

Stakeholder summary

College-to-university transfer: 2 + 2 = potential savings for students and government

Students who transfer from college to university to complete their undergraduate degree are likely to save themselves and the government money, and they often earn grades equivalent to students who go directly into university from high school, according to a new study from the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario** (HEQCO).

Project description

College-to-University Transfer Arrangements and Undergraduate Education: Ontario in a National and International Context examines the implications of expanding the number and scope of college-to-university transfer arrangements to address the demand for undergraduate degrees in Ontario. The study focuses on learning outcomes and costs for college-to-university transfer students compared with those in four-year university programs. It uses published data on the transfer experiences in Alberta, British Columbia, Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and nine U.S. states, supplemented by interviews with higher education officials, and it compares these experiences with recent data for Ontario.

Findings

The study finds that in most jurisdictions outside Ontario, the total cost to students and the government of a degree earned through two years at college followed by two years at university (2+2) is lower than the cost of a four-year university program, with potential savings of from 8-29% per student over the course of four years. Author David Trick notes that the 2+2 model is rare in Ontario, with most college-to-university transfer arrangements requiring additional courses that reduce or eliminate the potential financial savings.

Results in jurisdictions outside Ontario are mixed on graduation rates, with several instances of comparable or slightly higher graduation rates for transfer students than for direct-entry students, as well as a few instances where graduation rates for transfer students are somewhat lower. Trick says these lower rates may be linked to the fact that transfer students are more likely to study part-time.

The study notes that transfer policies are part of a broader framework involving institutional structure, academic standards, accessibility, financial assistance and student services. Trick cautions that the transfer policy goals of other jurisdictions -- such as student choice, more spaces, less duplication of credits or smoother administration -- may differ from Ontario's goals. For example, British Columbia, California and Florida have deliberately used college-to-university transfer as a way of expanding access to university education in jurisdictions with a limited number of university seats for students not directly admitted to university. Other jurisdictions simply aim to preserve credits for students who choose to transfer. "The experience of other jurisdictions suggests that policymakers need to establish clear and quantifiable goals, including appropriate deadlines and accountability," says Trick.

Ontario's transfer policies, facilitated through the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer, are intended to increase accessibility and student choice, "but to date it has not been Ontario government policy to use colleges as a significant means of providing access to university," Trick says. Previous [HEQCO research](#) has found that streamlining transfer between college and university could increase

access to university for students from traditionally under-represented groups including Aboriginal students, students with disabilities, first generation students and low-income students.

Policy implications

Trick says that better college-to-university pathways could make an important contribution to meeting the growing demand for baccalaureate education at an affordable cost. His study identifies three pathways for consideration:

- Creating two-year university transfer programs at colleges in arts and business.
- Expanding pathways from college career-oriented programs to university.
- Expanding pathways from college career-oriented programs to college degrees.

Trick says that these pathways are not mutually exclusive and that they could be combined into a system where every graduate from a two- or three-year college program with adequate marks would be guaranteed admission to a baccalaureate program in his or her region.

Further research

Trick's study identifies a number of areas for further research, including collecting data on how many Ontario students complete a degree with more than the minimum number of credits required, assessments on how well various pathways through college and university prepare students for the workforce or other goals, and a better understanding of the learning outcomes associated with each postsecondary credential in each field of study. A HEQCO-led [Tuning project](#) with Ontario faculty members from the social sciences, physical sciences, and life and health sciences is exploring ways to assess learning outcomes across diploma, degree and master's levels and will be completed next spring.

Trick notes that 11% of Ontario university baccalaureate graduates from 2009 were attending a college six months after graduation and 10% were doing so two years after graduation. "There is much that could be learned about the reasons for these transfers, cost issues and student success in college," he says. Many students devise their own postsecondary pathways and Trick says there is more to learn about the reasons for these complex pathways. He also suggests further exploration of pathways to graduate and professional programs. "As we move from a highly elite graduate system to a more accessible one, effective pathways to graduate and professional programs for undergraduate students from universities and colleges will be an increasingly important factor in the success of Ontario's higher education system."

Watch a [video interview](#) with study author David Trick.

A former Ontario assistant deputy minister for postsecondary education, Trick is a consultant in higher education strategy and management.