

ONTARIO'S MOBILE APPLICANTS:

Findings from the 2025 University/College Applicant Study



AUGUST 2026

ONTARIO'S MOBILE APPLICANTS:

Findings from the 2025 University/College Applicant Study



Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT)
Conseil Ontarien pour l'articulation et le transfert (CATON)
180 Dundas St W, Suite 1902
Toronto, ON M5G 1Z8
oncat.ca

Author

Jeffrey Napierala, Ph.D.
ONCAT

Suggested Citation

Napierala, Jeffrey. (2026). *Ontario's Mobile Applicants: Findings from the 2025 University/College Applicant Study*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/ONCAT_OntariosMobileApplicants_2026.pdf

Funding to support this report was provided by ONCAT (Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of ONCAT or the Government of Ontario.

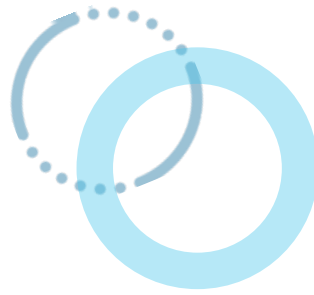


Table of Contents

Executive Summary	V
Introduction	1
Data	3
Findings	5
Demographics	5
Socioeconomic and Educational Attainment	7
Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Characteristics	9
Applicant Choices and Decision Making	12
Conclusion and Policy Implications	14
References	15

.....



List of Tables

Table 1: Age by Mobility	5
Table 2: Gender by Mobility	6
Table 3: Marital Status by Mobility	6
Table 4: Self-Reported Disability by Mobility	6
Table 5: Educational Attainment by Mobility	7
Table 6: Current Employment Status by Mobility	8
Table 7: Parental Educational Attainment by Mobility	8
Table 8: Self-Reported Household Income Last Year by Mobility	9
Table 9: Born in Canada by Mobility	9
Table 10: International Student Status by Mobility	10
Table 11: Primary Language Spoken at Home by Mobility	10
Table 12: Indigenous Identity by Mobility	11
Table 13: Race, Ethnicity, and/or Cultural Group Identity by Mobility	11
Table 14: Most Important Consideration for Postsecondary Destination by Mobility	12
Table 15: Average Number of School Applications by Institution Type and Mobility	13



List of Figures

Figure 1: Previous Postsecondary Experience by Mature Status	3
--	---

Executive Summary

The University/College Applicant Study (UCAS) is an annual survey that gathers insights on applicants to Canadian postsecondary institutions. A previous report using the data source (Napierala, 2025) showed that many Ontario applicants do not follow the “traditional” direct-entry route from high school into postsecondary education but instead take diverse routes including prior study, delayed entry, re-entry, or movement between colleges and universities. Applying the definitional framework developed by Napierala and LaCroix (2025), this report deepens the postsecondary sector’s understanding of mobile students—those who have transitioned between postsecondary programs or have begun or resumed study after a pause in formal or informal learning.

Data

This report analyzes 39,638 valid responses to the 2025 UCAS in Ontario, collected from applicants across 27 participating institutions (13 colleges/polytechnics and 14 universities). Here, mobile students are defined as applicants who have previous postsecondary experience or are mature students; this group accounts for just over a third of the sample. This report profiles mobile applicants and compares them with their nonmobile peers across a range of characteristics.

Main Findings

Mobile applicants accounted for just over a third (37%) of the 2025 UCAS sample, and they differed markedly from their nonmobile peers in several important respects. Mobile applicants were older and more likely to be married or in a common-law relationship, reflecting the changing life circumstances associated with returning to, or continuing, postsecondary study later in life. They were also more likely to be employed full time yet reported lower levels of income and parental education—key measures of socioeconomic status—than nonmobile applicants.

Differences in racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics were generally small, although mobile applicants were less likely to have been born in Canada and more likely to be international students.

Finally, mobile applicants approached the application process differently than nonmobile applicants, submitting fewer applications on average and placing greater emphasis on career outcomes and proximity to home.

Collectively, these findings highlight the value of understanding mobile applicants as a group with distinct needs, expectations, and contributions to Ontario’s postsecondary sector.

Recommendations for the Sector

Drawing on prior ONCAT research, this report offers three recommendations to help Ontario's publicly assisted postsecondary institutions better serve mobile students:

1. **Make key information for mobile students clear and accessible.** Institutions should provide clear, accessible information about flexible program options, transfer opportunities, and credit-transfer processes, including how to reach a transfer advisor.
2. **Communicate program strengths and career outcomes for graduates.** Institutions should highlight distinctive program offerings and post-graduation outcomes, which mobile students weigh heavily when choosing where to study.
3. **Build transfer pathways with nearby institutions.** Institutions should develop transfer pathways with nearby institutions so mobile students can build on prior postsecondary learning close to home.



Introduction

The University/College Applicant Study (UCAS) is an annual survey—conducted by Academica Group—that gathers insights from applicants to Canadian postsecondary institutions. Since the mid-2000s, UCAS has provided a wide range of information about students’ decision making around postsecondary study. In 2023, ONCAT partnered with Academica to expand the survey in Ontario. This partnership introduced new questions focused on students’ educational backgrounds, reasons for transferring, and postsecondary expectations. As a result of the partnership, Ontario’s publicly assisted postsecondary institutions could participate in the UCAS survey at no cost.

In the most recent report in ONCAT’s UCAS series (Napierala, 2025),¹ a number of detailed tables from the 2024 UCAS were presented. This resource was designed to provide a statistical overview of Ontario postsecondary applicants’ mobility patterns and transfer experiences. In particular, that report focused on the wide variety of student mobility patterns—sometimes known as “pathways”—that students follow through postsecondary study.

In the Napierala (2025) report, results highlighted the extent to which Ontario postsecondary applicants do not follow the “traditional” route into college or university. Only a minority of applicants—36%—fit the conventional direct-entry profile of moving from high school directly into postsecondary education. In contrast, nearly half of applicants (48%) had already participated in postsecondary education, and more than half (54%) were over the age of 19 (see also Napierala & Hanson, 2025). These findings indicate a sizeable student population whose educational journeys include prior study, delayed entry, re-entry, or movement between colleges and universities. For example, many applicants were continuing their postsecondary studies after previously attending college and were seeking either a college credential (18%) or a university degree (17%). A smaller share were returning after previously attending university (6%), while another group entered postsecondary education after taking an extended break after high school (9%). Taken together, these findings suggest that mobility is not a marginal feature of Ontario’s postsecondary sector; rather, diverse pathways into and through postsecondary education are a common part of students’ experiences.

Students who follow nontraditional routes into or through postsecondary education bring prior learning and experiences that can shape their educational journey. For some, previous postsecondary coursework may be recognized through transfer credit; for other students, their work, community, or life experiences may be assessed through prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR).

This variability in mobility patterns raises an important question: what terminology can we use to discuss students whose pathways include such varied forms of prior learning and experience? Research and policy discussions about mobile or “transfer” students use a range of terms to describe students’ educational journeys. Stakeholders use different language for similar concepts, creating uncertainty about how to describe students who stop and restart postsecondary education, move between institutions or programs, or delay entry after high school. To address this

¹ See Pizarro Milian (2022) for additional ONCAT reporting of UCAS data.

variation, Napierala and LaCroix (2025) reviewed mobility terminology in Ontario and other Canadian jurisdictions and developed a framework for describing learner mobility and related transfer processes. The central term is mobile student, which is defined as:

A current postsecondary student who has transitioned between postsecondary programs of study or has begun/resumed postsecondary study after a pause in formal or informal learning (Napierala & LaCroix, 2025, p. 5).

In the following pages, a series of tables is presented to help readers better understand the backgrounds and characteristics of the diverse population of mobile students in Ontario.



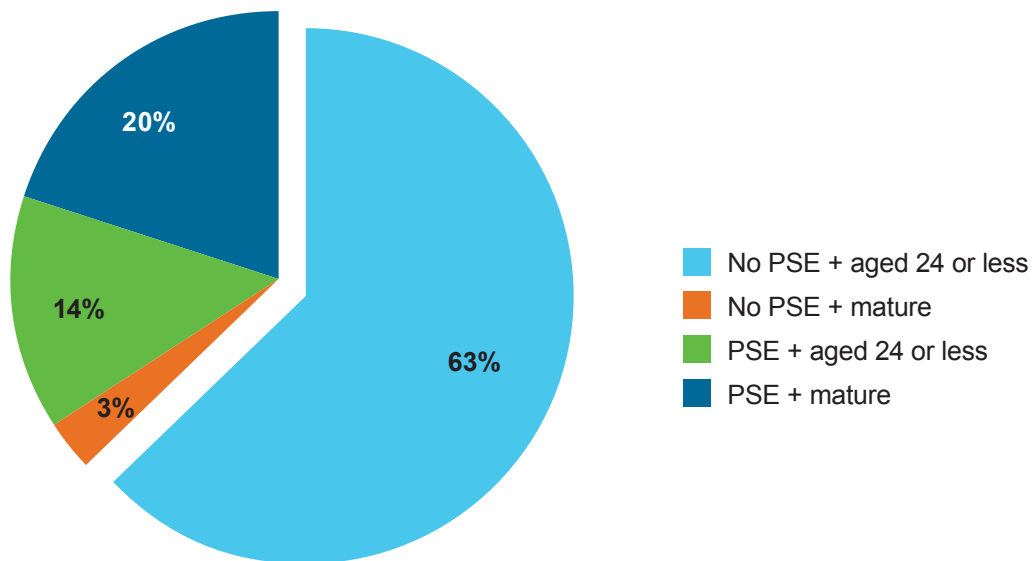
Data

This report draws on data from the 2025 UCAS survey in Ontario, which was conducted online during the spring and summer of 2025. There are 39,638 valid responses for this study² from applicants to Ontario publicly assisted postsecondary institutions.³ Twenty-seven institutions participated in the 2025 UCAS, including 13 colleges/polytechnics⁴ and 14 universities. For context, among these institutions,

- 30% are in the Greater Toronto Area, and 22% are in Northern Ontario.
- 33% are smaller institutions with fewer than 10,000 students, and 33% are larger institutions with more than 20,000 students.

As noted in the introduction, mobile students are defined based on their previous educational experiences. Napierala and LaCroix's (2025) definition is operationalized in this report as an applicant who has previous postsecondary educational experience or is a mature student—here defined as aged 25 or older.

FIGURE 1
Previous Postsecondary Experience by Mature Status



Note. $n = 39,638$

² The total sample from the survey is 39,654. Results below exclude a small number of respondents who did not provide their age.

³ All tables below show weighted sample sizes (n) adjusted to match each institution's gender population profile. The number of observations (n) may vary across tables due to item nonresponse.

⁴ For this analysis, polytechnic institutions are grouped with colleges.

Figure 1 illustrates the intersection of two characteristics, previous postsecondary educational experience and age, or mature status, for postsecondary applicants. The blue section of the pie, accounting for 63% of all applicants, represents nonmobile students. On the left side of the figure, mobile applicants, comprising 37% of the total, are grouped together; the largest component are applicants with previous postsecondary education who are also mature (20% of all applicants). The second-largest mobile group are traditionally aged applicants, or those aged 24 or younger, with previous postsecondary experience (14%). These applicants have either restarted their postsecondary education or are transitioning between two postsecondary institutions. The final component of the mobile group are applicants who are mature but do not have postsecondary educational experience (3%). The small size of this group indicates that few mature applicants are entering postsecondary education for the first time.



Findings

The tables below provide a descriptive profile of mobile applicants in the 2025 UCAS and compare their characteristics with those of nonmobile applicants. The results are organized around four broad areas: demographics; socioeconomic and educational attainment; racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics; and applicant choices and decision making. Each section includes a results summary to aid reader interpretation.

Demographics

The largest difference between mobile and nonmobile applicants is age, in part due to the definition of the mobile applicant group including all mature learners. Additionally, older applicants have had more time and opportunities to re-engage with learning over the course of their lives, and as a result they are more likely to have previous postsecondary education. What may be surprising to readers, however, is the broad age range among mobile applicants: 39% are 24 or younger, 25% are 25 to 29, 23% are 30 to 39, and 14% are 40 and older. This finding points to the diverse experiences and knowledge that mobile applicants bring with them into the classroom.

Other differences between mobile and nonmobile applicants are smaller but indicate that a wide range of life circumstances shape mobile applicants' experiences. Mobile applicants are somewhat more likely to identify as women (56% compared with 52%); they are also less likely to be single and never married (68% versus 85%) and substantially more likely to be married or in a common-law relationship (24% compared with 7%). As a result, mobile applicants are more likely to be balancing postsecondary study with a range of additional responsibilities, such as caring for or financially supporting family members.

TABLE 1
Age by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
19 and younger	24,038	90.95	8.12
20–24	6,751	9.05	30.87
25–29	3,568	0.00	24.60
30–39	3,318	0.00	22.88
40–49	1,466	0.00	10.11
50 and older	498	0.00	3.43

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 2
Gender by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Woman	21,046	51.61	55.66
Man	17,384	45.22	41.49
Non-binary	488	1.17	1.34
Prefer to self-describe	116	0.31	0.26
Prefer not to answer	605	1.68	1.26

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 3
Marital Status by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Single, never married	31,150	84.98	67.51
Married/Common-law	5,276	7.28	23.77
Separated/Divorced/Widowed	1,280	2.52	4.46
Prefer not to answer	1,932	5.23	4.26

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 4
Self-Reported Disability by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Have a disability	7,307	17.89	19.37
No disability	29,920	75.61	75.27
Prefer not to answer	2,411	6.50	5.36

Note. *n* = 39,638

Socioeconomic and Educational Attainment

Mobile applicants use a range of pathways through postsecondary education. While nonmobile applicants in this analysis—by definition—have a high school diploma or less, most mobile applicants have already completed a university undergraduate degree or higher (40%), followed by a college certificate, diploma, or degree (33%), or an incomplete college, university, or polytechnic credential (18%). Mobile applicants are more than three times as likely to be working full time (37% compared with 11%) and less likely to be working part time, unemployed, or not working outside the home.

Despite mobile applicants' higher rates of educational attainment and employment, they reported lower levels of socioeconomic attainment. Their household incomes are substantially lower than those of nonmobile applicants; over two in five (42%) mobile applicants reported a household income under \$60,000 the previous year (compared with 23%); conversely, less than half as many mobile applicants reported household incomes exceeding \$150,000 (6% compared with 13%). It should be noted that nonmobile applicants are younger and much more likely to have lived with their parents when income was measured in the survey question; consequently, they may have reported incomes that were not their own. Nevertheless, mobile applicants also reported lower levels of parental education, with more than twice as many respondents indicating their parents had a high school diploma or less (23% compared with 11%); conversely, 57% of nonmobile applicants' parents completed a university degree compared with 41% of mobile applicants' parents.

TABLE 5
Educational Attainment by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile %	Mobile %
High school diploma or less	26,183	100.00	7.23
Incomplete college/university/polytechnic	2,642	0.00	18.21
Completed trades/vocational/technical school	259	0.00	1.79
Completed college certificate/diploma/degree	4,806	0.00	33.14
Completed university undergraduate degree or above	5,748	0.00	39.63

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 6
Current Employment Status by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Working full time (32 or more hr per week)	8,230	11.44	36.93
Working part time (less than 32 hr per week)	13,378	38.82	24.97
Serving in the military	107	0.22	0.36
Unemployed and looking for work	10,788	30.19	22.06
Not working outside the home and not looking for work	4,320	13.12	7.05
Prefer not to answer	2,815	6.22	8.63

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 7
Parental Educational Attainment by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
High school or less	6,002	10.80	22.67
Incomplete postsecondary education ^a	2,803	5.99	8.94
Completed college or trades/vocational/ technical school	9,082	22.56	23.53
Completed university	20,321	57.48	40.50
Not applicable/don't know	1,429	3.17	4.36

Note. *n* = 39,638

^a Incomplete postsecondary education accounts for university, college, or trades/vocational/technical training.

TABLE 8
Self-Reported Household Income Last Year by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
\$30,000 or less	6,023	10.89	22.66
\$30,001–\$60,000	5,836	11.85	19.70
\$60,001–\$90,000	4,538	11.08	12.08
\$90,001–\$120,000	4,025	11.41	7.97
\$120,001–\$150,000	2,448	7.15	4.48
\$150,001+	4,135	13.15	5.72
Don't know	8,138	24.26	14.07
Prefer not to answer	4,496	10.21	13.31

Note. *n* = 39,638

Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Characteristics

Mobile and nonmobile applicants have broadly similar racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, with one notable exception: mobile applicants are much less likely to have been born in Canada (48% compared with 75%). This difference reflects the larger share of international applicants in the mobile group, where they account for 27% of applicants, compared with 8% in the nonmobile group. International applicants are also more likely than domestic applicants to have prior postsecondary experience (62% compared with 29%), which results in their greater inclusion in the mobile group. Mobile applicants were also less likely to report English as the primary language spoken at home (69% compared with 76%). Differences related to specific Indigenous identity and race, ethnicity, and/or cultural characteristics were much smaller than those related to country of birth, international student status, and language.

TABLE 9
Born in Canada by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Yes	25,863	75.04	48.27
No	13,352	24.14	50.24
Prefer not to answer	423	0.82	1.49

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 10
International Student Status by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
International	5,949	8.37	26.52
Domestic	33,690	91.63	73.48

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 11
Primary Language Spoken at Home by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
English	29,143	76.07	69.11
Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, or other)	1,594	4.41	3.35
Punjabi	976	1.87	3.49
French	924	1.51	3.75
Arabic	798	2.01	2.02
Spanish	797	1.88	2.24
Tagalog	612	1.08	2.35
Other	4,794	11.17	13.70

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 12
Indigenous Identity by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Yes ^a	1,567	3.88	4.08
No	36,605	92.92	91.35
Prefer not to answer	1,506	3.31	4.65

Note. *n* = 39,638

^a Respondents selecting First Nations, Inuit, or Métis status in the survey question, either separately or in combination, were counted in the “Yes” category.

TABLE 13
Race, Ethnicity, and/or Cultural Group Identity by Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
White	17,404	45.10	43.24
Black	5,861	15.18	16.63
South Asian	5,213	13.50	13.53
Chinese	2,677	6.94	6.51
Middle Eastern/West Asian/Arab	2,608	6.76	6.56
Caribbean/West Indies	2,056	5.33	5.36
Latin American/Hispanic	1,761	4.56	4.57
Filipino	1,547	4.01	4.22
Southeast Asian	948	2.46	2.42
Korean	539	1.40	1.42
Other	1,209	3.13	3.16
Prefer not to answer	2,106	5.46	5.79

Note. *n* = 38,601; A small number of respondents who self-report as Indigenous and do not “identify with any other ethnic groups” via two additional survey questions are not included.

Applicant Choices and Decision Making

When asked about the most important consideration in choosing a postsecondary destination, both mobile and nonmobile applicants most frequently cited a strong reputation in their specific program of interest; however, nonmobile applicants selected this reason more often (33% compared with 27%). Mobile applicants were somewhat more likely to prioritize a strong reputation for graduates having good careers (20% compared with 16%) and proximity to home (15% compared with 14%), while nonmobile applicants placed greater weight on the overall campus experience (6% compared with 3%). These patterns are consistent with the older age and employment profile of mobile applicants, who may focus more on career outcomes and studying close to where they already live and work.

Mobile and nonmobile applicants also differed in the number of schools they applied to. On average, mobile applicants submitted fewer applications than nonmobile applicants (2.1 compared with 4.0). When disaggregating the results by institution type, the difference between mobile and nonmobile applicants was largest for universities, where nonmobile applicants applied to an average of 4.7 schools compared with 2.3 for mobile applicants. This finding suggests that mobile applicants tend to apply to postsecondary education in a more targeted way, perhaps reflecting clearer goals, specific program interests, or constraints related to work, finances, and family responsibilities.

TABLE 14

Most Important Consideration for Postsecondary Destination by Mobility

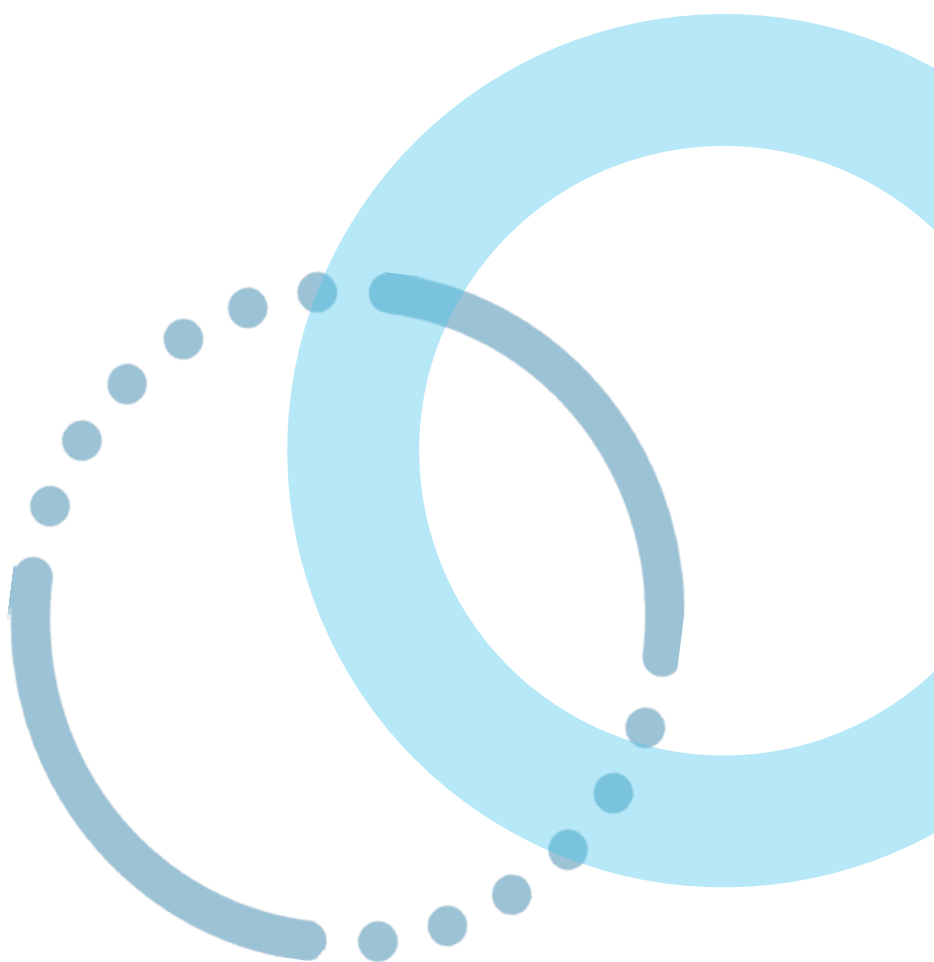
	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Strong reputation in my specific program of interest	12,226	33.04	27.05
Strong overall academic reputation	5,504	13.63	14.33
Strong reputation for teaching	1,517	3.39	4.58
Strong reputation for campus experience	1,941	6.04	2.91
Strong reputation for graduates having good careers	7,056	16.45	20.14
Financial reasons (I only considered the most affordable choices)	2,901	6.99	7.88
Schools were close to home	5,630	13.67	15.13
Where my friends are going	517	1.52	0.93
None of the above	2,346	5.27	7.05

Note. *n* = 39,638

TABLE 15
Average Number of School Applications by Institution Type and Mobility

	<i>n</i>	Nonmobile	Mobile
		%	%
Colleges only	18,224	2.44	1.80
Universities only	17,623	4.65	2.34
Both colleges and universities	3,790	5.39	3.39
Overall	39,637	4.01	2.06

Note. *n* = 39,637



Conclusion and Policy Implications

Across the four broad areas presented here—demographics; socioeconomic and educational attainment; racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics; and applicant choices and decision making—mobile applicants differ from their nonmobile peers in ways that reflect their more varied life experiences and complex pathways through postsecondary education. Mobile students are older, more likely to be married and employed, and have lower levels of socioeconomic status. Their backgrounds are otherwise broadly similar to those of nonmobile applicants, apart from a larger share who were born outside Canada and are studying as international students.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that mobile students are often connected to the labour market and balancing study with work and family responsibilities. Mobile students, therefore, approach postsecondary study more deliberately, applying to fewer institutions, placing greater weight on graduates' career outcomes, and preferring options close to home—choices that reflect clear goals alongside meaningful constraints on their time.

The findings from this report support the key recommendations presented in previous ONCAT reports (LaCroix, 2026; LaCroix & Napierala, 2025; Napierala & LaCroix, 2026), which aim to help institutions better serve mobile students:

Make Key Information for Mobile Students Clear and Accessible

Institutions should ensure they provide clear, accessible information about flexible and online program delivery options, which are particularly important for mobile students who are making complex decisions in the context of previous postsecondary study, family responsibilities, and ongoing/prior labour market experiences (Napierala & LaCroix, 2026). Institutions should also clearly and prominently present information about transfer opportunities and their credit transfer processes, including contact information for transfer advisors (LaCroix & Napierala, 2025; see also LaCroix, 2026).

Communicate Program Strengths and Career Outcomes for Graduates

As mobile students often prioritize employment goals and their fit with specific programs, institutions should clearly communicate their distinctive program offerings and strengths along with postgraduation outcomes. This information can help mobile students identify programs that are aligned with their goals and understand how postsecondary study may support their future success in the labour market (Napierala & LaCroix, 2026).

Build Transfer Pathways with Nearby Institutions

Mobile students often express a preference to stay close to home and have prior postsecondary experience. Consequently, institutions should seek to build transfer pathways with nearby institutions to ensure mobile students can easily build on their previous postsecondary learning. By clearly showcasing these transfer pathways, institutions may attract additional students seeking to gain maximum credits and reduce their times for completion (Napierala & LaCroix, 2026).

References

- LaCroix, E. (2026). *Expectations and outcomes: A qualitative analysis of transfer students navigating the credit transfer process*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/documents/projects/research-project-attachments/ONCAT_ExpectationsAndOutcomes_2026.pdf
- LaCroix, E., & Napierala, J. (2025). *How do students learn about transfer? Postsecondary students' use of transfer information sources in Ontario*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/ONCAT_HowDoStudentsLearnAboutTransfer_2025.pdf
- Napierala, J. (2025). *What the 2024 University/College Applicant Study tells us about student mobility and transfer in Ontario*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/documents/projects/research-project-attachments/ONCAT_Whatthe2024UniversityCollegeApplicantStudyTellsUsAboutTransfer_2025.pdf
- Napierala, J., & Hanson, N. (2025). *What postsecondary institutions should know about Ontario's mobile learners*. Academia Forum. <https://forum.academica.ca/forum/what-postsecondary-institutions-should-know-about-ontarios-mobile-learners>
- Napierala, J., & LaCroix, E. (2025). *(Re)Defining transfer: Key learner mobility terminology in Ontario*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/documents/projects/research-project-attachments/ONCAT_Redefining-Transfer-KeyLearnerMobilityTerminologyinOntario_2025.pdf
- Napierala, J., & LaCroix, E. (2026). *What shapes students' mobility decisions: The role of institutional characteristics in Ontario*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. https://oncat.ca/assets/oncat/ONCAT_WhatShapesStudentsMobilityDecisions_2026.pdf
- Pizarro Milian, R. (2022). *A statistical analysis of transfer and student mobility in Ontario: What the University/College Applicant Survey tells us*. Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer. <https://oncat.ca/detail+a-statistical-analysis-of-transfer-what-the-UC-applicant-survey%EF%BB%BF-tells-us>



