

International Transfer Credit Practices

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This newsletter presents the executive summary for this project report. The full report is available at bccat.ca/pubs/intl_transfer_credit.pdf

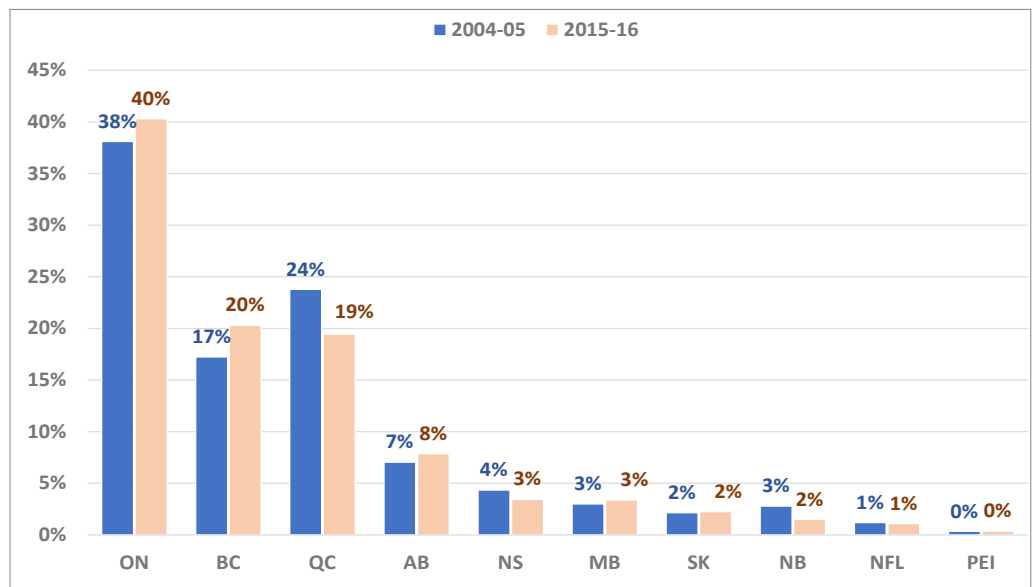
International assessment of academic documents by post-secondary institutions and other bodies represents a complex field guided by quality assurance frameworks, formal conventions and best practice. This research study illuminates this complexity by examining current practices, constraints, perspectives, and possibilities for transfer and exchange assessment informed by a cross-Canada and international environmental scan.

Research objectives included providing a literature review; exploring and showcasing exemplars across Canada and around the world that represent innovative, efficient, and scalable examples of promising practices; identifying a typology of assessment activities informed by a survey of institutions and qualitative interviews, with a particular focus on members of the BC Transfer System; providing member-informed issues and recommendations; and identifying potential next steps and areas for future research.

This report found that most of the review processes of international documents rely on hand review of *individual* credentials and/or supporting information submitted by *individual* students and/or sent directly from other institutions in paper or PDF formats.

Documents reviewed to support the transfer and exchange equivalency assessment processes tend to include academic transcripts, other academic credentials (e.g., European Diploma Supplements, diplomas), detailed course information (if available), and translations (where needed). The Registrar's Office (RO) remains pivotal in policy and partnership development, and the Admissions Office, often situated within the RO, tends to support individual document evaluations, while faculty members within program areas conduct most of the course equivalency assessments.

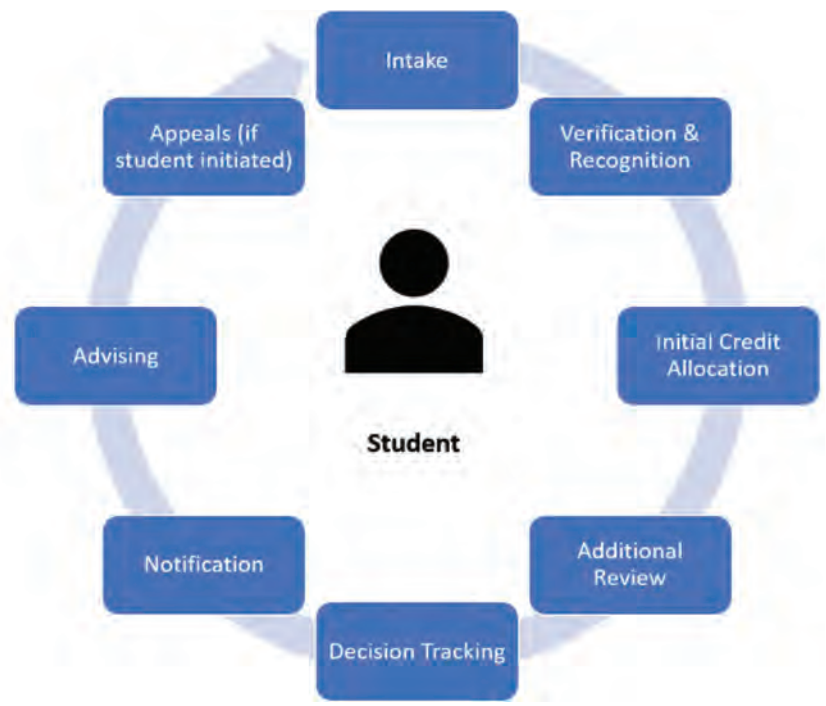
Proportional Share of Overall International Enrolments in Canada by Province 2004-05 (n=94,791) versus 2015-16 (n=221,859) (FT/PT; University + College; as of Fall Snapshot)



Source: Statistics Canada, 2018

International document assessment represents a complex, formal field of practice and requires system-level supports and expertise that are not easily replicated within individual institutions, either in central registrarial areas or in specific academic disciplines—although larger institutions and those with long histories and large volumes of international student enrolments seem to have built this expertise within central units over time.

Institutional staff and faculty follow an eight-phased process to support the assessment of international documents, with advising typically occurring throughout. For exchanges, institutions tend to resolve institutional recognition and possibly even initial course equivalency decisions when establishing partnerships; however, students often return from exchanges having taken other courses, which results in their documents being subjected to the same review process as applies to international student documents. Therefore, institutions commonly coordinate processes across such activities. Several of the tasks required are undertaken during the admissions process (e.g., intake, document verification, institutional recognition review, additional review for purposes of determining admission, decision notification to the student, advising, and, if necessary, appeals adjudication). Students are required to submit detailed course syllabi to enable review and assessment of course equivalencies, based on course elements such as course content; learning outcomes or objectives; number of weeks of study and of contact hours per week; and type of course (e.g., lecture, laboratory, tutorial, seminar, studio work).



Typology of International Document Assessment Practices to Support Transfer and Exchange Credit

The research identifies the following challenges with current practices and processes, faced by both students and institutions:

- Students often experience difficulties producing the documents required, such as detailed syllabi;
- Students often experience difficulty meeting the timelines for submission of all required materials;
- Students may find the costs of using international transcript evaluation services to be prohibitive;
- Faculty assessors often do not complete their evaluation of international course outlines and syllabi within the time allotted;
- Different areas within the same institution may rely on different equivalency review protocols;
- Institutions may face challenges establishing recognition *bona fides* of international institutions; and
- Institutions may lack adequate resources and expertise to respond to demand or to stay abreast of best practices and developments in industry conventions.

As context for its recommendations, the report also identifies innovative, efficient and promising practices for transfer and exchange credit assessment of international documents, including (but not limited to) the following:

Establishing course equivalency by looking for *substantial equivalence* requires highly detailed assessments of inputs, such as credits, weighting, and text used, with the intent of establishing maximum comparability in program content. Emphasizing *substantial difference* instead directs course assessors to focus on outcomes of learning, to look for “differences between the foreign qualification and the national qualification” that are sufficiently significant as to impede a student’s subsequent success in further study (enic-naric.net), and encourages the granting of credit recognition when such significant gaps are not found. The Lisbon Recognition Convention and best practice guides encourage the adoption of quality assurance and access practices informed by concepts such as *substantial difference* and a focus on learning outcomes. These approaches test the reasonableness and efficacy of relying so heavily on inputs, as identified in course syllabi and other documents, in the equivalency assessment process across all programs. They also represent a potential area for further exploration: requiring *substantial equivalence* may be a practical reality for regulated professions; however, institutions have the opportunity to explore and consider adopting a *substantial difference* approach to principles-based credit transfer assessment in other fields.

- The partnership between the Ontario Universities’ Application Centre (OUAC) and the World Education Services (WES);
- Various national and international collaborations focused on enhancing transfer, such as those led by the Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions and Transfer (PCCAT) and the Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) and, internationally, the Groningen Declaration Network Foundation (GDN); and
- Several technology and data exchange initiatives aimed at improving the transfer and exchange credit assessment processes, including BCCAT’s plans to extend its long-standing equivalency database to support international course equivalency decisions,

The report recommends improvements in the training and support provided for faculty and staff, to recognize and respond to the complex needs and nature of the field. Specifically, the report calls upon BCCAT and the BC Transfer System member institutions to

- Conduct further research into document expectations for course syllabi, to address the challenges faced by internationally educated students, faculty and staff; and
- Where possible and appropriate, explore alternative assessment approaches for establishing equivalencies (beyond relying on course syllabi) that acknowledge *substantial difference* versus *substantial equivalence*.

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In addition to the recommendations cited above, the report further proposes the following next steps for BCCAT and relevant institutional stakeholder groups throughout the BC Transfer System:

- Continue efforts to expand existing system-level equivalency and agreement database(s) to include international courses and agreements. To support these projects, consider additional exemplar research of system architecture designs and search capacities embedded in other database models that accommodate international courses.
- Create new system-level resources, tools, and training for faculty and staff to expand their knowledge of the field of international document assessment. Consider assessing the value of existing resources and training to avoid unnecessary duplication.
- Establish strategic partnerships to enhance international credential evaluation capacity within post-secondary institutions, across the province and nationally. Conduct research on existing credential evaluator service providers and consider partnership opportunities to enhance efficiencies and provide greater coherence and supports for internationally educated students.
- Endorse and support national and international data exchange projects that hold the promise of establishing trusted connections to international institutions and organizations to facilitate connectivity and seamless and efficient student data exchange. Examples include the ARUCC Groningen and Student Mobility Project and the CanPESC¹ GeoCodes Project, which seeks to corral information on international institutions from around the world.

¹Canadian Post-Secondary Electronic Standards Council User Group