of their expectations. As part of this project, it is also the intention to gauge students' satisfaction with the ONTransfer website in helping them explore their Ontario PSE mobility options.

Proposed next steps: Through a competitive process, ONCAT will select an appropriate vendor to carry out this survey work.

D. Data

ONCAT has been working with Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities to develop a set of benchmarks, and eventually an accountability framework, that lends itself to a set of made-in-Ontario performance measures on credit transfer activity. In conjunction with Deloitte, the organization with which the Ministry engaged to make recommendations regarding appropriate credit transfer metrics, a set has been proposed. Following this Ministry-led exercise, ONCAT undertook a leadership role in testing whether or not those metrics made sense in the Ontario context, and whether there was institutional capacity to produce the data to support those proposed performance metrics.

In the spring of 2013, ONCAT requested feedback on the availability of that data from institutions, while also providing financial support. ONCAT continues to work with institutions to collect common data. In addition, the ONCAT-supported Credit Transfer Accountability Framework Pilot Working Group will provide recommendations, by the fall of 2013, on the best way to implement the Ministry's Accountability Framework.

Proposed next steps: ONCAT will continue to provide funding to enable institutions to produce the necessary data points in order to inform the development of a made-in-Ontario accountability framework.

E. Refining and continuing our work on learning outcomes

Many of ONCAT's partners in the PSE system are deeply engaged with the study, potential implementation and/or development of learning outcomes, including HEQCO, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and, of course, institutions themselves. The approaches to the study of learning outcomes, however, differ, depending on the purpose to which that work is being put.

These different uses include:

- To set and determine minimal standards for quality;
- For accountability purposes (determining the 'value add' of the educational experience);
- For the purposes of transparency and making the difference between the various educational experiences more comprehensible; and,
- The study of learning outcomes for use as the building blocks of a comprehensive and transparent system of system pathways and credit transfer.

As a critical component in the ONCAT funded work of our project partners, ONCAT came to understand that learning outcomes served as the place where all pathways discussions began, as colleges and universities sought to establish a common language that could launch and contextualize their bridge-building work.

To facilitate future work, ONCAT is proposing a new Learning Outcomes project that will be guided by a steering committee, which will provide advice on how to best proceed in a landscape of well established learning outcomes for the college sector, multiple on-going learning outcomes projects in the university sector, and new learning outcome projects funded by other organizations such as HEQCO. This work will help ONCAT better understand the role of learning outcomes in the transfer credit process and improve existing and future pathways.

Proposed next steps: Following the provision of advice, ONCAT proposes to establish a Learning Outcomes committee to steer future professional development activities and make recommendations to ONCAT about the use of learning outcomes for the purposes of credit transfer.

F. Creating professional development and creating communities of practice

ONCAT has identified a demand for providing better support mechanisms and more opportunities for professional development for those who support the credit transfer process at Ontario institutions. As evidence of this demand, ONCAT hosted more than 100 delegates attended its conference in February 2013 in a workshop, *Building effective programs and supports for transfer students: Towards a community of practice*.

To better manage and understand the transfer process and the other institutional decisions and decision-making processes that affect the work of credit transfer professionals – including faculty, student service providers, registrars, administrative and institutional research personnel – ONCAT is looking to provide funding, and other forms of support, to these professionals, including the facilitation of communities of practice.

ONCAT is looking to hold a number of regional events and conferences, in addition to the ONCAT annual conference, to make it easier for those around the province to take full advantage of additional professional development and networking opportunities. Topics for these regional events may include:

- Learning outcomes and curriculum redesign (Target community: e.g., faculty and academic program co-ordinators; teaching and curriculum experts).
- How to provide better supports for transfer students based on our knowledge of the challenges of transfer and “transfer shock” (Target community: e.g., student services).
- Potential solutions to how student level data may be housed and managed to help institutions better understand their “transfer credit community” and guide the institution to better planning and service provision around this base of evidence (Target community: e.g. planning and IR professionals within institutions).

Proposed next steps: Through a competitive sourcing process, contract with a consultancy firm to help co-ordinate more professional development opportunities for credit transfer professionals, and help build more vibrant communities of practice.

G. Funding for project implementation – How can ONCAT help?

There is still work to be done on implementing the projects already funded and underway; not all of our bridging programming has been finalized by the governing bodies at each of the participating institutions. ONCAT would like to find ways to support institutions – through financial and other means – to fully implement their newly created transfer pathways.

One of the potential ways is through an advertising budget that ONCAT can provide to assist institutions make potential applicants more aware of newly created pathways programming opportunities.

Proposed next steps: ONCAT develops a strategy to support the implementation of completed projects, following the advice provided as to how best ONCAT could assist in this way.

H. Building credit transfer capacity, one course at a time

In order to simplify and enhance the credit transfer system for universities and colleges, as well as students, ONCAT has developed a Course Equivalency Database. For institutions, the database will help with the management of workflow in that the system is flexible and can adapt to the different ways and means that universities and colleges determine course equivalencies.

For those institutions that wish to continue to work with their respective IT systems, a course equivalency synchronizer has been developed. The synchronizer gives them the ability to upload information to the ONTransfer.ca website, ensuring accurate and timely information is available through both institutions and ONCAT. For students, the database is an interactive tool that allows them to enter their transcript information to determine which institution would award what levels and amounts of credit.

The new database will go live in the fall of 2013, with all institutions being encouraged to participate. Institutions that provide data to ONCAT prior to October 1st, 2013, will be included in the initial launch, while institutions that provide data after October 1st, 2013, will appear on the website within a 6-8 week processing period. Additionally, ONCAT is providing a one-time grant of \$10,000 to participants to offset any IT costs, but will consider providing additional funds in circumstances that warrant it.

A project steering committee is being developed that is comprised of the institutions who are participating in the fall launch. The committee will guide the final development of the web environment and make recommendations on any additional future enhancements to the system that are deemed appropriate.

Proposed next step: ONCAT to continue to work with a steering committee comprised of the institutions who are participating in the fall launch, and to expand the project's membership.

III. AN INVITATION TO THE COMMUNITY – How to forward your advice

ONCAT invites feedback on the contents of this Consultation paper, as well as ideas, directions and priorities that are not addressed in this document. Your advice is sought by Monday, September 27, 2013.

Some of the questions community members may want to consider in providing advice are the following:

1. Overall, what are your views about the proposed ONCAT areas of work?
2. Are there any models for project funding that are not envisioned in this Consultation paper?
3. Are there important research themes that are unaddressed in this Consultation paper?
4. What professional development opportunities would you like ONCAT to support over the next several years?
5. How would additional support from ONCAT in terms of developing learning outcomes for credit transfer assist you in your work?
6. What role can you see ONCAT playing in assisting you in project implementation?

Please send them to:

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OR

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Thank you in advance for your advice.