

# Discussion Paper

January 2010

## WHAT IS A MOBILE STUDENT? BROADENING THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK BEYOND TRADITIONAL TRANSFER STUDENTS

### BACKGROUND

As part of its mandate for the past two decades, the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) has been conducting research on transfer students, focusing primarily on transfer and admissions-related issues. The traditional transfer student population has been historically defined as those students moving from “sending” institutions (colleges, teaching intensive universities, and institutes) to “receiving” institutions (research universities). The primary goals of BCCAT’s research agenda have been to find out how many students transfer to research universities with transfer as the basis of admission, how successful those transfer students are, and how their performance compares with that of direct entry high school students. One of BCCAT’s principal research vehicles since the early 1990s has been transfer student profile reports, which are conducted by each of the research universities on a periodic basis to determine the number of transfer students and their performance over time. An example of a recent profile report is available at [bccat.ca/pubs/SFUPProfile0708.pdf](http://bccat.ca/pubs/SFUPProfile0708.pdf).

In 2004, BCCAT began doing research to determine the number of potential transfer students in Central Data Warehouse contributing institutions (all institutions except research universities) and their subsequent enrolment in a research university in the next calendar year with transfer as the basis of admission. In 2006, this research became part of the Student Transitions Project (STP) work plan and has continued since then (see [bccat.ca/pubs/rr\\_mobility09.pdf](http://bccat.ca/pubs/rr_mobility09.pdf) for the most recent research results).

In early 2009, the STP’s Mobility of Transfer Students Subcommittee recommended that it is time to reconceptualise the mobility of transfer student research, taking into account the changing nature of the post-secondary system. We now have 14 colleges and institutes in BC and 11 universities, with 4 research universities and 7 teaching intensive universities (including Royal Roads University). All public post-secondary institutions have the authority to grant degrees, and most colleges are doing so in applied program areas. Furthermore, recent STP research has shown that each year large numbers of post-secondary students are moving in multiple directions and across many program areas. Indeed the traditional transfer student population represents less than 20 percent of the students that switch post-secondary institutions in a given year. (See Figure 1.) [aved.gov.bc.ca/student\\_transitions/documents/stp\\_highlights\\_dec09.pdf](http://aved.gov.bc.ca/student_transitions/documents/stp_highlights_dec09.pdf)

BCCAT hosted a Visioning Session on November 13, 2009, which brought together key individuals to revisit the framework and definitions that have been used to measure the mobility of transfer students. BCCAT invited members of its Admissions Committee, its Research Committee, and STP’s Mobility of Transfer Students Subcommittee, along with other system representatives. The meeting was led by a facilitator and involved both large group and small group discussions around a series of specific questions. For additional information, please see Appendix A at [bccat.ca/mobilityappendix.pdf](http://bccat.ca/mobilityappendix.pdf) which includes the meeting agenda, a list of participants, and a transcription of notes taken from the small group discussions. The key questions addressed were the following:

- What is the definition of a mobile student?
- What are the subpopulations of mobile students and which are most important to know about?
- Why and what do we want to know about the subpopulations (e.g., what policy questions might the research answer), and what are the barriers to knowing?
- How important is it to continue focussing research on the traditional transfer student population?

What follows is a summary of advice received from the visioning session attendees.

### WHAT PARTICIPANTS TOLD US: DELIBERATIONS BASED ON KEY QUESTIONS POSED AT VISIONING SESSION

This section encapsulates the feedback received from Visioning Session participants and was vetted by them prior to circulation to the broader post-secondary community.

#### 1. What is a mobile student?

The broadest definition of a mobile student identified is a student who changes institutions (including concurrent enrolment at more than one institution) and/or programs and/or credentials within the public or private post-secondary systems in or beyond BC.

From this broad working definition, a number of more manageable subpopulations worthy of study in the BC context were then identified.

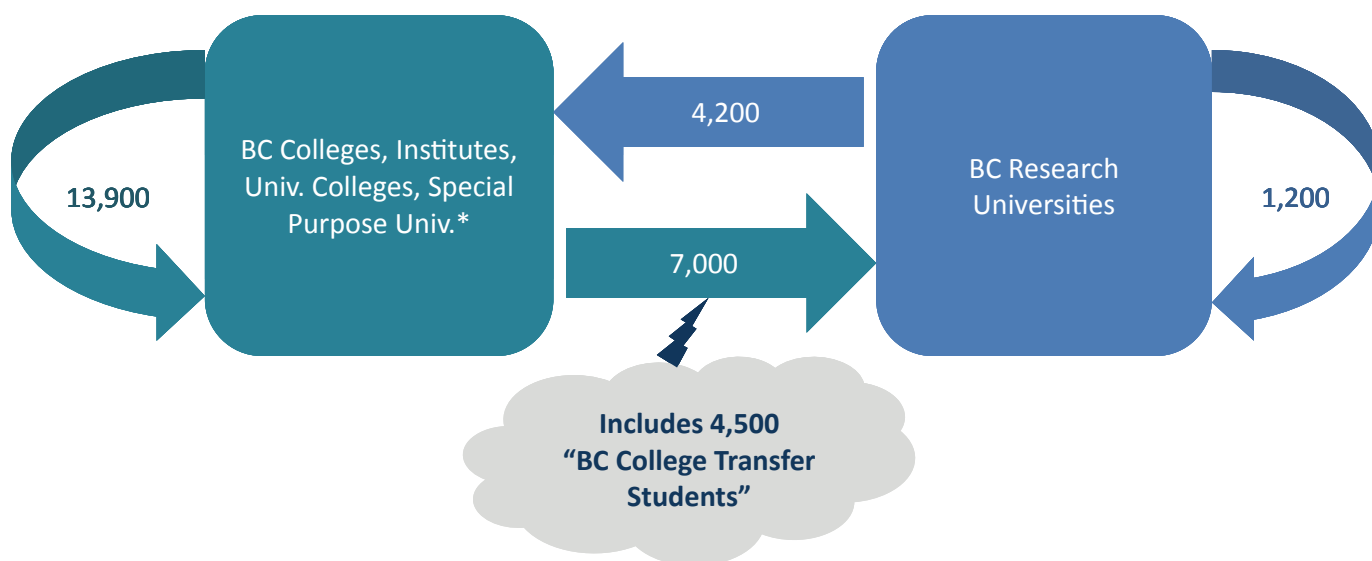
#### 2. Which are the most important subpopulations of mobile students to know about? Why and what do we want to know about them, and what are the barriers to knowing?

##### a. Students moving between public and private institutions

The movers identified as one of the top three priority groups by all but one break out group were those who move between public and private post-secondary institutions. This research was felt to be important in order: to better understand the role of private education in BC; for BCCAT to inform transfer policy decisions related to the two systems, including the inclusion of private institutions in the BC Transfer System; and to facilitate student movement and credit recognition in both directions. It was felt that what constitutes “private” institutions for the purpose of mobility research needs to be defined and that we need a better understanding of quality assurance in private institutions. It was also felt that knowledge about public/private student mobility can help inform

Figure 1 Student Mobility in the BC Public Post-Secondary Education System

- 26,300 students moved between BC public post-secondary institutions, from 2006/07 to 2007/08.



\* Institutional designations are those that were in place before Fall 2008.

institutional recruitment strategies. Some concern was expressed about using public funds to support research linked to private institutions.

Specific information of interest in this area included the scope and flows of movement between the two systems (between institutions and programs) both in and out of province, the proportion of credits awarded by institutions and how much can be applied to programs, and the reasons why students move to private institutions.

The main barrier to answering research questions related to public/private mobility identified by all three break out groups was the lack of a Personal Education Number (PEN) being assigned to students at private institutions which, if in place, would allow tracking of students between systems. Other barriers included lack of knowledge about quality assurance measures at private institutions, potential lack of program fit between the two systems, and the perception that private institutions, especially “for profit” institutions, are reticent to share data, which would inhibit data sharing agreements. It was also opined that some private institutions can be less stable (opening and closing their operations) which would affect ongoing data collection and analysis.

#### **b. Movers with credentials and those laddering with credentials**

Similar to a. above, movers with credentials and those laddering with credentials was also in the top three subpopulations cited by three out of four break out groups. This was considered an important population to study as the ability of students to ladder their credentials was seen by some as a measure of educational and system effectiveness. Credentials were seen as legitimate enablers of both social and work mobility and, in the education context, demonstrate how people can build on the outcomes of their previous studies. Broadening acceptance of certificate and diploma programs as transfer vehicles to advanced certification (such as Nursing) was seen as a laudable goal. Others questioned whether laddering was an

efficient means of completing programs and wondered about the appropriate role of block transfer versus course-to-course transfer. With regard to block transfer, the distinction was made between transferability of the credential and applicability of credit towards a higher credential.

Visioning Session participants were interested in knowing the number of students who receive block transfer credit and about those who move between institutions after having completed a flexible pre-major, which is being developed in a number of disciplines. An assessment of these students’ transfer experiences, including their success rate (e.g., completion to a baccalaureate degree) was considered worthwhile. Others expressed an interest in the reasons why students pursue sequential credential completion rather than enrolling in and completing a higher level degree from the start. Given that students do ladder degrees (how should this be defined?), what are the best practices in informing students about requirements and transferability?

A stated barrier to studying the population of credential completers who move on to further study was that the many “why” questions posed are hard to answer. An opinion was expressed that certificates and diplomas can be perceived as not having a strong enough theoretical component necessary for further study, perhaps creating a barrier for students wishing to pursue a higher credential. It was also opined that differences among certificate/diploma credit values could lead to some transfer problems.

#### **c. Students with some credits moving between post-secondary institutions, especially the 21,000 movers identified by the STP that are in addition to traditional transfer students**

Two of the four break out groups identified as worthy of study the approximately 21,000 students identified by the STP as moving from one institution to another in a given year but not as traditional transfer students. A third group identified the

larger group of about 26,000 movers; that is, all students moving between post-secondary institutions with some credits (the 21,000 students plus the traditional transfer students to research universities).

It was felt that the size of the identified population, if studied, would give a sense of transfer scope and the robustness of articulation and add value and credibility to the transfer system in the province. It would also provide a much richer understanding of students who move among institutions, their reasons, experiences, and success or failure in receiving and applying transfer credit. This understanding could help the system to optimize transfer of credit to non-traditional receiving institutions and provide further support for the removal of “sending” and “receiving” designations in the BC Transfer System. A variety of policy considerations for studying such a broad population included whether or not the extent of movement is a good or bad use of resources, whether existing policies were thwarting movement, and how to facilitate student movement and achievement of student goals in the most expedient way.

Not surprisingly, participants identified a considerable number of “would like to know” items about such a large population of movers, many of which have been answered about traditional transfer students through the “profile reports” conducted by BCCAT over the years. These included demographics, institutions students move among, their basis of admission, credits completed, programs taken, course level data, academic performance at the point of institutional entry and exit and points in between and whether or not it changed between institutions, and credentials awarded. Qualitative information sought included student intentions and whether or not educational goals were met. Further data of interest included mobility patterns, adequacy of system capacity, links to outcomes data, longitudinal data, what courses were moved and what proportion received credit, and understanding different paths taken.

Perceived barriers to gathering the data of interest included the lack of a research framework, a lack of data (e.g., no research university course level data, no data on capacity), data quality issues, and lack of data comparability across institutions. The sheer complexity of a potentially massive database was also viewed as an obstacle as was a lack of resources at the institutional and provincial level required to submit and analyze the data. A further barrier was the lack of a transfer guide for non-traditional student movement.

#### **d. Other priority subpopulations**

There were two other subpopulations that made it into the top three choices of at least one of the break out groups.

##### *i. Stop-outs*

Stop-outs, who are generally considered those students who enrol in a post-secondary institution in BC, leave for a period of time without graduating, and then return at the same or a different post-secondary institution, need to be clearly defined. They were considered a subpopulation worthy of study for many of the same reasons as given for the 21,000 movers above and on many of the same variables, and with similar research barriers. Additional research questions included why they stopped out, whether or not it was with credentials, what activities they were involved in during the stop-out, why they returned, whether they returned to the same or a different institution or program, and how long they stopped out. In addition to the research being qualitative (more costly and involved), a further research barrier was definitional: i.e., where is the cut-off point between a stop-out and a drop-out, and who are the institutional versus system-level stop-outs?

##### *ii. Students attending multiple institutions, including virtual students*

Many of the reasons for researching students who attend more than one institution at a time were the same as for the subpopulation in c. above.

This was also the case for the type of information sought and barriers to gathering that information. Research on this subpopulation could help to explain the reasons for multiple institution enrolment, whether these students are satisfied with their experience, if there is academic coherence to courses taken at multiple institutions, and whether they are getting credit towards a credential. Further research questions would ideally profile who these students are, what the extent of this type of activity is, in what disciplines it is occurring, and how the number of credits to graduation and success compares with that of other students. This research would require course-level data and could give rise to privacy concerns should the numbers be too small.

*iii. How important is it to continue focussing research on the traditional transfer student population?*

All those who answered this question (three out of four groups) agreed that the traditional transfer student population (those moving to research universities with a “BC College” basis of admission<sup>1</sup>) continues to be worthy of study, but not at the expense of furthering understanding about other movers (the 21,000 and subsets of them).

## NEXT STEPS

This discussion paper is being circulated to members of the Student Transitions Project (STP) Steering Committee, BC Registrars’ Association (BCRA), BC Institutional Researchers and Planners Directors’ Association (BCIRPDA), Research University Institutional Research Directors, and Vice-Presidents Academic at BC public post-secondary institutions. The responses received will be incorporated into a final report that will be shared with respondents and presented to Council at its March 2010 meeting to help inform its research agenda in 2010/11 and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Note that BCCAT encourages research universities to continue to identify as “BC College” transfer students, those students transferring from teaching intensive universities.

## INVITATION FOR FEEDBACK

***BCCAT is interested in knowing if the feedback from Visioning Session participants above resonates within the broader BC post-secondary education community. We ask that the questions below be addressed and welcome any and all additional comments that are relevant to the topic.***

- 1. Are there top priority subpopulations that should be considered for research that were not included in the Visioning Session participants’ priority groups? (See pages 2-5.) Explain rationale.***
- 2. Are there additional policy questions or considerations that would inform research on any of the specific subpopulations described?***
- 3. Are there additional subpopulations of mobile students not listed that are worthy of future research? (See page 6 for a complete list of subpopulations identified.) What are the policy questions that this research would address?***
- 4. Is there value in continuing to study the traditional transfer student population? What is the relative value of this compared with other subpopulations of mobile students?***

***Please send your response via email to: Jean Karlinski, Research Coordinator, BCCAT (jkarlinski@bccat.ca), by February 5, 2010.***



# COMPLETE LIST OF SUBPOPULATIONS IDENTIFIED

*Below is the comprehensive list of possible subpopulations that Visioning Session participants felt were worthy of study at some point (in no particular order). Note that numbers 30-32 were not considered to be within the scope of the broader definition of student mobility. These subpopulations are being dealt with by STP research.*

- 1. 21,000 movers identified in STP research (which is in addition to the traditional transfer student population moving to research universities with a college transfer student basis of admission)*
- 2. Movers with or without accumulated transfer credit*
- 3. Stop-outs and returning students and those who don't return*
- 4. Movers between public and private post-secondary institutions*
- 5. Movers with credentials and those laddering with credentials*
- 6. Movers without credentials*
- 7. Multi-institutional movers/shoppers*
- 8. Intended movers (or movers with intended outcomes)*
- 9. Non-intended movers (or movers with non-intended outcomes)*
- 10. Movers that switch programs (within the same institution or at another institution)*
- 11. Movers that don't switch programs*
- 12. Those simultaneously enrolled*
- 13. Movers between BCIT and other BC post-secondary institutions (both directions)*
- 14. Movers from research universities to other BC post-secondary institutions*
- 15. The traditional transfer student to research universities ("BC College Transfer")*
- 16. Associate Degree holders (part of "BC College Transfer")*
- 17. Those who move geographically (involving a physical move)*
- 18. Out of province movers (both into and out of BC)*
- 19. ABE students*
- 20. Virtual students*
- 21. Apprenticeship students*
- 22. A cohort of students (e.g., a group of students moving from one fall session to another fall session or one that moves over a longer time frame)*
- 23. Those with Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) towards credential completion*
- 24. Groups of students based on socio-economic or demographic similarity (e.g., female or male students, age groups, movers with parents with or without certain levels of post-secondary education completion)*
- 25. Visiting students (studying concurrently or consecutively)*
- 26. Students who move between programs not designed for transfer but which include comparable course work*
- 27. Aboriginal students*
- 28. English as a Second Language (ESL) students*
- 29. Students who want to transfer credit*
- 30. Direct entry to BC post-secondary education from a BC high school*
- 31. Direct entry to BC post-secondary education from a non-BC high school*
- 32. Direct entry from a BC high school to a non-BC post-secondary institution (including online enrolment)*