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TRANSITIONS TO AND WITHIN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Reference document coordinated by the
Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada
for the sub-theme on *Transitions Into and Through the School Systems*

The opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada nor of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada

Foreword

In preparation for the Third Pan-Canadian Forum on Education, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, asked a number of stakeholder organizations to prepare discussion papers on particular topics under the general theme of "transitions". The Association of Universities and Colleges accepted CMEC's request to prepare a discussion paper on "transitions to and within postsecondary education". It should be emphasized that the resulting document does not constitute a statement of the policies or positions of the AUCC, its Board, or its members. Nor does it claim to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject "transitions to and within postsecondary education". The brief introduction does present a viewpoint for the purposes of provoking thought and discussion. The remainder of the document is a survey of the issues involved in these transitions, often setting out contrasting or opposing points of view on individual issues, and in a number of cases summarizing views with which AUCC would not itself agree. This survey of issues is presented to the participants of the Third National Forum as a starting point for their discussions.

Furthermore, although document presenters were asked by CMEC to set out two or three issues for in-depth discussion, this document does not follow such a format. The issues involved in this transition are numerous and complex, and there was concern that Forum participants might feel that discussion was being stifled if they were forced down certain paths of discussion. Instead, we have briefly presented an outline of the issues in eleven different areas of discussion. It is our hope that each of the "break-out" groups which will be examining this theme will choose three or four of these areas for discussion at the outset of their deliberations.

In the course of preparing this document, the AUCC convened two meetings of an advisory group, composed of individuals from organizations that had expressed an interest in its drafting. These people aided immeasurably in giving the document its final form. We would like to thank Claude Dionne and Bob Moore of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, Brian McGowan on behalf of the Canadian Teachers' Federation, Frank Smith from the National Education Association of Disabled Students, David Mason from the Canadian Association for the Deaf, Charlotte French from the Canadian Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, Pierre Killeen of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, Jocelyn Charron of the Canadian Federation of Students, Rubina Ramji of the Canadian Graduate Council, Hoops Harrison of the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, and Hartley Nichol of the National Association of Career Colleges. Marie Pierce of the Canadian School Boards Association also provided useful counsel. We would stress, however, that participation in the process of drafting this document does not constitute an endorsement of, or agreement with its contents.

INTRODUCTION

Prosperity and social cohesion belong to countries that can provide opportunity and hope to their citizens. In the globalized trading economy of the 21st century, opportunity will come only to those who have a capacity to learn about the world, adapt to new challenges and make the most of their intellectual resources. Whether or not Canada prospers in the next century will depend in large part on the ability of governments to foster a culture of learning, maintain access to learning, and help ensure that learning occurs in the context of a global environment.

Together, provincial and federal governments have helped to build a high-quality, accessible network of public postsecondary institutions. They have also contributed indirectly, mostly through the provision of publicly-subsidized student assistance, to the development and growth of a significant private training sector. These institutions contribute directly and indirectly to the well-being of all Canadians, providing society with a steady stream of graduates who are well-prepared for the challenges of civic life and the labour market.

Access to the new knowledge economy and participation in the new knowledge society will depend upon access to education. Countries which do not raise their average levels of educational attainment will quickly find their economies stagnating. Our largest trading partner, the United States, has recently adopted a set of policies designed, in President Clinton's words, "to make the thirteenth and fourteenth years of education as universal as the first twelve". Moreover, countries who lag in education will find it increasingly difficult for their citizens to engage in meaningful democratic discourse on the increasingly complex economic, social and scientific issues which confront society. That is why Canadian governments must commit themselves to a concrete programme of raising educational attainment rates over the next twenty years. By 2020, the attainment of at least some postsecondary education must be near-universal among Canadians. The target of a 90 percent rate of past or present participation in postsecondary education among Canadians aged 30 is a both a realistic goal for Canadian governments and a necessary achievement for Canadian society and its economy.

At the same time, education providers are coming under pressure both to provide education credits which are portable and combinable with learning credentials from other institutions, and to provide unique courses of study of an increasingly specialized nature. These two pressures are not easily reconcilable. Moreover, there are also pressures and compelling arguments for encouraging learners' geographical mobility.

In short, the challenge for Canadian governments is to ensure that all citizens have an opportunity to receive an education which matches their needs, desires, goals and abilities.   Achieving this goal will require a concerted effort to improve two sets of "transitions"; the transition from secondary education to postsecondary education, and the transition from one postsecondary institution to another. The purpose of this discussion paper is to identify the difficulties which currently exist at the point of transition and to suggest possible avenues of inquiry which will allow education partners to work together to overcome them.

Section 1: Issues in the Transition from Secondary to Postsecondary Education

The transition from secondary education to postsecondary education is a difficult and complicated one, both from the point of view of the individual and from the point of view of society as a whole. For the individual, in many cases, it coincides with the transition into adulthood, and all the new responsibilities that entails. Quite apart from the substantial personal issues that are involved in this transition, the move to postsecondary education entails a number of crucial financial and educational adjustments as well; academic readiness for the transition is thus very important. As well, paying tuition fees, coping with substantial educational debt and shifting from the familiar environment of secondary school to the more demanding, complex and unfamiliar environment of a postsecondary institution can exact a substantial toll on an individual's social development, and for those reasons, many choose not to undertake it. But from society's point of view, it is increasingly clear that we must help more people to make this transition. Ten years ago it was possible for the Ontario Premier's Council to write that "a secondary school diploma is the minimum requirement for participation in the labour force"; today it is fast becoming obvious that economic conditions are forcing us to up the ante, and add to that requirement some form of postsecondary education. But this transition does not come without a cost; an expansion of system capacity combined with improved and expanded student aid systems will require substantial additional investments in postsecondary education which will be difficult to finance in an era of substantial public debts, an aging population and many other competing claims on the public purse.

This section will examine the main issues involved in the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Six sets of issues within the transition process are discussed. First, the student must *want* to attend postsecondary education; second, the student must be *academically prepared* to attend; third, there must be *places* sufficient for students to attend; fourth, students must be able to *afford* to attend; fifth, there must be *academic and social supports in place* for those students who wish to attend; and sixth, *special supports* must be in place for those who have special needs.[1]

At the end of each section, there are suggested questions for group discussion. The answers which forum participants provide to these questions should provide the Ministers with directions which their governments, collectively and individually, may take in order to aid Canada's youth to make the transition from secondary to postsecondary education.

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[1]These transition issues are not exclusive to the secondary-postsecondary transition; several of these issues are also important in the transition between postsecondary sectors (i.e. between college and university) as well. Although the following section is written in terms of the secondary-postsecondary transition, the applicability of the issue to another set of transitions should be borne in mind.

"Wanting to Attend": Factors relating to the socialization of attitudes about education

Numerous studies have suggested that many factors are at play when an individual decides not to pursue education beyond a certain point. Some of these reasons are financial, others relate to the state of the job market, and still others relate to life goals. Most prevalent, however, are the individuals' attitudes towards education and how their families view education.

Since the mid-1960s, studies have consistently shown that participants in higher education are drawn disproportionately, at least to some degree, from higher income backgrounds. Data from other countries show that this is not simply a function of the affordability of postsecondary education - the same pattern holds true in countries with no fees at the postsecondary level. Rather, it is a function of many different environmental factors, most of which are crucially related to socialization towards education. Parental attitudes towards education are particularly key in this regard. Are children given encouragement at home in their studies? What are the attitudes of a child's peer group towards education? Poor socialization decreases the likelihood of *desiring* to continue one's studies, regardless of socio-economic background (though there is a reasonably close correlation between income levels and positive views of education). This leads directly to national high school drop-out rates of approximately 20 per cent - many of whom will never end up in postsecondary education, and will not be well-placed to reap the benefits of the modern knowledge society.

If some postsecondary education is a key to success in the labour market, then the phenomenon of non-attendance is certain to doom a sizeable portion of our citizens to a second-class existence. But the research seems to show that student financial assistance, which is the traditional means governments have used to help students access postsecondary education, is only a part - albeit an important one - of the accessibility equation. For those individuals who effectively take themselves out of the running for postsecondary education at the age of 12 or younger, the availability of loans and grants available at the age of 18 is very useful. The "culture" of lifelong learning must be developed long before senior secondary school. More active strategies must be used to encourage students to persist in their studies, and these interventions may have to begin as early as primary school. Yet because of the crucial role that family plays in children's decisions regarding education, effective methods of encouraging educational persistence which do not involve substantial state intrusions into family life may be difficult to identify.

Unfortunately, current research is not clear as to what kinds of strategies might be most effective. Greater contact between educators and parents is clearly part of the equation, but not all of it. Some American states have experimented with "assured access grants" - grants given to students attending schools in low-income areas for good grades in primary school, redeemable only if they attend postsecondary education. A philanthropist in Manitoba has recently undertaken a similar project in conjunction with Winnipeg School Board no. 1. These strategies may be useful in encouraging students who might not otherwise consider postsecondary education to do so, but they have not been in place long enough for any firm conclusions to be drawn from them.

What strategies should be used in order to encourage greater secondary school retention and greater persistence into postsecondary education? Are there steps which can be taken to improve families' ability to encourage children to pursue education? What role can governments play in these efforts? What role should educators play? If you could design a research agenda on this subject, what topics would receive the highest priority?

"Prepared to attend": the role of secondary schools

Assuming students *want* to continue their studies past secondary school, the next step to assuring a smooth transition into postsecondary education is to ensure that students receive adequate academic preparation for the transition while still in secondary school. There are two questions to be resolved here. The first is adequate preparation for postsecondary education and the second is adequate preparation for the *appropriate* form of postsecondary education.

The former question presumably implies that the purposes (or at least *a* purpose) of high school is to prepare people for further steps of education. To the extent that secondary school systems see this as their mission, it is a relatively new role for them to be playing. As recently as twenty years ago, this would have been seen as quite a revolutionary idea. At that time, secondary school was seen primarily in terms of preparing people for the labour market (a function which now seems to have been passed up the line to institutes of postsecondary education), and completion of high school was almost an end in itself. So perhaps the first step in ensuring better academic preparation for students is to be more explicit in our assumptions that the role of secondary schools is, for most students, to prepare them for education beyond the secondary level.

But this in turn begs a question. Presumably secondary schools will nevertheless continue to educate students with three "destinations": university, college (public or private), or direct entry to the labour force. If the assumption is that secondary schools must become more "destination-oriented" in their goals, then this means that schools will have to find ways to prepare people for each of those three destinations in a more systematic fashion than is presently the case. Currently, most secondary school systems implicitly acknowledge only two possible destinations, since they tend to have only two streams: "academic" and "general". One could imagine an alternate system in which students, after appropriate career counselling, chose between streams with "university", "college", or "workforce" destinations. The central goal of all three streams would presumably remain to encourage students to "learn how to learn", since no matter what students' initial destination might be, the need to continue learning in at least a general sense will remain with them throughout their lives. But the context in which students learn certain subjects and competencies might change in order to be more appropriate to their "destination".

Of course, the benefits of a three-destination approach would be most fully captured with much closer co-ordination and articulation between secondary schools on the one hand, and the "recipients" of secondary students on the other. This might take the form of provincial or

regional "councils" in which secondary schools and universities, secondary schools and colleges, and secondary schools and local business can discuss ways to improve students' preparation to their chosen destinations.

Admittedly, this approach does involve a certain amount of "streaming" of students, which is by no means an uncontroversial notion. But to a certain extent any system involves *some* degree of streaming; the only questions are when streaming begins, what kind of counselling students receive prior to the streaming process (paying close attention to the needs of all students, and in particular those of students with disabilities), where the streaming leads and what kind of bridging programs exist between the streams. One possible benefit of this approach would be to stream people according to their desired educational destination rather than according to an external assessment of "ability".

Does a destination approach to secondary school learning make sense? If so, how might governments, secondary schools and postsecondary institutions create a better articulation between the two sectors? If not, what other learning approaches might be used to improve secondary students' preparation for further learning?

"Places to Attend" I: Ensuring sufficient system capacity

Whether or not students are able to attend postsecondary education depends in part on there being enough places for them within the system. This dimension of accessibility leaves questions of student assistance aside; it is rather a question of system capacity. Even if there was a significant upswing in demand for postsecondary education due to better student assistance, greater persistence through high school, etc., access *per se* might not increase if institutions were unable or unwilling to increase enrolment because of the potential threat to the quality of education posed by enrollment growth in the face of constraints of space or of teaching capacity. Consequently, the issue of system capacity will be an increasingly important one if the demand for postsecondary education begins to increase significantly.

There are, in effect, two ways to solve this problem:

Using existing resources more intensively. This can be done with a fairly blunt instrument, such as lowering entrance requirements in all disciplines. Institutions may do this on their own, and in some circumstances, provincial governments have effectively mandated increased enrollments without a concomitant increase in funding. Such actions, on their own, can raise serious issues of quality. Without a change in patterns of institutional usage or funding, this option inevitably results in higher student-teacher ratios. Alternatively, or as part of this strategy, institutions might try to use their plant in a more intensive fashion, either by using it for more hours during the day, or by using facilities more intensively during the summer, perhaps by shifting to a trimester system. These strategies do not necessarily enhance enrollments as one might expect, since an

increase in the availability of opportunities to enroll in classes does not necessarily translate into higher enrollments. This is because the 8 to 5, September-to-April model of attendance is a consumer-driven one, and demand may be much lower for a product offered at non-traditional times.

Increasing capacity. The most straightforward way for governments to increase capacity is to increase investment in existing institutions through increased capital and operating grants. This will allow institutions to expand their student intake while maintaining existing or near existing teacher:student and space:student ratios. At the same time, or alternatively, governments might choose to encourage greater use of private donations, private investments, alternate providers, or tuition fee revenues to expand capacity. Meeting new demand in these ways may be less costly to the public purse than are other options, but they are certainly not costless and in some instances may again raise questions about educational quality. Non-subsidized private education, for example, has high tuition costs which many students can only meet through public student assistance, which in turn may result in significant public expenditure due in particular to the high level of loan defaults from this sector as a whole. Some analysts have also suggested that an increased reliance on distance education within the public system might also reduce costs. However, evidence that distance education of comparable quality to on-campus education results in cost-savings is scarce. Moreover, the primary distance education market is continuing, rather than initial, education - a market segment which has declined significantly in recent years.

Is existing physical capacity sufficient or will new spaces be necessary? If current space is sufficient, how could it be used more efficiently? Is the 8-5, September to April model of education truly consumer driven or is change necessary? If new spaces are necessary, what mix of measures should be used to finance it? Will new Information Technology prove to be more effective in delivering the promise of flexible, cheap and effective education than television proved to be?

"Places to Attend" II: The Challenge of Diversity vs. Geography

Institutions face substantial pressure from governments to specialize, to find "niches" and to reduce program duplication. One consequence of the increasing need for specialization is that significant cost pressures are put on institutions or groups of institutions that wish to give comprehensive educational service for the population of a given area. For instance, not every university can have law, medicine, dentistry or veterinary programs. Specialization within disciplines is also hard to achieve in areas with smaller population bases. For instance, a small institution may have a management program, but not offer courses in Management Information, or a program in Arts but not Labour Studies. While greater geographical dispersion may make the general problem of physical access less prevalent for community college students than for university students, the problem of ensuring that students from rural areas have access to the *right* program is the same. To get into a specialized program, students must often move away from

their homes, thus increasing their costs. If governments do not make extra money available for these students, then access to these programs must decrease for those students. As the demand for specialized knowledge in the labour market increases, so will the scope of this problem increase. In effect, the problem is this: only residents of very large urban areas can really be said to have ready access to the full panoply of educational programs the country has to offer. Others have the access in principle, but must incur higher costs in order to pursue their studies and to this extent have a differential level of access.

There are broadly two solutions to the problem: find ways to bring students to the institutions, or find ways to bring education to the students. The former implies much heavier investments than currently exist in grant-based student assistance to students from remote or rural areas in order to ensure that they have access to programs on an equal basis. The latter implies either significant investments in new institutions or satellite campuses of existing institutions, or significant investments in distance education. While there has recently been a great deal of interest in both the pedagogical and possible cost-efficiency aspects of distance education (particularly computer-mediated distance education) both in Canada and internationally, this mode of delivery has not traditionally been seen as a real alternative to traditional campus-based education for large numbers of full-time, first-degree students. Indeed, usage patterns of distance education suggest that it may be most useful as an introduction to the postsecondary environment before attending a physical campus, or as an alternative delivery mode for part-time study for purposes of skills upgrading.

How can equal access and equal program choice be ensured for people in urban and rural areas equally? Should the process of institutional specialization now under way speed up or slow down? Do innovations in information technology mean that distance education is a viable large-scale alternative to traditional, campus-based education?

"Affording to Attend": Financial Barriers to Postsecondary Education

While there are no conclusive studies regarding the relationship between costs and enrollments in Canada, the vast majority of American studies have found that, *ceteris paribus*, there is an inverse relationship between tuition fee increases and enrollments.[2] The results suggest that a $100 increase has a negative enrollment co-efficient of between 0.2 and 1.0 per cent. However, this same research also suggests a number of caveats to this picture:

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[2]See meta-analyses by Leslie, L. & Brinkman, P., *The Economic Value of Higher Education*, Washington: American Council on Education, 1988, and Jackson, G & Weathersby, G, *Individual Demand for Higher Education*, in the Journal of Higher Education 46 (6), pp. 623-652. For the most recent research, see in particular the work of Donald Heller of Harvard University.

- Among the *ceteris paribus* assumptions is the rate of private return on education. An increase in the perceived value of a university or college degree has a positive effect on enrollment, which may wholly or partly counteract the negative enrollment effects of tuition increases.

- Even if there is a relationship between tuition increases and *new* enrollments, it is very unclear whether tuition fee increases have any impact at all on students *already* enrolled in PSE institutions (note, though, that this research only surveys "normal" tuition increases - the effects of a "big bang" on tuition, such as a large, sudden, one-time price rise, such as those contemplated under some tuition deregulation arrangements, have never been studied).

- Enrollment price-sensitivity is not a one-way relationship; changes in the *spread* between college and university prices also affects enrollments in the two sectors.

- Enrollments are most price-sensitive at the community college level; little price sensitivity has been demonstrated at "flagship" 4-year state universities (the Canadian equivalents would, more or less, be those Canadian universities which have large doctoral programs). Similarly, students from low-income families are found to be price-sensitive while students from higher income backgrounds are much less so, if at all. The California Postsecondary Education Study (1980) estimated that "lower-income students are approximately twice as price-responsive as middle-income students" and that "high-income students are about two-thirds as responsive as middle-income students".

- Students do respond positively to grants which offset tuition fees, but student price response declines over time. That is, a grant matters more to access and retention if it is given early in a student's studies; the further they proceed in the studies, the more indifferent students are as to whether or not they receive aid in the form of a loan or a grant, at least from the point of view of retention.

These last two points are especially important. They suggest that postsecondary pricing policies have different effects on students depending upon their income level. In other words, there can be no "level playing field" unless there is some other force to counteract the negative effects of price and price increases on students from lower-income backgrounds.

This suggests that, assuming a student assistance system contains both grants and loans, the optimal grants program would be "front-end loaded", with a decreasing reliance on grants as the student approaches program completion. The effectiveness of such a program requires, however, that students are *aware* of financial aid programs and their requirements early in their high school years in order to maximize the number of students who are in the "set" of people considering postsecondary education in the first place. If this information is not made widely available, then the "set" of people whose choice to enter PSE may be swayed by financial incentives may be of less than optimal size, and a number of non-repayable awards may be given to students who did

not require them in order to be persuaded to attend a PSE institution. This points to a greater need for communication about educational and career choices with students and their parents than is presently the case.

There is however, an alternative view in the Canadian postsecondary education community regarding access and pricing; namely, that participation and access can best be increased not through the indirect means of lowering "net price" (that is, tuition minus grants) for low-income students, but by reducing student costs directly for all students through a freeze upon or abolition of tuition fees. Among the arguments offered in support of this argument is that it is simpler to understand than "tuition + student aid" and therefore better able to reduce "sticker shock" (that is, the disinclination to attend based on a negative reaction to the stated tuition price) - an important consideration for policy advocates and policy-makers. Also, unlike a "tuition + improved student aid" approach, more people benefit, thus making it more attractive from a political point of view. Several American commentators have suggested that in times of fiscal restraint, it is tougher to raise tuition fees than it is to cut back on student aid because lower tuition benefits more people than student aid and therefore has a larger "constituency". It is not clear, however that this has been the Canadian experience, and critics of this point of view argue that it is less cost effective and less equitable(since tuition subsidies themselves are sometimes considered highly regressive) than a "tuition + student aid" approach in delivering the most dollars to those students most in need.

How significant a barrier are tuition fees? To what extent can the barrier they represent be offset by appropriate student aid?

"Academic and social supports": Ensuring student persistence after enrollment.

The question of "preparation" for postsecondary education does not end the day students begin classes at their new institutions. Students cannot and should not, as a rule, be expected to adjust instantly to the new set of challenges that are posed by attending a postsecondary institution. In fact, many do not make this transition successfully. While statistical data on postsecondary dropouts is tentative and open to multiple interpretations, a 1990 study suggested that Canadian universities have an attrition rate of approximately 20 per cent, with the bulk of this occurring in the first year of study.[3] The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and not fully understood. In part, first-year dropouts occur for financial reasons; but more frequently are related to stress,

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[3]Data on this topic is ambiguous. Rates of attrition are usually measured in terms of percentage of entering students graduating within a prescribed period of time. This method of study inevitably reports as "drop-outs" students who transfer schools, "stop-out", switch to part-time study or for whatever other reason do not complete within the given time period. So while it is acknowledged that there is a problem in retention, and that this problem manifests itself most significantly in the first year or two of a first degree program, quantifying the actual magnitude of the problem has so far eluded researchers. Data cited is from *Attrition in Canadian Universities*, Sid Gilbert, 1989.

reduced academic self-esteem, and, more generally, a lack of a sense of attachment to the campus community due, among other things, to disruption in ties to peer groups and increased anonymity.

The most comprehensive Canadian study on first-year experiences[4] laid particular emphasis on the importance of institutions taking active measures to assist students in the crucial first-year of studies. It was suggested that "front-end loading" student support activities will yield significant benefits both in student retention and in students' learning outcomes. The authors also recommended that first-year programs should be more "holistic" (that is, they should focus not only on academic integration but on social integration into campus activities as well) and more "intrusive", in the sense that institutions should have means of actively identifying students who are having difficulty in their social and academic adjustment to life on campus. Finally, they suggested that all this must be done in the context of institutions taking a learner-centred approach to achieving their broader academic missions.

While virtually every institution has some form of program to assist first-year students, and these programs are collectively quite broad and diverse in nature, a full-scale commitment along the lines suggested by this study would amount to a substantial change in educational philosophy in Canadian institutions. Canadian institutions, unlike American ones, do not view their role vis-à-vis students as being *in loco parentis*. Canadian students are, rightly or wrongly, treated as autonomous adults, and truly "active" measures are seen both by institutions and students as being more suited to secondary schools than postsecondary ones. Integration is seen as an individual "choice" with which the institution should not interfere, and responsibility for campus activities rests almost uniquely with student associations.

Are attrition rates cause for concern? What measures would be useful to improve students' integration to a postsecondary environment? Do you think institutions should play a more active role in identifying and aiding students with academic or social difficulties? What are the appropriate roles for institutions and student associations in improving student integration? What roles might other partners play? Can you think of examples of best practices in this area?

"Special Support": Preparation and facilities for students with special needs

While general support within the transition is important, it is important to keep in mind that not all students face the same types of challenges in the transition to postsecondary education? Some students with special needs may face barriers to transition which are quite different from those faced by the student population as a whole. This is particularly true of students with disabilities and aboriginal students.

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[4]*From Best Intentions to Best Practices: The First-year Experience In Canadian Postsecondary Education*, by Judy Chapman, Sid Gilbert, Peter Dietsche, John Gardner & Paul Grayson, National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience & Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, 1997.

Disabled students face three separate sets of barriers to transition that other students do not. The first has to do with institutional accommodation: how postsecondary institutions provide the learning aids necessary for disabled students to succeed in their studies as well as how institutions ensure that disabled students are able to physically access campus facilities. This does not simply imply a series of one-off expenditures to ensure physical access, such as wheelchair ramps. It implies a larger commitment and investment in seeing aids to ensure access to the written word for the visually impaired and interpreters for the deaf to ensure access to spoken language.

The second set of barriers are attitudinal and social; what steps are taken to ensure that academic staff are sufficiently accommodative of students with disabilities in their teaching arrangements for examinations and assignments? What steps are taken to ensure that the types of social integration described in the previous section are available to disabled students, who may face even greater difficulties in adjusting to a postsecondary environment because of lack of access to physical space and the written or spoken word? Finally, the costs of funding a postsecondary education are often higher for students with disabilities because they often have longer times-to-completion and higher costs associated with attendance.

The steps which must be taken to overcome these barriers are easily identified but less easily achieved. The basic conditions of success seems to be a strong institutional commitment to the provision of access, and the presence of an Office of Students with Disabilities, committed to promoting awareness of disability issues within the institution, and with dedicated resources to support essential services.

Similarly, Canada's aboriginal population is confronted by a much more difficult set of barriers to postsecondary than the population at large. Statistics from the Council of Ministers of Education produced in 1995 show that the educational attainment rate among adult aboriginals is significantly lower than for that of the adult population as a whole.[5] These results stem mainly from a lack of upper secondary educational opportunities for students in remote areas and disturbingly high dropout rates among urban natives. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People identified racial prejudice, lack of resources, and lack of understanding among teachers of Aboriginal peoples as being among the barriers that native students face in completing their studies. Given the figures, it may not be too much of an exaggeration that for aboriginal peoples, the most important present barrier to the transition from secondary to postsecondary education is secondary education itself.

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[5] Highest level of education attained, all Canadians and Aboriginal Canadians, age 25 and older

	All Canadians	Adult Aboriginal Canadians
Less than high school diploma	35%	56%
High school diploma	21%	12%
Some college or university	7%	13%
College diploma/certificate	24%	16%
University degree	13%	3%

As for the postsecondary system itself, many Aboriginal Canadians face many of the same barriers to completion at his level that they do in secondary education. At some institutions, special access or first-year programs exist to help students make the transition, and these are generally held to have had a good measure of success. However, many experts are now urging the creation of new universities and colleges which would be administered by aboriginals themselves, along the lines of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. A halfway step to this measure would be to set up Aboriginal "colleges" within existing institutions.

What are the main challenges facing Aboriginals and Students with Disabilities as they make the transition to postsecondary education? What are the roles of respective educational partners in making colleges and universities more accessible for these students? What other groups might be identified as having special needs?

Section 2: Issues in Transitions within Postsecondary Education

Once within postsecondary education, some but not all students are in a position to make a second set of transitions; namely, that between institutions or even between postsecondary education sectors (i.e. private trainers, community colleges and universities). There are several dimensions to this issue, but they can be reduced to questions of *personal mobility* and *transfer of prior learning credits*. Personal mobility implies that students are able to leave their original place of study and move to another city or province in order to pursue their studies. While there are of course no legal impediments to doing this, there may be administrative or financial barriers, such as non-portable student loans or out-of-province differential tuition fees which may dissuade students from undertaking these moves. *Transfer of Prior Learning Credits* is an altogether more complicated phenomenon. Up until now, the majority of PSE students have not needed to make these transitions, but with an increased emphasis on lifelong learning and growing specialization among providers, this situation may be changing. How can we reconcile, *within* each of the college and university systems, the desire for more transferability with the drive for more specialized programs and the duty of individual institutions to ensure the quality of credentials they confer? Should there be more linkages *between* the three very different postsecondary education sectors? And if so, how can we encourage flows between systems without compromising standards?

Credit transferability within individual postsecondary sectors (i.e. university-to university; college-to-college)

Over the past number of years, some commentators have lamented the perceived lack of transferability in university and college credits between institutions. This, it is suggested, is a barrier to transitions between institutions. Underlying this view is a not uncontroversial notion

that *individual courses* are discrete building blocks of knowledge which should be creditable towards a wider range of degrees. Alternatively, one could say that curricula - or at least some of them - are designed to be an integrated program, and that individual credits are not discrete building blocks, but parts of an integrated whole. Individual courses, in this view, are not as easily transferable from institution to institution or even from program to program. Indeed, this is the basic assumption behind many of the current recognition arrangements. *Credentials*, such as a Bachelor's degree in science, for instance, are universally portable within Canada, and graduate students have been making these institution-to-institution transfers based on these credentials for many years. *Partial credentials*, or credits, are not similarly transferable, and therein lies the perceived problem.

University Senates by law have the right to set their own curricula and graduation requirements. This includes the right to choose not to treat partial credentials from other institutions as equivalent to their own, because they have a responsibility to ensure that individual credentials issued from their institutions conform to institutional standards. Moreover, institutions are being encouraged, both by governments, the private sector and the marketplace, to make their own programs and course offerings more "distinctive", in order to occupy more individual educational "niches". This goal is difficult to square with that of total mutual credit recognition, since the nature of many "niche" programs is that they are seamless and integrated; thus, recognition of partial credentials from other institutions may undermine both the educational content of the program in question and lessen the uniqueness of the credential it confers.

This leads to the second layer of the transferability issue. Under current arrangements, credits may be transferred as credits towards a degree but not towards graduation *in a program*. Thus, if a student were, for instance to transfer from University X to University Y in a philosophy program, his or her philosophy credits from X might be accepted as "credits" towards a degree at Y, but the Y's Philosophy department might still require the student to take certain "required" or "core" courses which in some respects duplicate courses taken at X. Thus, a credit from one university might be equivalent to a credit from another according to *institutional* guidelines, but an Aristotle course from one might not be equivalent to an Aristotle course at according to *departmental* guidelines, if the department feels strongly that its core or upper year courses are essential to its distinctive niche. For the student, this can mean a longer time to graduation and greater costs and thus a greater potential barrier to mobility and transitions. It is not clear that this type of transferability problem can be facilitated through administrative fiat. In order for this type of transferability to work, a vast amount of work would have to be done in order to determine equivalencies of courses right across the country, almost at the lecture-by-lecture level - a very large and complicated undertaking.

The ability of students to transfer credits between institutions is different depending on where they study and where they wish to study. As a result of the Council of Ministers' Protocol on Credit Transfer, first and second year university credits are now transferable among nearly all Canadian postsecondary institutions. Alberta students have a significant degree of flexibility in transferring credits between institutions. In Ontario, the Council of Ontario Universities is moving in the same

direction by creating the Student Equivalency Program. Quebec has a high degree of transferability within its UQ system, but less so between other institutions. Conceivably, these measures represent building blocks towards a national system of transferability, but this has yet to be discussed in any significant way.

How important is credit transferability? What do we know about patterns of student transfers and what should we know before undertaking major new initiatives? What are the legitimate limits of transferability? Should national initiatives in credit transferability be attempted before all the provinces have such measures in place, or could there be parallel initiatives?

Articulation between postsecondary education sectors (i.e. college-to-university)

Another consideration in educational mobility is the ability of students to shift between educational sectors (that is, between universities, colleges, private training institutions, and to a lesser extent, public adult education systems). However, this set of transitions is rarely thought of in terms of mid-stream transitions from sector to sector. Instead, it is usually discussed in terms of prior learning assessment[6] and how previous credentials gained in one sector are considered for standing and/or advanced placement in a program in another sector. Since it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss PLA in-depth, this issue will only be touched upon briefly.

Articulation between colleges and universities is the inter-sector link most often discussed, though it is not the only point of articulation. However, it is important to recognize that because the college sector is so heterogenous from province to province, sweeping statements about improving articulation are nearly meaningless. In Quebec, the transitions are nearly seamless, as attendance at its CEGEPs are a pre-requisite to attending university for Quebec students. Alberta and British Columbia have colleges which are well-integrated with the university system, and have comprehensive credit transfer arrangements. Beyond these three provinces, there are lesser degrees of articulation In New Brunswick, some colleges are being used to teach first-year university courses via distance education. In Ontario, there are a number of cases of individual college-university collaboration and credit recognition agreements. In other provinces, where colleges are more oriented towards traditional vocational learning, the opportunities for interface between the two systems dwindle quite considerably. Similarly, the opportunities for interface between private career colleges and the public institutions will depend in the first instance on the fit in the types of skills they teach. In some provinces, there may be considerable overlap, and thus more scope for articulation. In others, there may not be the same kinds of possibilities.

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[6]In this context, "prior-learning assessment" refers to assessment of prior formal learning experience in a different education institution for the purposes of determining placement in a new program or course, and does **not** refer to assessment of experiential learning.

There are in effect two approaches to inter-sector articulation: the macro and the micro. The macro approach is that taken by the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer or the B.C. Open Learning Agency's Credit Bank, where agencies take on the function of measuring "equivalencies" of courses and assign the number of credits which are transferable from the old institution to the new.[7] This approach is comprehensive but costly and time consuming to implement. The micro approach is that taken where pairs of institutions get together and negotiate transferability of learning credentials on a bilateral basis. This is an effective and comprehensive method of serving local marketplaces, but is less useful to students who wish to switch sectors *and* switch locations at the same time since equivalencies may not be extended to other institutions. The micro approach has the benefit of being "bottom-up" and having a lot of institutional "buy-in", but at the same time, it is a haphazard approach from the point of view of those who prefer system-wide equivalencies.

How might increased articulation actually take place? Are there structures or frameworks which could be put in place which would encourage more articulation? What are the limits of articulation?

Differential Tuition Fees by Province

At face value, the imposition of differential tuition fees - that is, the practice of charging higher tuition fees to students from out-of-province - might seem an open-and-shut case of a barrier to mobility. However, the sole existing case of such a situation in Canada is not quite so clear cut. In November 1996, the government of Quebec introduced a differential fee arrangement for students from out-of-province. The government pointed out that tuition fees in Quebec were significantly lower than those that existed in other provinces. No new "barriers" were being created by the government of Quebec's move because students were not being asked to pay more to attend a Quebec institution than they would have if they had stayed in their province of origin. This is much different than the situation in the United States where, although there is significant variation between states, out-of-state fees at public institutions are generally set at approximately three times the in-state rate, thus creating real barriers to mobility (though these can be and are offset by more generous student assistance programs). Nevertheless, the Quebec decision is criticized by some as a step toward the American system, whose price barriers are much more significant than is the case with the current Quebec arrangement.

Should provinces charge out-of-province tuition fees? Do out-of-province fees constitute a significant barrier to transitions within postsecondary education? Does the Council of ministers have a role to play in this area? Does the federal government?

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[7]The B.C.O.L.A.'s Credit Bank assigns these equivalencies for purposes of learning only at the B.C.O.L.A.; unlike the ACAT, it does not undertake this exercise for the purpose of a standard, province-wide assessment of equivalencies which all institutions are obliged to accept.

Portability of Student Assistance

A central premise of the Canada Student Loans Program (CSLP) is that assistance should be portable. Provided that the student is accepted at a designated educational institution, the loan will be delivered. However, some provinces have taken the position that their student assistance programs should favour institutions in their own province. Four provinces - British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Quebec - place limits on the ability of students to take provincial assistance outside provincial boundaries. New Brunswick places similar limits on mobility, but only with respect to private trainers. Newfoundland permits mobility with its loans, but will not grant loan remission to those students who choose to study outside the province. The rationale for these limits to portability is that the public subsidy for loans should primarily benefit local institutions. Alternatively, though, it could be argued that those provinces with sufficient undercapacity of student places, such as British Columbia, might find it cheaper to fund students to study outside the province than to build new capacity in-province.

The point is often made that these restrictions on loan portability impede student mobility. Those who argue against these restrictions stress that if loan assistance is not available, then mobility will be restricted to those who are sufficiently well-off not to require student assistance. Direct evidence for this point is scant. Over the past 15 years, despite fluctuations in institutional and provincial enrollment profiles, the Canada-wide percentage of full-time undergraduate students studying full-time outside their province of origin has remained steady between seven and nine per cent.

Do restrictions on portability of public student assistance constitute a significant barrier to transitions within postsecondary education? Should all public student assistance be portable throughout Canada? Are there reasonable limits on the portability of student assistance?