

WHAT SHAPES STUDENTS' MOBILITY DECISIONS:

The Role of Institutional Characteristics in Ontario



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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

Authors

Jeffrey Napierala, Ph.D.
ONCAT

Emerson LaCroix, Ph.D.
ONCAT

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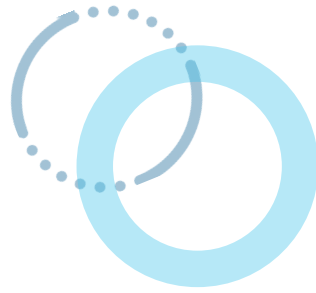


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Executive Summary

In Ontario's postsecondary sector, students are increasingly using indirect, nontraditional pathways, which require them to make complex decisions about institutions and programs. However, because much existing research focuses on decisions made by students transitioning directly from high school to postsecondary education, the decision-making processes of mobile students remain relatively underexplored—particularly in the Ontario context.

To address this gap, this project examines the key institutional characteristics that mobile students consider (e.g., program offerings and location) and assesses how these characteristics interact with students' lived experiences. For Ontario postsecondary institutions, understanding how students make transfer decisions can help strengthen transfer-specific supports and programs.

Data

This report uses data from ONCAT's Longitudinal Study of Transfer Students. In this study, data was gathered from students with previous postsecondary experience as they explored their transfer options and progressed through the transfer process. For this report, the data comprise survey responses ($n = 1,881$) and interviews ($n = 51$) from mobile students in the initial "intent" stage of their transfer journey.

Main Findings

Our analysis produced two broad findings related to institutional characteristics and mobility. First, respondents were interested in a relatively small set of institutions, although this varied according to the type of institution under consideration. Most respondents considered between one and three institutions, unless they were considering applying to both colleges and universities. Respondents considering both types of institutions averaged five institutions.

Second, respondents emphasized practical considerations. They prioritized institutions that offered desired programs, were close to home, and had strong academic reputations. Our qualitative analysis added nuance, suggesting that advanced standing, program flexibility, and work-integrated learning opportunities were particularly important, as was information about how well programs prepare graduates for the workforce.



Recommendations for the Sector

The findings of this report have numerous implications for postsecondary institutions when it comes to recruiting and supporting mobile students. Based on the main findings, ONCAT suggests the following actions for postsecondary institutions:

1. **Clearly communicate program details and unique strengths.** Mobile students are most concerned with finding specific programs that will help them progress toward their existing educational and career objectives. To help students make accurate and informed decisions, postsecondary institutions should aim to provide accessible and comprehensive information about their programs. Furthermore, because mobile students tend to favour schools close to home, institutions can distinguish themselves from neighbouring institutions by promoting their unique strengths and offering specialized programs.
2. **Highlight program features that are desirable for mobile students.** Mobile students often seek flexible programs that allow them to balance academic commitments with personal and professional responsibilities. As a result, schools should clearly indicate the instructional format for courses (e.g., online, hybrid, or in-person), the semesters and times of day when they are normally offered, and whether students are eligible for work-integrated learning opportunities. Postsecondary institutions that offer flexible online courses may find that they can attract more mobile students from outside their immediate region.
3. **Create transfer pathways with nearby institutions.** Mobile students prefer nearby institutions and programs that allow them to finish quickly. Institutions can attract these students by developing transfer pathways to programs at proximate institutions, which helps clarify how credits will transfer and the amount of time needed to complete the programs.
4. **Provide information on post-graduation outcomes.** When mobile students consider transferring to another institution or resuming their studies, they commonly evaluate how the additional educational experience will impact their future career prospects. To that end, institutions could provide information about the employment outcomes of program graduates, including occupations for graduates of specific programs and their rates of employment.



Introduction

Colleges, universities, and Indigenous Institutes in Ontario's postsecondary sector are diverse, offering a wide range of credentials and academic programs. This diversity provides Ontario learners with substantial flexibility and opportunities to expand their skills and knowledge throughout their lives. With choice comes complexity: learners can be confronted with an overwhelming amount of information when making decisions about postsecondary education. This is particularly true for mobile students who engage with the postsecondary sector in “nontraditional” ways. We define mobile students as those who have transitioned between postsecondary programs of study or who have begun or resumed postsecondary study after a pause in formal or informal learning (Napierala & LaCroix, 2025). These students stop, start, and take detours on their route through postsecondary study, and they are increasingly common in Ontario (Maier & Robson, 2020; St-Denis et al., 2021; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). How do these students make decisions about which institutions to attend, given their nonlinear postsecondary journeys?

This project focuses on the actual and perceived characteristics of postsecondary institutions—such as program offerings, institutional reputation, and location—that influence students' mobility decisions. In general, students consider institutional characteristics individually and in combination as part of the process of deciding which institution to attend (Gardner-Cook, 2025). Research on these characteristics, and the extent to which they impact mobility decisions, is an emerging area of interest in mobility studies (e.g., Jabbar et al., 2019). Much of the relevant scholarly work, however, has focused on the high school-to-postsecondary journey using linear decision-making models (e.g., Hossler & Gallagher, 1986; Jackson, 1982), which may not fully account for the complex backgrounds and needs of mobile students.

This report begins with a review of the literature on institutional characteristics, including studies oriented toward traditional high school-to-postsecondary pathways. Next, the methodological framework is discussed. Using data from ONCAT's Transfer Intent Survey, a mixed methods design was employed to identify the key institutional characteristics that impact the decision-making process of prospective transfer students and to explore the nuances of these decisions using interview data. The report concludes with a discussion of policy implications for postsecondary institutions.

Postsecondary Decision-Making

Research on postsecondary decision-making has often focused on students transitioning directly from high school to college or university. According to Niu and Tienda (2008), there are two approaches to studying this transition. The first approach focuses on stages in students' decision-making process, from the time they aspire to postsecondary education to when they begin making enrolment decisions. The second focuses on how institutional characteristics (e.g., cost, distance from home, and program quality) shape their decision-making process around selecting a postsecondary institution.

The process-based approach to analyzing students' decision-making is reflected in Hossler and Gallagher's (1986) College Choice Model (see also Jackson, 1982). This model is used to understand how students develop their choice set, or a "group of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1986, p. 214). The decision-making process is split into three phases, presuming that students progress "linearly," or sequentially, from one stage to the next until completion. The first stage is "predisposition," in which students develop an interest in pursuing higher education. Second, during the "search" stage, students seek out more information about colleges and universities to develop their choice set. After this stage, students are expected to have formed strong preferences, which can be difficult to alter later on (Hossler & Gallagher, 1986; see also Gardner-Cook, 2025). Finally, after applying to institutions in their choice set, students reach the "choice" stage, in which they decide which postsecondary institution they will attend. While this framework makes the decision-making process easier to analyze, it does not consider the complexities experienced by mobile students (Cox, 2016; Jabbar et al., 2021) and can lead to the oversimplification of students' decision-making by failing to account for the social context of their decisions, as well as the cost–benefit analyses they use (see Perna, 2006).

With respect to postsecondary decision-making, there are some noteworthy differences between direct-entry and mobile students. Whereas direct-entry students are constrained by a structured admissions timeline, mobile students can often make their postsecondary decisions over a longer period of time (Jabbar et al., 2021). These mobility decisions might be planned (Decock & Janzen, 2016), but in other cases they may be highly circumstantial (e.g., abrupt changes due to personal or academic reasons; see Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). As a result, efforts have been made to develop more empirically accurate models of postsecondary decision-making for mobile students. For example, Wickersham (2020) developed the Pathway (Re)Selection Model to account for mobility-specific factors impacting the decisions of two-year college students in the United States. The key finding from these studies is that students moving from colleges to universities consider both short-term and life-long—or "larger picture"—factors when making their decisions.

Researchers have also found that mobile students, similar to traditional students, tend to choose from a relatively small number of institutions (Jabbar et al., 2019, 2021; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). When making mobility decisions, students may engage in "narrow bracketing" by making decisions about potential destinations separately, as opposed to in relation to one another, to simplify the decision process. For example, students may consider only a small set of institutions that offer one specific program or provide programming in one community. What is concerning about narrow bracketing is that students may make suboptimal decisions by not considering the full scope of institutions and programs available to them. Conversely, students can engage in "broad" bracketing, which is more complex and involves making decisions across multiple factors simultaneously (Jabbar et al., 2021).¹ In locations such as Ontario, with a wide variety of postsecondary opportunities, this complexity increases the potential for broad bracketing and engaging in decision-making processes that involve multiple characteristics and institutions

¹ Narrow and broad bracketing have emerged as concepts to more accurately capture the nuances of mobility decisions. For an empirical application, see Jabbar et al. (2019).

(Lang, 2009; Lang & Lopes, 2014). The potential concern, however, is that engaging in especially wide-ranging strategies can create fatigue or confusion, causing students to unwittingly overlook potential transfer destinations that could provide them with the best opportunity to complete their postsecondary education.

The second approach to postsecondary decision-making moves away from the use and development of stylized models or frameworks and focuses on the characteristics of postsecondary institutions that students use to select destinations. Dougherty's (1987) classic work considered numerous characteristics—both at the community college and university levels—that intersect to explain the attrition rates of students transferring from two- to four-year institutions. Jabbar et al. (2019) identified five types of “choosers,” who consider different factors when selecting potential schools. For example, they contrasted “purposeful mix” students, who consider institutional characteristics, such as geographic proximity and the quality of the college experience, program availability, cost, and institutional prestige, with those “casting a wide net” or those who choose “lower bar” institutions as a safe bet. Across their classification scheme, the researchers found that financial considerations, program availability, and geography were important characteristics that mobile students considered. Tobolowsky and Bers (2019) found that similar institutional characteristics impacted decision-making and that some “practical concerns,” such as school location and cost, can hold more significance than other factors, such as institutional prestige. For example, students in their study transferring from a college to a university were more concerned with practical considerations, such as the time it would take to complete their degree, than students using other pathways. Similar considerations were noted by Jabbar and Edwards (2019), who found that, alongside school location, mobile students tended to choose institutions that provided higher-quality programs and increased graduation rates.

This pool of literature examining how postsecondary students choose destinations is not without limitations. The first is that most studies have focused on locations in the United States. For example, key studies have examined states such as Texas (Jabbar et al., 2019; Niu & Tienda, 2008) and Florida (Backes & Dunlop Velez, 2015), or cities such as Chicago (Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). As a result, the findings of these studies may not be generalizable to Ontario given the numerous differences in postsecondary systems (see Davies & Zarifa, 2012). Similarly, American studies have focused exclusively on mobility between community colleges and four-year universities. In contrast, students in Ontario follow numerous mobility patterns (e.g., Zarifa et al., 2020), which could potentially alter the influence of the institutional characteristics noted above.

With these limitations in mind, this report examines the institutional characteristics that are important to mobile students in Ontario by asking the following research questions:

1. How often do mobile students consider multiple institutions? Does this vary by the institution type or types they are considering?
2. Do prospective students who consider different institution types use different types of decision-making processes (e.g., narrow or broad bracketing)?
3. What institutional characteristics are most important to prospective mobile students?
4. Are institutional characteristics prioritized differently for mobile students considering colleges compared with those considering universities?

Data and Methods

To answer these research questions, data was sourced from ONCAT's Longitudinal Study of Transfer Students. This longitudinal data project was designed to offer a comprehensive analysis of students' mobility journeys. In this report, both survey data and interviews from the longitudinal study were used to describe the number and characteristics of potential postsecondary destinations that students considered and interview data was used to provide additional nuance around why students prioritized these characteristics.

The quantitative data source—referred to as the Transfer Intent Survey (TIS)—recruited respondents through the [ONTransfer.ca](https://ontransfer.ca)² website between fall 2021 and fall 2024. All respondents to the survey had previous postsecondary experience and were seeking additional postsecondary educational opportunities at the undergraduate or college level. Because the respondents were still within the initial “intent” stage of the mobility process and had not necessarily transitioned to a new institution, they are referred to as prospective mobile students (or simply students) throughout the remainder of this report. At the end of the survey, respondents could opt for semi-structured interviews, which were later conducted by ONCAT staff.³ A total of 1,881⁴ survey responses were retained, along with a sample of 51 student interviews.

The analysis focused on a series of questions in the TIS regarding respondents' intended postsecondary destinations. First, respondents were asked whether they were interested in specific institutions as a destination, and if so, what type (colleges, universities, or Indigenous Institutes).⁵ Based on their responses, respondents were then asked to select the specific institutions they were considering from a list of all publicly assisted postsecondary institutions in Ontario. A follow-up question then asked respondents to select the reasons they were interested in each institution (see Appendix B for the survey questions).



² ONCAT's online guide that helps learners explore their transfer and pathway options.

³ For an extended methodology, see Appendix A. Readers interested in learning more about the Transfer Intent Survey and ONCAT's broader longitudinal project may consult our previous report, which includes an extended discussion of the survey instrument (see LaCroix & Napierala, 2025).

⁴ Respondents were filtered out of the sample if they were seeking a graduate degree, had no previous postsecondary experience, did not report an origin or potential destination institution type, or provided highly inaccurate information about the timing of their high school graduation (and entry into postsecondary studies). Only the most recent case was taken for the small number of students who responded to the survey more than once.

⁵ No survey respondents indicated that they were interested in an Indigenous Institute.

Findings

A growing body of research focuses on the unique decision-making factors that impact mobile students (Jabbar et al., 2019, 2021; Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019; Wickersham, 2020). These studies have found that, compared to traditional students, mobile students tend to choose institutions from a smaller, more tightly bound set of choices. Mobile students are also more likely to consider long-term goals when making decisions and are more concerned with the practical impacts of their choices.

The findings of this project build on existing research by describing the institutional characteristics that mattered most to the prospective mobile students in our sample. Similar to the existing literature, students in this study tended to choose from a small set of institutions—unless they were considering applying to both colleges and universities—and were highly influenced by practical matters, such as program availability and location. These findings are discussed in greater detail below.

Prospective Mobile Students Are Interested in a Small Set of Institutions

The analysis began by examining the number of institutions that prospective mobile students were considering in Ontario. This number revealed the scope of decision-making in the sample. Table 1 displays the distribution of students across the number of postsecondary institutions they indicated they were interested in, by the type of institutions they were considering.

Overall, 40% of students were interested in just one institution, followed by 33% interested in two or three institutions. Fewer students were interested in four or five institutions (16%) and six or more institutions (10%). Just 1% of respondents declined to name a specific institution they were considering, likely because they were in the very early stages of the search. Taken together, these results suggest that most students engaged in narrow bracketing by choosing their postsecondary destinations from a limited set of institutions.

TABLE 1

Average Number of Institutions Prospective Mobile Students Were Interested in, by Institution Type

Institution type	Number of specific institutions selected					Average	Total
	0	1	2-3	4-5	6+		
College	1%	59%	30%	9%	2%	1.9	498
University	0%	39%	35%	17%	9%	2.7	1,175
Both	1%	2%	33%	26%	39%	5.3	208
Total	1%	40%	33%	16%	10%	2.8	1,881

Note. Due to the design of the survey, respondents could select one or more institution types but could not provide any specific institutions.

The number of institutions students were considering varied according to whether they were interested in a university, college, or both. At one end of the continuum, almost 90% of students who were interested in colleges were considering three or fewer institutions, with the average student considering just 1.9 institutions. Students who indicated a preference in attending a university were considering an average of 2.7 institutions, with approximately 75% considering three or fewer. On the opposite end of the spectrum, students considering both colleges and universities selected 5.4 institutions on average, with more than 25% selecting four or more. Thus, we observe that students who are considering universities (alone or, especially, in combination with colleges) engage in broad bracketing, potentially to allocate space in their choice set for both types of institutions, while students considering only one type of institution—especially colleges—engage in narrow bracketing.

Institutional Characteristics Impact Mobility Decisions

Prospective mobile students consider numerous factors when selecting potential destinations. Table 2 presents the percentage of survey respondents who selected each institutional characteristic as a reason for considering a specific institution. The results are disaggregated by institution type (i.e., college, university, or both). Statistical tests were conducted to assess whether there were meaningful differences between the percentages of students selecting colleges and universities.

TABLE 2
Institutional Characteristics Influencing Mobility, by Receiving Institution

Institutional characteristic	Institution type			Total
	College	University	Both	
They have the program/courses I want to take	78%**	72%	76%	74%
The school's location	47%	49%	47%	48%
The school's academic reputation	37%	48%***	42%	44%
The school's campus/facilities	28%	33%*	27%	31%
The school culture	21%	28%***	23%	26%
The extracurriculars available	13%	16%*	14%	15%
They could offer me more credit for my courses than other schools	14%	15%	13%	14%
They have an articulation agreement with my current school	8%	13%***	10%	11%
Other	7%	5%	7%	6%
N	498	1,175	208	1,881

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, and * $p < 0.05$ indicate a significantly larger value from Z-tests conducted between college and university.

The most common institutional characteristics that students considered were program and course offerings (selected by 74% of respondents), location (48%), and academic reputation (44%). Students contemplating attending a college were more likely to indicate that program and course offerings were important, whereas students contemplating a university were more likely to select academic reputation. Other commonly selected characteristics were campus and facilities (31%) and school culture (26%), both of which were more prevalent among students considering universities. Between 11% and 15% of respondents indicated that extracurricular activities, transfer credits, and/or articulation agreements were important to their decisions, with university-bound learners more likely to identify articulation agreements.

In the following sections, the top three institutional characteristics are further contextualized using interview data from a subset of survey respondents.

Program Options

The most influential characteristic in prospective mobile students' decision-making, selected by 74% of survey respondents, was the institution's program or course offerings. This result indicates that students are focused on institutions that have programs aligned with their educational goals. As shown in Table 2, this is especially true for students interested in college.

Interviews afforded the opportunity to explore why some programs are considered more desirable by students. One key factor was the speed at which participants could finish programs based on their prior educational experiences. In general, transfer credits were commonly mentioned by interview participants despite being selected infrequently in the TIS. Mark⁶ was completing an advanced college diploma in business administration and marketing and was considering where he would like to continue his studies afterward. Mark knew he wanted to immediately begin a degree program after finishing his diploma and acknowledged that time to completion was front of mind when considering his institution choice:

I was talking with [destination choice], and they said that after I complete this program, as long as it's an advanced diploma, I could go straight into my third year of their commerce program. So that, for me, is really attractive because it cuts down the time it would take to get into the university. (College-to-university)

When asked if he was considering other institutions, Mark said that he was, and the pull factor for his first choice was the level of advanced standing he would receive there. Although he was still waiting to hear back from some other institutions about their commerce programs, he had been informed by another university that he would not be guaranteed the same level of advanced standing as his first choice. He was told that "some" of his credits "might be applicable, but [I] might still have to go into their first-year program." In another instance, Aarnav was about to begin a commerce degree after completing a college diploma. Also interested in getting through his new program quickly, he mentioned, "I wanted to do it as fast as I can, but also spreading [my courses] out evenly." Therefore, time to completion is balanced with the intensity of the course load for some students.

⁶ All references to students' names are pseudonyms. Participant mobility patterns have also been added for extra context.

Coupled with time to completion, participants were also interested in the flexibility to study part-time and have work-integrated learning opportunities in their new program. For participants who were balancing school with work and family obligations, the ability to study part-time was a desirable option. Although Ashley was undecided about her next move, she knew that any program she chose would need to offer part-time studies: “It has to be part-time. Otherwise, I would have to take leave from work, and that’s not financially possible right now.” As a working professional who was looking to go back to school, Leslie had a similar perspective. Leslie had completed some university courses after high school but left postsecondary studies to enter the workforce. She also had numerous co-workers in the same position who were trying to strike a balance between full-time study and work, ultimately finding themselves “overwhelmed.” Informed by their experiences, Leslie decided, “A lighter load and a slower pace tend to work better. It’s much better to focus, and that way I can keep the energy up and go longer with [the program] instead of all these courses at once.” In this case, Leslie was trying to forecast how much demand returning to school would place on her time and energy level.

Work-integrated learning was another desirable program feature for many participants. Isa, for example, had transferred from a university engineering program into a university early childhood education program. When speaking about what drew her to the program, Isa mentioned, “The program I’m in has four years of placement, so that’s a great opportunity.” Throughout her program, she would have a variety of placement options ranging from low-income family support to kindergarten classrooms. Isa stated that the variety and number of placement opportunities were “what enticed me to apply.” Some participants were also interested in scaffolding work-integrated learning, where the work placements in their new program would complement those they had completed in their previous program. Khalid had completed some elements of an advanced diploma with a co-op component and decided to transfer to a different college for a bachelor’s degree. During this transition, he was interested in gaining additional work-integrated learning opportunities:

I have the opportunity to do another co-op term if I’m here at [destination choice]. Since I’ve already completed one co-op term at [my previous college], I won’t be having any more. I decided, since I’m already transferring over to [destination choice], I’ll get another chance to get another internship. (College-to-college)

Therefore, while students are drawn to particular institutions based on their academic program offerings, their decisions are further nuanced by desirable program features, such as advanced standing (i.e., time to completion), program flexibility, and work-integrated learning opportunities.

School Location

Prospective mobile students also prioritize the location of postsecondary institutions when developing their choice sets. School location was selected by 48% of survey respondents, with similar percentages across institution types. Additional analyses (not shown⁷) indicate that location largely corresponds to proximity to their current place of residence. In other words, students are most interested in institutions that are close to home.

⁷ Additional results are available upon request from the authors.

Through interviews, participants discussed why location matters for their mobility decisions. As Isa stated, “The deciding factor was mainly location. I lived closer to [destination choice], and I wasn’t looking to live on campus [elsewhere] if I could do the same program at a closer school.” When Chandra was considering a college-to-university transfer, she made her decisions in a similar fashion, where she selected universities based on their proximity to her home: “I, ideally, would like something within the Greater Toronto Area. Just because that’s where I live, and that’s what’s accessible to me.”

Some participants acknowledged that they were willing to travel short distances if there were viable transportation options. For example, when thinking about his transfer options, Aarnav recognized that he could take the train to school, since both his home and chosen university were on a commuter train line:

Another important factor was transportation. [Destination choice] is right where a GO Train station is, and I live near one. So, it wouldn’t be that much of a hassle, probably 45 minutes to an hour. I’m not sure the exact time, but it’s just right there in my backyard. So, getting to [destination choice] and back home would be easy. I won’t have to live on campus. I won’t have to drive... (College-to-university)

A second hassle students were keen to avoid was the prospect of moving. Sydney, who was planning to transfer between universities, said, “I applied to [destination choice] just because it’s also in downtown, and it’s the distance... I’m currently living in downtown, and I won’t have to switch my housing situation if I were to transfer.” Although Sarah was following a different mobility pattern—from college-to-university—location was still a key consideration. When thinking about universities she would like to apply to, she stated, “It’s just sort of how close [they are], because I don’t really want to move away again when I could stay in the same city.”

These qualitative findings demonstrate that students prefer to choose postsecondary destinations that are close to home. While there were instances in which students were willing to make use of convenient public transportation options, choosing postsecondary institutions close to home makes education more accessible, and also reduces the hassles of commuting and moving.

Academic Reputation

Prospective mobile students also hold the academic reputation of postsecondary destinations in high regard. While 37% of respondents interested in colleges indicated that academic reputation was important, nearly half (48%) of university-bound respondents said this was important.

The academic reputation of colleges and universities was discussed in broad terms in the student interviews. Many acknowledged the quality of education available in Ontario’s colleges and universities. This was especially true for international students who came to Canada to take advantage of learning opportunities. Yusef, who was born and raised in Kuwait, discussed the name recognition that certain universities have abroad: “[The people back home] know that it’s a university that has contributed a lot to this world.” The name recognition of these institutions acted as a pull factor for Yusef when he chose to come to Canada, beginning his studies at a college and planning to transfer to university afterward. As he thought about the universities he would like to apply to after completing his diploma, he mentioned that academic reputation was a key institutional characteristic he cared about, “so I thought ‘just go with the university and complete my degree’... and if the reputation was less, I would have gone with the one with more

reputation.” Another aspect of academic reputation was the programs colleges and universities offered. Participants viewed program offerings as adding to the prestige of their institution choices. When comparing two universities, Jin preferred the one that had invested more heavily in a business program:

The reason I prefer [University A] instead of [University B] is because of their reputation... I heard about University A's] business program and how good they are from people around me. And so, I knew that they have a business school, and [University B] doesn't. I think they put their energy more on their business program, which makes them better. So that's why I wanted to go to [University B], because I wanted a little better education... (University-to-university)

As Jin was interested in a business degree, it was natural to be attracted to the institutions offering such programs. As he said, he was more interested in a university that “puts their energy” into his program of interest. Therefore, Jin had a positive impression of the academic reputation of his chosen university vis-à-vis the quality of its business program.

Others interpreted the academic reputation of an institution based on graduation rates and the graduate employment outcomes. Students beginning a new program are rightfully interested in the alignment between their chosen program and their subsequent career prospects. For example, when Chandra was planning her transfer, she kept her options open with respect to the universities and programs she was interested in. For her, it was important that a program demonstrate the outcomes of its graduates, who would ideally be working in their chosen field:

It would definitely be the number of people who graduated and are working in that field, using their specific credential that they graduated with as opposed to working overall, or working in something completely different. (College-to-university)

Not only are post-graduation work outcomes important, as mentioned by Chandra, but participants were also interested in work opportunities during their studies. Just as work-integrated learning was established as a desirable feature of programs, it is also evident that the presence of work-integrated learning adds to the academic reputation of institutions. Thus, a key component to the academic reputation of an institution is not just graduate outcomes but also the opportunities within programs to help secure those outcomes. As Sunny explained, opportunities such as co-op can add to an institution's reputation:

So, part of the question, what made [destination choice] desirable compared to my current university? Solely because of the employment connections that they have. [Destination choice's] co-ops, as you might know, are renowned all over Canada...having some sort of a work experience while I'm studying, that would have been really helpful to me... (University-to-university)

For participants like Sunny, it was important to have work opportunities scaffolded throughout their academic programs, and programs with these opportunities were more desirable. In addition, Sunny's comments suggest that students are aware of institutional reputations for program elements such as co-op, and these can play into the decisions they make.



Conclusion and Policy Implications

The analysis examined the institutional characteristics that prospective mobile students used to help them find the postsecondary institutions that were right for them. Survey data was used to examine the number of institutions students were considering and to identify the institutional characteristics that influenced their decision-making process. These findings were further refined and contextualized through the analysis of interview data collected from students within the survey sample.

While the analysis emphasized individual institutional characteristics, students did not view these factors separately. Instead, these characteristics interact and collectively influence mobility decisions. Similar to direct-entry students, students in this study tended to choose from a limited, or “tightly bound,” set of institutions—a finding that resonates with much of the existing student mobility literature (Jabbar et al., 2019; Jabbar & Edwards, 2019). Moreover, students in this study considering universities—and especially those considering both colleges and universities—had a broader choice set. Also aligned with previous research, respondents were concerned with practical elements of mobility, such as choosing institutions that offer specific programs that fit their goals and are close to home (e.g., Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019). Through qualitative interviews, this study was able to further nuance the particular characteristics that make institutions and programs desirable to mobile students, such as advanced standing, program flexibility, institutional reputation, and work-integrated learning opportunities. With these findings in mind, ONCAT offers the following four recommendations to postsecondary institutions.

Clearly Communicate Program Details and Unique Strengths

The results show that students' mobility decisions are heavily influenced by program offerings. More generally, students are often interested in programs that will help them work toward their pre-existing education and employment goals. To help mobile students quickly identify appropriate programs, institutions should aim to provide clear and comprehensive information about their program offerings. This should include a balance of general information relevant to institutional policies, such as residency and GPA requirements, along with more detailed program information, such as the required courses and program structure. In addition, because mobile students often favour schools close to home, institutions may have the most success in promoting their programs that are unique and/or highly regarded—especially for universities—among peers in their region.

Highlight Program Features that are Desirable for Mobile Students

There are specific features of postsecondary programs that are especially attractive to mobile students, given their need to balance work and family obligations alongside their studies. Notably, flexibility in completing studies—such as online learning or part-time enrolment—and access to work-integrated learning opportunities featured prominently in this study's interview data. Therefore, postsecondary institutions could consider highlighting these features to prospective students, which would increase the attractiveness of their programs while also allowing students to make more informed decisions. Institutions that embrace enhanced program flexibility, particularly remote learning, may have more success in recruiting students

outside their immediate area. Existing online databases, such as [OntarioLearn](#),⁸ may be useful tools for connecting with such students.

Create Transfer Pathways with Nearby Institutions

The results consistently suggested that location strongly influences students' mobility decisions. This was most evident in the survey data, in which the location of the receiving institution was the second most mentioned characteristic impacting students' choice of a postsecondary destination. In addition, many interview participants were concerned about the amount of time it would take them to complete their studies. Taken together, this suggests that mobile students are most interested in opportunities that create minimal disruptions to their current circumstances. To attract these students, as well as to facilitate more efficient transfer, postsecondary institutions should work with nearby institutions to develop transfer pathways. These pathways would have the benefit of allowing students to continue their studies in a seamless fashion without having to worry about the hassles of travel, while also allowing institutions to build on their existing program strengths.

Provide Information on Post-Graduation Outcomes

Whether a student is contemplating transfer prior to completing a program, pursuing credentials in quick succession, or returning to postsecondary education after some time away, they do so with education and career aspirations in mind. As voiced by a number of interview participants, mobile students want to see the employment outcomes associated with their programs of interest. When discussing institution and program reputation, some participants wanted to see more information about student success rates. To this end, institutions could provide statistical information about program outcomes—such as graduation rates, income, and employment—that can be compiled or computed using existing data sources (ideally disaggregated by the program of study). In addition, institutions could provide nuanced information about the employer connections developed with their programs, the specific places where their graduates have gone on to work, and how, more generally, their programs set graduates up for success. In particular, institutions should consider the unique outcomes of mobile students by providing data and examples (e.g., transfer “success stories” or testimonials) of their experiences after graduating.



⁸ OntarioLearn is a virtual organization that manages a database of online courses and programs at colleges, polytechnics, and some Indigenous Institutes.

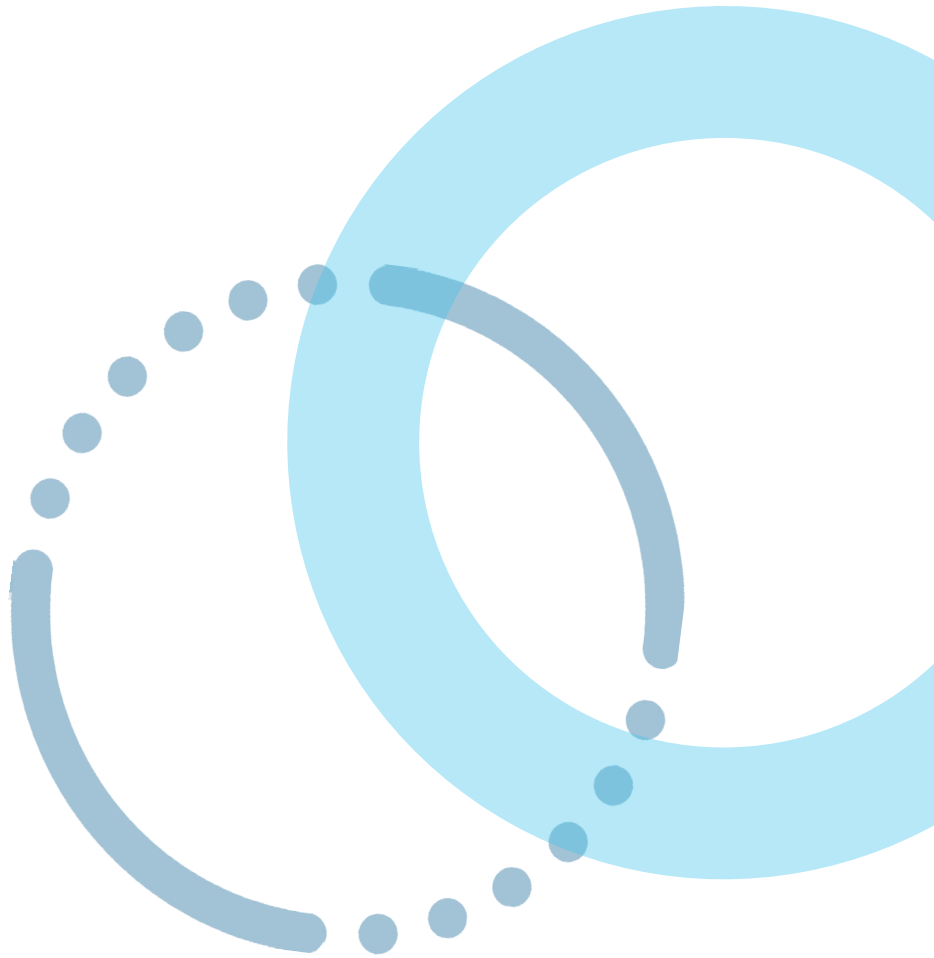
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Appendix A

Extended Description of Data and Methods

This study was conducted using a convergent mixed methods design (Fetters et al., 2013). Mixed methods research “combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration” (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 123). Here, the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods are used to offset their respective limitations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Fetters et al., 2013; Moseholm & Fetters, 2017). In convergent designs, quantitative and qualitative data are collected and analyzed within a close timeframe, with several options for integration throughout the research design (Fetters et al., 2013).

To answer the research questions, data were collected through an online survey, followed by interviews. Thus, the research design was an explanatory unidirectional model in which “an initial quantitative strand is conducted and followed by a qualitative study to explain the findings” (Moseholm & Fetters, 2017, p. 6). While the quantitative survey was useful for reporting the types of sources students were using and the relative number of sources they consulted, it could not reveal how students were using these sources. In this study, integration (or “mixing”) took place at three periods of the research design: (a) the sampling framework, (b) the analysis, and (c) the presentation/interpretation of findings.

TABLE A1
Sample of Size by Mobility Pattern

Mobility pathway type	Interviews	Surveys
College-to-college	14%	18%
College-to-university	44%	46%
University-to-college	8%	6%
University-to-university	26%	24%
Pathway unclear*	8%	8%
Total	51	2,137

*These participants indicated that they did not have a particular postsecondary institution in mind at the time of data collection.

Quantitative Analysis

As described in the Data and Methodology section of this report, our quantitative analysis focused on a series of questions regarding respondents’ intended postsecondary destinations (see Appendix B). For the analysis in Table 2, data were converted from “long” to “wide” format, where each institution selected by respondents was treated as an observation, and statistics were weighted inversely to the number of institutions selected by each respondent. The statistical tests for Table 2 were computed based on the differences between the weighted means for colleges and universities.

Qualitative Analysis

The interviews, which took place over Zoom, were roughly 30 minutes in length. Since the interviews took place after the survey was launched and the participants were derived from the survey sample, some participants were actively in the process of transferring institutions. In such cases, participants were invited to complete the Transfer Intent Interview and share retrospective accounts of their experiences.⁹

During their interviews, students were asked about their potential postsecondary destinations and the reasons why they had selected those institutions. Probing questions were used to understand how they made their decisions and how they weighed the relative importance of different institutional characteristics against one another. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software. Each participant was assigned case attributes that captured their mobility pattern (e.g., college-to-university), allowing for analyses and discussion based on the mobility pattern.

The analysis broadly took place during three rounds of coding: pre-coding, round one coding, and round two coding. To ensure the qualitative data spoke to the quantitative data, the quantitative survey constructs were used as *a priori* codes. Ten codes formed the parent codes of the codebook—eight from the original survey constructs and two capturing how students weigh different institutional characteristics and those that may prevent them from applying to a particular institution. Each of these codes was further saturated by numerous child codes to obtain a more detailed understanding of transfer decision-making and the importance of different institutional characteristics. For example, in the “school has desired program” code, child codes addressed “desirable features of the program” and “time to completion.”

As a general process of pre-coding, these *a priori* codes were deductively applied to a sample of five interviews. During this stage, inductive coding was also used to further develop the codebook. For example, the child code “desirable features of the program” was further saturated by three grandchild codes to note “desirable features,” “full-time versus part-time,” and “time to completion.” After the precoding process, the codebook was used for the first round of coding to analyze the remaining interviews.

The second round of coding was much more inductive, working from within the winnowed data of round one. In this round, parent and child codes were further saturated with data from newly developed grandchild codes. This process allowed the researchers to capture the various aspects of institutional characteristics more accurately. As an example of this process, the previously mentioned grandchild codes for “desirable features of the program” were redesigned to identify a broader array of desirable program features. In this process, the three grandchild codes were redeveloped and expanded into five grandchild codes. Ultimately, this three-stage coding process adds to the robustness of the analysis and the trustworthiness of the findings in this report.

⁹ We are confident that our qualitative data ward off any validity concerns related to retrospective accounts (Snelgrove & Havitz, 2010). Given that the participants had only recently switched institutions (i.e., a semester or two before their interviews), our open-ended interview questions allowed them to create a narrative informed by their recent experiences.

Appendix B

Selected Survey Questions From the Transfer Intent Survey

TABLE B1

Which Colleges in Ontario Are You Interested In? Select All That Apply.

College	Selection
Algonquin College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collège Boréal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cambrian College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Canadore College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Centennial College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Collège La Cité	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conestoga College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Confederation College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Durham College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fanshawe College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fleming College	<input type="checkbox"/>
George Brown College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Georgian College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Humber College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lambton College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Loyalist College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Michener Institute of Education at UHN	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mohawk College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Niagara College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Niagara Parks School of Horticulture	<input type="checkbox"/>
Northern College	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Guelph, Ridgetown Campus	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sault College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Seneca College	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sheridan College	<input type="checkbox"/>
St. Clair College	<input type="checkbox"/>
St. Lawrence College	<input type="checkbox"/>

TABLE B3*Which Universities in Ontario Are You Interested In? Select All That Apply.*

University	Selection
Algoma University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brock University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Carleton University	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Guelph	<input type="checkbox"/>
Université de Hearst	<input type="checkbox"/>
Lakehead University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Laurentian University	<input type="checkbox"/>
McMaster University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Nipissing University	<input type="checkbox"/>
OCAD University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Université de l'Ontario français (UOF)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ontario Tech University	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Ottawa	<input type="checkbox"/>
Queen's University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Royal Military College of Canada (RMC)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Saint Paul University	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Toronto	<input type="checkbox"/>
Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trent University	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Waterloo	<input type="checkbox"/>
Western University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wilfrid Laurier University	<input type="checkbox"/>
University of Windsor	<input type="checkbox"/>
York University	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sheridan College	<input type="checkbox"/>
St. Clair College	<input type="checkbox"/>
St. Lawrence College	<input type="checkbox"/>

