

Exploring Students' Motivations for Credit Accumulation

Prepared for BCCAT by Academica Group

September 2021



BCCAT

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

BCCAT has found that both transfer and direct entry students collect, on average, more credits than required for their degrees (Pendleton, 2010; Tikina, 2020). Building on earlier quantitative studies, BCCAT sought to use a qualitative analysis to understand the reasons why students collect more credits than required for their credential(s) and their general feelings towards accumulation of excess credit.

To this end, Academica conducted a literature review and held interviews with nearly 50 transfer and non-transfer post-secondary students from the UBC system to better understand the student perspective and rationale behind over-accumulating credits.

FINDINGS

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature revealed a general consensus among published research that students in the United States, Canada, and BC specifically complete more credits than required for their degree programs. None of the research in the literature included a qualitative component, and all were based on the use of various types of institutional data, which revealed that the numbers of excess credits accumulated can vary by program, transfer status, and, in some studies, demographic factors.

Reasons for accumulating excess credits fell broadly into two categories: individual-level motivations and systemic issues. Individual motivations include, but are not limited to curiosity about other subjects, timing of choosing a major, and skills development; systemic issues include transfer inefficiencies, advising support, and course scheduling and offerings.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Over two-thirds of interviewees in the study (70%) reported that they anticipate graduating with credits in excess of their program requirements. Bachelor of Science students (60%) and international students (58%) reported a lower incidence of anticipated excess credits than the overall average.



Building on earlier quantitative studies, BCCAT sought to use a qualitative analysis to understand the reasons why students collect more credits than required for their credential(s) and their general feelings towards accumulation of excess credit.

ISSUES RELATED TO INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFER

80% of transfer students anticipated graduating with excess credits, while 42% reported completing coursework at UBC that duplicated coursework from their previous institution(s). Satisfaction with the transfer process was mixed, and complaints about the inability to transfer certain credits or limits placed on the number of credits that could transfer were common.

Although some transfer students reported positive experiences regarding transfer-specific advising, three specifically attributed excess credits to poor advising they received regarding their transfer. Analyzing interviewees' comments overall indicates that advising related to transferring institutions is highly variable.

ISSUES RELATED TO PROGRAM TRANSFER

Among the participants interviewed for this study, program transfer was less of a concern than institutional transfer when examining the cause of excess credits. The structure of some programs, including required prerequisites and courses offered only once per academic year, made it difficult for students transferring into these programs to avoid excess credits. This was particularly true in science and engineering programs.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS

85% of interviewees had accessed advising services at UBC, and general satisfaction was high. The only commonly-cited barriers to accessing advising services were long line-ups on drop-in days and waits of up to a week for scheduled appointments.

Although many participants found Degree Navigator to be a helpful tool, the user interface design was generally considered confusing and outdated. Many students reported that they only used Degree Navigator in conjunction with an advising visit in order to facilitate interpretation of the results.

GENERAL MOTIVATIONS FOR CREDIT ACCUMULATION

Two-thirds of interviewees who had taken courses outside of their direct program requirements said that these courses were related somehow to their program. Two-thirds also reported that these courses taught competencies that had helped them in their academic career.

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A significant majority (80%) of interviewees who had taken courses outside of their program requirements anticipated that competencies they learned in these courses would help them in their planned career.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EXCESS CREDITS

Students' feelings towards excess credits were complicated. Close to half (48%) considered them a waste of time or money, while 39% stated that they could be useful or beneficial; there was even overlap between these opinions, with 13% acknowledging the benefits of excess credits that they otherwise described as being wasteful.

Over a quarter of interviewees (28%) expressed some degree of resentment or unhappiness due to excess credits.

Several motivations for accumulating excess credits were not uncovered in the literature review, and did not fit well into the broader themes discussed previously: these included wanting to increase GPA; a desire to comply with certifications requiring different courses from the program requirements (i.e., CPA); and excess credits earned due to transferring International Baccalaureate high-school credits.

NEXT STEPS

BCCAT and other stakeholders in BC's higher education system should continue to monitor and periodically study the incidence of excess credits to graduation at postsecondary institutions in BC.

A detailed analysis pertaining to transfer-specific advising in BC would be warranted given some of the feedback received as part of this study.

BCCAT, in partnership with BC institutions, could undertake an analysis of the structure of various undergraduate programs in BC to better understand the degree to which program structures impact the time-to-completion and excess credit accumulation of new-to-program students.

BCCAT and other stakeholders in BC's higher education system should continue to monitor and periodically study the incidence of excess credits to graduation at post-secondary institutions in BC. A detailed analysis pertaining to transfer-specific advising in BC would be warranted given some of the feedback received as part of this study.

Introduction

PROJECT CONTEXT

In previous quantitative studies undertaken to assess the number of credits that BC postsecondary students complete to graduate with a degree (Pendleton, 2010; Tikina, 2020), BCCAT found that both transfer and direct entry students collect, on average, more credits than required for their degrees. Building on these earlier quantitative studies, BCCAT sought to use a qualitative analysis to understand the reasons why students collect more credits than required for their credential(s) and their general feelings towards accumulation of excess credit.

This topic is of particular interest to BCCAT because excess credits can be a symptom of transfer inefficiencies within an educational system (see, for example, Giani 2019). They may also represent inefficiencies at the institutional level (Bell & Valliani, 2014). Either way, excess credits represent time and money invested by postsecondary students. If this time and money is being spent unwillingly, due to systemic inefficiencies, then it is the responsibility of an accountable postsecondary education system to examine and understand ways that this can be avoided.

While many studies have examined student-level administrative data to understand the dynamics of credit accumulation (Complete College America, 2011, 2014; Cullinane, 2014; Fink et al., 2018; Pendleton, 2010; Tikina, 2020; Zeidenberg, 2012, 2013), few have taken a qualitative approach to understanding students' reasons for graduating with more credits than are required. Instead, researchers are left to speculate on these factors without the necessary data to confirm their conclusions. This significant gap in the literature is the focus of this report.

METHOD

The scope of this report is narrow in the context of postsecondary education in BC, and it reflects the experiences of students at only one institution. The goal of this report, however, is not to close the proverbial book on excess credits in BC or Canada, but instead to use real voices and experiences to narrate the story which quantitative analysis has already provided.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to identify the gaps in the literature on student credit accumulation, with a specific focus on the accumulation of credits excess to program requirements. To this end, a scan of the available research was conducted using Google Scholar. References to other published research from the results of this primary search were also investigated to ensure the inclusion of all relevant, high-quality research on the topic.

INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the motivations, experiences, and perceptions of upper-level transfer and direct entry students regarding the credits they completed at BC Transfer System institutions – particularly those beyond the strict program requirements for their chosen credential(s).

The study population consisted of upper-level (third or fourth-year) students at UBC Vancouver (UBCV) and UBC Okanagan (UBCO), from a range of program areas and split equally between students who have transferred and those who have not. In total, 48 students participated in interviews. Table 1 outlines the distribution of interview participants by program area and transfer status.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Interview Participants by Program Area and Transfer Status

Program Area	Transfer	Non-Transfer	Total
Arts	6	6	12
Science	6	6	12
Management/Commerce	6	6	12
Engineering	6	6	12
Total	24	24	48

Prospective participants were identified from a student dataset provided by UBC’s planning and institutional research (PAIR) office. UBC provided a list of all 3rd and 4th year students at the Okanagan and Vancouver campuses, along with demographic data such as year and month of birth, campus, degree program, gender, international status, program year level, transfer status, and email. Based on the desired distribution discussed previously, and using a random sort method, potential participants were invited in cohorts of approximately 100 students at a time, beginning in late January 2021. The full text of the email invite sent to students can be found in Appendix A.

In conjunction with BCCAT, an interview guide was designed to explore the themes of credit accumulation, transfer experience, and overall postsecondary education experience. The full outline of the guide which was used for the interviews can be found in Appendix B.

The 30-minute interviews were conducted via Zoom (using audio only) and were recorded with participants’ permission. Some interview recordings were transcribed when required for the inclusion of verbatim quotes. Interviewers also took detailed notes on each interview, which allowed responses for each participant to be coded and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The majority of interviews were conducted in February 2021, with several conducted at the end of January 2021 and the beginning of March 2021.

Participants were evenly split along gender lines, with 52% female and 48% male (Figure 1). This was very close to the true gender distribution in the programs examined.

International students made up approximately 19% of interviewees (Figure 2), slightly lower than the overall percentage of international students in the programs in question, which was 28%. Overall, response rates from international students were lower than for domestic students, which resulted in lower participation in this research project.

Overall, about two-fifths of interviewees were from UBC's Okanagan campus (UBCO), located in Kelowna in the interior of British Columbia. The remaining three-fifths were from UBC's Vancouver campus (UBCV) (Figure 3).

FIGURE 1.
Gender Distribution of Interview Participants

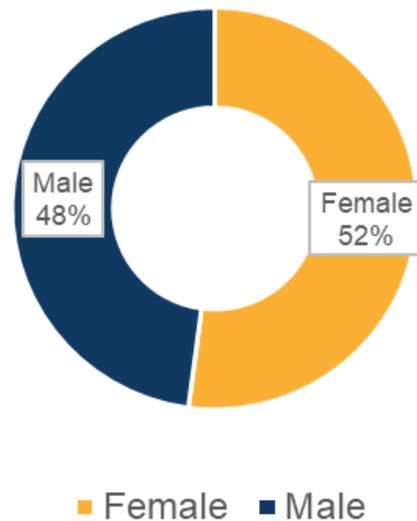


FIGURE 2.
International Status of Interview Participants

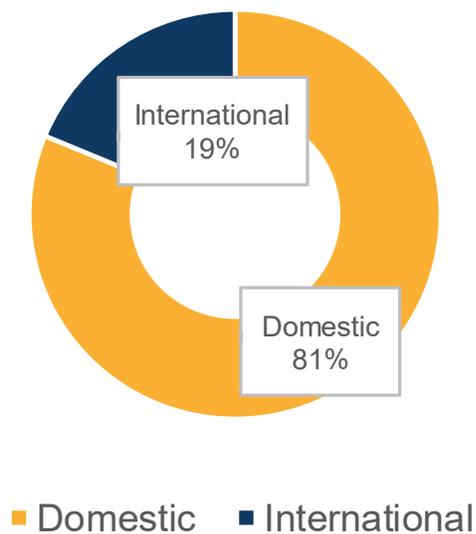
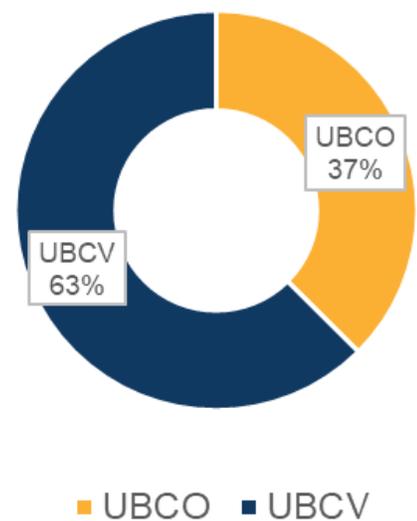


FIGURE 3.
Campus Distribution of Interview Participants



Literature Review

It has been widely reported that students in the USA and Canada tend to attain more credits than they actually need to graduate (Complete College America, 2014; Zeidenberg, 2012, 2013). The actual number of excess credits found in American studies varies from 15 (Bell & Valliani, 2014) to 16.5 (Complete College America, 2011).

Students' motivations for credit accumulation are of interest to researchers and policymakers for two main reasons: first, when students take longer than is prescribed to complete their program, they are less likely to graduate; and second, attaining more credits than is necessary to graduate can be seen as an inefficiency in an educational system, and comes with an increased cost to both governments and students (Auguste et al., 2010; Bell & Valliani, 2014; Bound et al., 2012; Complete College America, 2014; Kinne et al., 2013).

The actual amount of excess credits earned does vary with a number of demographic and program factors, including program discipline. Cullinane (2014) showed that, in Texas, Agriculture and Arts/Architecture students attempted the most excess credits, while Pendleton (2010) showed that among a sample of standard-credit-load programs at British Columbia universities, science students tended to complete more excess credits. Fink et al. (2018) explored both race and gender, finding that Black students, American Indian students, Asian students, and male students attempted above-average numbers of excess credits.

In Canada, the phenomenon of students accumulating credits in excess of program requirements has been demonstrated in two studies in British Columbia (Pendleton, 2010; Tikina, 2020) and one in Ontario (Sidhu et al., 2016). Many studies consider the differing experiences of transfer and non-transfer students; more specifically, Pendleton (2010) showed that, although both transfer and direct-entry students earned slightly more credits than required for their degree, transfer students did not earn a significantly higher number of credits when compared to direct-entry students. Tikina (2020) updated the methodology used in this study to include data from both sending and receiving institutions, and concluded that transfer students do, in fact, earn more credits than their direct-entry counterparts. The Ontario study, which used data from York University, found that students at that institution did accumulate excess credits, but that the amount was not as significant as studies in the American context have shown. The amount of excess credits in that study amounted to a median value of 3 credits for transfer students and 0 credits for non-transfer students (Sidhu et al., 2016).

Theories are varied as to why students, on average, take more credits than they actually require to complete their degree programs. Broadly speaking, though, reasons generally fall into one of two categories: institutional environment, and student characteristics (Cullinane, 2014).

One important institutional reason why a transfer student may complete more credits than required for their program is inefficiencies in transfer systems. As previously discussed, transfer students have been shown to complete more credits than non-transfer students during the course of their studies (Bell & Valliani, 2014; Tikina, 2020). Deficiencies in articulation agreements can result in transfer students being forced to re-take courses on content they have already covered at their previous institution (Zeidenberg, 2013).

Another institutional factor in why students obtain excess credits is a lack of course options. If course offerings do not meet student demand, or if they are not scheduled in a way that allows students to take the courses they require,

students may be compelled to take courses they are less interested in or that do not contribute to their program. In many cases they may do this in order to maintain eligibility for financial aid (Bell & Valliani, 2014; Cullinane, 2014). Other factors cited include a lack of advising support (Bell & Valliani, 2014; Complete College America, 2014; Zeidenberg, 2012), taking courses to complete remedial course requirements (Bell & Valliani, 2014; Complete College America, 2014), and unclear degree requirements (Bell & Valliani, 2014; Kinne et al., 2013).

A second category of explanations for excess credits relates to student characteristics and their own decisions around course enrolment behaviours. One reason why a student may choose to complete more credits than they need is that competencies required to complete a program may lie outside of the actual required courses. For example, English skills, computer skills, writing skills, and math skills may not be explicitly part of the course requirements for a program, but these skills are all important to students in a wide variety of programs. Therefore, students may be compelled to take these courses in order to develop the skills they need to excel in their program's core courses (Zeidenberg, 2012). On a related note, some students take extra courses that are related to their program out of interest or curiosity, spurring them to take additional courses in order to better understand and explore a topic (Zeidenberg, 2012).

Finally, either due to indecision or poor advising (or likely a combination of both), students may also not choose their major early enough in their studies, resulting in the need to make up some 100-level courses once they have chosen a program (Fink et al., 2018).

This report will build on the existing research by using interviews to examine students' own motivations for accumulating excess credits during their baccalaureate degrees; additionally, students' perspectives of the institutional and systemic factors which influence these decisions will be explored. All the factors mentioned in this literature review will be considered and studied.

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Student Interviews

GENERAL OVERVIEW

PROGRAM-LEVEL TRENDS

At UBC, typical bachelor of arts programs require 120 credits, bachelor of applied science programs require between 145 and 158 credits, bachelor of commerce and management programs require 121 and 120 credits, and bachelor of science programs require 120 credits.

Overall, 70% of interviewees reported that they would be graduating with credits in excess of their program requirements. Factors associated with a lower incidence of excess credits included being in a B.Sc. program (only 60% of students anticipated excess credits), international status (only 57% of international students anticipated excess credits), and transfer status (only 59% of non-transfer students anticipated excess credits).

Bachelor of Applied Science

The majority of students who were not aware of the number of credits required for their program were bachelor of applied science (BASC) students. One of the main reasons cited for not being aware of the number of credits they had accumulated or the number required to graduate was the fact that course timetables were highly regimented. While students who stuck with the prescribed course schedule generally graduated on time with their cohort, this left students with little room for other courses beyond their electives.

While this regimented course schedule can be a benefit for students who begin their studies in engineering in first year and do not deviate from the prescribed path, it can cause difficulties for students who wish to explore other subject matter via courses outside of their program. One BASC interviewee had an interest in a different area of engineering from their program and chose to pursue courses in that area of interest despite the regimented course schedule; as a result, they anticipate graduating later than initially expected and with a number of excess credits.

This highly regimented curriculum can also negatively impact students who transfer into engineering programs, a significant majority of whom anticipated graduating with excess credits due to transfer issues. Most students reported that many courses transferred over, but that not all credits that were expected to transfer did. Although interviewees had not necessarily expected all of their courses to transfer over, there was some disappointment expressed in the advising they received specifically around transfer. Some reported receiving erroneous information or no information at all regarding which courses would transfer into their desired program at their destination institution.

Bachelor of Arts

Most bachelor of arts (BA) students were aware of the approximate number of credits they had accumulated during the course of their studies, and all had used Degree Navigator, a UBC degree-planning tool, with generally favourable feedback. Most did not anticipate graduating with many (if any) excess credits beyond the 120 required for the program.

Only one BA interviewee anticipated graduating with a significant number of excess credits (approximately 27). In this case, a program transfer combined with the structure and timeline of prerequisites in the new program meant that the student ended up taking several excess credits. This student transferred programs in 2nd year and due to prerequi-

sites, could only take a handful of courses relevant to the new program. Having already used most of their coursework from first year as electives for the new program requirements, they had no option but to take additional courses in order to maintain full-time status.

Bachelor of Science

In general, bachelor of science students reported that they had accumulated very few excess credits accumulated during their studies.

Although not as credit-intensive as bachelor of applied science degrees, bachelor of science degrees are also highly regimented. Two BSc interviewees reported accumulating a small amount of excess credits for reasons related to the following: In one case, the respondent took some extra courses in a summer term with the express purpose of giving themselves flexibility in scheduling later on in their degree. Another student had completed exchange semesters at other postsecondary institutions and encountered issues with the policies around recognizing coursework, describing these as inflexible and frustrating. Furthermore, the rigid scheduling of program-required courses (i.e., prerequisite offered in term 1, subsequent course offered in term 2), meant that this student anticipates accumulating excess credits by the time they graduate.

Bachelor of Management/Commerce

Business degree students were generally aware of the number of credits required for their program, which is 121 credits for bachelor of commerce students at UBCV and 120 credits for bachelor of management students at UBCO.

Two non-transfer business students reported some excess credits due to program transfers. One non-transfer student reported that, due to a semester on exchange, they had to stay for an extra term to complete a course required for a specialization. While this would not have led to excess credits on its own, the student in question was driven by the limited immediate job prospects during the COVID-19 pandemic to take even more courses in order to complete a concentration.

Two-thirds of transfer business students reported accumulating excess credits, half of whom said that their transfer was the primary reason.

ISSUES RELATED TO INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFER

Half of the interviewee pool (24 interviewees) were identified as transfer students through their institutional records. Transfer students were those students who had been admitted to UBC with credit(s) from a previous institution. The interview guide contained several questions which specifically addressed issues that might be faced by transfer students regarding credit accumulation, including the transfer process generally, the credit transfer process, and advising regarding transfer.

THE TRANSFER PROCESS

Overall satisfaction with the transfer process was mixed. While many interviewees reported that the transfer process was generally straightforward, many also reported various frustrations.

A common frustration with the transfer process was finding out that courses could not transfer. Reasons cited for this included course material not being comprehensive enough to merit a transfer credit, or credits only transferring as general credit, forcing students to use them as electives at the destination institution. Several interviewees reported that they were not given a reason for the credits not transferring. Although many accessed BCTransferGuide.ca and found it useful, it was not uncommon for interviewees to report some confusion around knowing which courses would transfer and which ones would not.

Over half of transfer students reported that not being able to transfer credits had resulted in them completing coursework at UBC that they had previously covered at their origin institution, resulting in excess credits that could not be applied to elective requirements.

A second issue with transfer that was mentioned by several interviewees was the feeling of being overwhelmed by numerous life changes at once. Although this is not a direct cause of excess credits, per se, one interviewee specifically mentioned encountering mental health challenges as a result of the life changes associated with transferring from a college to a university. This resulted in the interviewee taking time off from their studies and delaying their anticipated graduation date.

"I was surprised by how smoothly it went. A lot was automatic. I don't remember a lot because it was so smooth."

"I needed to have kept syllabi from courses at first institution to 'fight' to get credits at UBC that did end up transferring. Was a lot of work to fill out the transfer forms to be granted transferred credits."

"Transition process was challenging - overwhelming to transition from a small college to a large university, like a 'tsunami wave'."

TRANSFER-SPECIFIC ADVISING

Satisfaction with advising specifically related to transfer was mixed. Some interviewees reported receiving very knowledgeable advice from advisors regarding transfer, including knowledge about which courses would transfer. One participant used the word “encouraging” to describe the advisor at their origin institution.

There were several notable areas in which interviewees felt that the advising they had received regarding transfer was not sufficient. One transfer student mentioned that different advisors had different advice, and that there did not seem to be clear processes for advising on transfer.

Several transfer students mentioned issues with regards to the quality of advising staff with comments such as “occasional rudeness” or “discouraged pursuing program of interest at UBC.” Three transfer students in the study specifically attributed excess credits accumulated due to transfer to poor advising that they had received regarding the transfer.

"Not really [satisfied]: so much confusion and it's hard because different advisors have different ways of looking at things."

ISSUES RELATED TO PROGRAM TRANSFER

Although half of the sample population was classified as being transfer students based on institutional data, over a third of the non-transfer students had experience transferring programs within their institution, an experience which can also result in excess credits being taken for various reasons. Despite this, program transfer generally resulted in fewer “lost” credits when compared with institutional transfer.

In one case, a student who did run into issues with excess credits due to program transfer had transferred into a moderately regimented program in which not all necessary courses were offered every term. As a result, they were limited in the courses available to them in the new program during their first couple years and were not able to efficiently “catch up” to make up for the lost time.

In most cases in which students transferred programs within the same institution during their first few years, they were able to apply most if not all of their earned credits to the new program. Even if they were not able to apply the previously earned credits to specific program requirements in the new program, they could often apply these credits to elective requirements. The number of elective credits allowed does vary by program, so in some cases this was more easily done while in other cases this was more difficult.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS

ADVISING SERVICES

Overall, 85% of study participants had used advising services at their current institution, and interviewees were generally satisfied with the support provided by the advising offices at UBC's Okanagan and Vancouver campuses.

Only seven interviewees stated that they had not accessed advising services, and almost all because they felt as if they did not require these services. Most of these interviewees had used Degree Navigator and were generally satisfied with it. None of these seven students reported taking any credits in excess of their program requirements due to lack of advising or confusion regarding program requirements.

The only barriers to accessing advising services that were commonly cited by interviewees were scheduling and wait times, which could range from several days to up to a week. Several students mentioned long line-ups on drop-in days, which meant that even though there was a delay when actually booking an appointment, drop-in advising was typically preferred.

ONLINE DEGREE PLANNER

All respondents were asked whether their institution offers an online degree planner, which UBC does provide for its students on both campuses. The UBC degree planner is called "Degree Navigator."

Almost all interviewees were aware of UBC's Degree Navigator, and of those who were aware of it, all but three had used it. Although interviewees generally found Degree Navigator helpful, there were several challenges raised with regards to its ease-of-use.

The first issue raised centred on how useful Degree Navigator is for students who are looking to enter into new programs. One interviewee specifically cited wanting to plan to enter an education program after their bachelor's degree, and said that Degree Navigator was not a helpful tool for knowing which undergraduate courses they should take to prepare to enter a bachelor of education program.

Among the interviewees whose feedback on Degree Navigator was mixed (approximately a third of those who had used it), many cited deficiencies in the user interface design of Degree Navigator. Some mentioned variations on the interface being "outdated," "confusing," or "ugly". Many students, even those whose feedback on Degree Navigator was positive, mentioned that the navigator had to be used in conjunction with a visit to the student advising office to aid in interpreting the results.

"...[It] tells you required classes that you could figure out on your own, but it's confusing to find out number of credits you need and what upper level/lower level electives you need. Wording makes it confusing: booked appointments with advising so they could explain it better..."

GENERAL MOTIVATIONS FOR CREDIT ACCUMULATION

Just over half (52%) of interviews reported that they had taken courses that were not a part of their program requirements (i.e., not a part of any majors, minors, electives, concentrations, etc.). Two thirds of these students saw these courses as related to their program somewhat, even if not directly.

The connection between these courses and interviewees' programs were varied. Sometimes the cited connection was due to similarity in disciplines and subject matter (for example, social sciences such as psychology, sociology, anthropology). Two interviewees had taken math courses and cited these as being fundamental to many other courses taken as part of their program. Finally, several interviewees reported that the unnecessary course they had taken was a prerequisite for an elective course which they desired to take.

Two-thirds of the students who reported taking courses outside of their program requirements reported that these courses had taught competencies that helped in their academic program. A significant majority of study participants (80%) reported that these courses had taught competencies that they believed would help in their planned career.

Other reasons for extra credit accumulation included wanting a "change of pace" from a current program and wanting to potentially increase GPA by taking courses that were known to be easier.

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF EXCESS CREDITS

FEELINGS REGARDING EXCESS CREDITS

Although there were some positives mentioned by interviewees, most felt that credits in excess of program requirements represented a waste of time, money, and effort. The monetary cost was the most common negative mentioned, especially among international students, almost all of whom mentioned cost when asked about their feelings regarding excess credits. International students pay much higher tuition fees than domestic students, so it is not surprising that this sentiment was particularly common among that subset of participants.

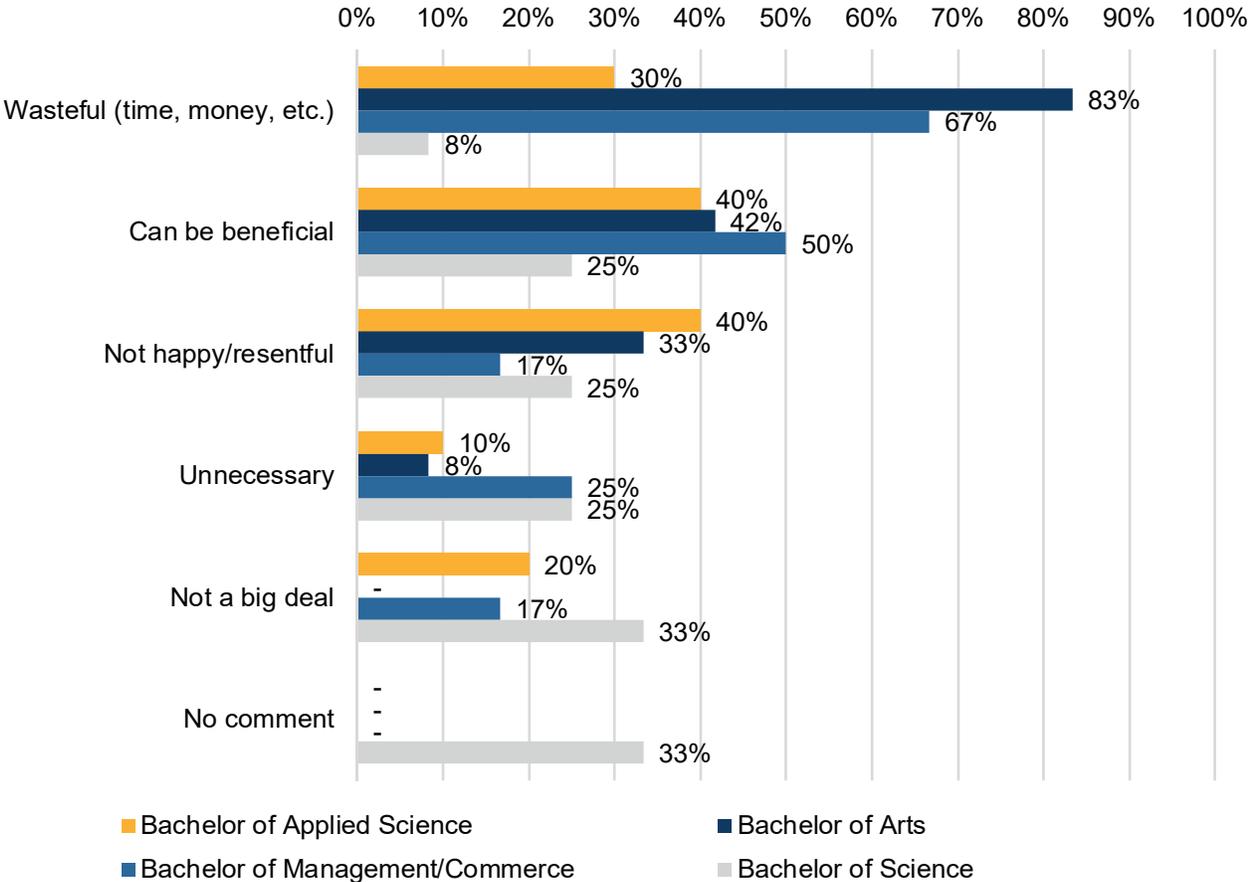
"Mixed feelings: I love to learn, "knowledge is power", but wasted a year and would have saved money and time."

Despite the negative feelings towards unnecessary costs, some interviewees expressed variations on the opinion that, so long as the excess credits were accumulated voluntarily, and students were fine with the cost, that they were not a big deal. Some students reported some degree of dissatisfaction that their academic program was too highly structured, which meant that if students wished to pursue any interests outside of their program, they would end up taking more credits than necessary.

In several cases, interviewees expressed some regret that they had not been decisive enough to choose an academic program earlier on, which led to situations where they were forced to take excess credits.

Figure 4 below summarizes interviewees' general feelings towards accumulating excess credits, compared by degree program. This figure illustrates the majority opinion that excess credits are wasteful, although this varies widely by program. Despite considering them wasteful, many interviewees also suggested that they could be beneficial for some students or in certain situations. Overall, 28% of participants reported being unhappy or resentful of having taken excess credits.

FIGURE 4. General Sentiment Towards Excess Credits by Degree Program (Coded Responses)



Note: Individual responses could be categorized under multiple coded responses; thus, the totals by program do not add to 100%.

STUDENT-SPECIFIC MOTIVATIONS FOR ACCUMULATING EXCESS CREDITS

Post-Graduation Plans

Five interviewees specifically mentioned taking credits outside of their requirements due to wanting to increase their GPA. In two cases, this was due to specific post-graduation plans: in one case, the respondent planned on applying to law school, and anticipated returning for a term after their graduation date to take additional courses that would increase their GPA. One student mentioned a desire to apply to medical school, and saw the cost associated with taking additional credits as minimal in the context of wanting to accomplish their goals.

One interviewee mentioned wanting to pursue a certified professional accountant (CPA) designation post-graduation. The student indicated that there were course requirements associated with that designation that are excess to actual degree program requirements.

Subject Matter of Excess Credits

Just under half of interviewees reported taking courses outside of their program requirements. About half of them saw these courses as being related to their program somewhat, even if not directly. Reasons for this included that courses were broadly in the same field, and therefore would expand the student's horizons; in some cases the course taken was seen as being a core skill fundamental to many other courses, such as a mathematics course.

In several cases, additional courses were necessary due to prerequisite requirements for elective courses.

Other Reasoning for Pursuing Credits Outside of Program

There are other reasons cited by study participants for taking credits outside of their program requirements that do not fit neatly into a particular category.

For example, one interviewee mentioned the need for a "change of pace;" the additional credits were seen as a welcome break from the relative monotony of a course schedule filled with courses in the same discipline.

One student had initially taken some additional credits during a summer term to allow for greater flexibility in their future course schedule and continued taking a full course load through their program, ending up with several excess courses.

One interviewee came to UBC out of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, and got course credit for some 100-level courses at UBC for high school coursework. Although this student will technically graduate with excess credits due to this, they did not necessarily see these as true "excess credits."

"I want to go to Med school so I don't really care too much because I look at it as an opportunity to raise my GPA."

Concluding Remarks

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Students' motivations for credit accumulation, based on this study of one research-intensive university in BC, are varied. In general, though, a few conclusions can be drawn:

- While students generally feel that excess credits are wasteful, they also acknowledge that they can occasionally be useful or necessary. Given tuition costs, though, excess credits resulting from events outside of students' control are viewed unfavourably.
- Despite widespread use of BCTransferGuide.ca and other efforts made by BCCAT and postsecondary institutions in BC, transferring between institutions is not straightforward for all students; this underscores the importance of BCCAT's ongoing mission to facilitate admission, articulation, application, and transfer arrangements among BC post-secondary institutions for the benefit of students.
- While students generally found the quality of advising services (both at UBC and previous institutions), the overall quality of transfer-specific advising was not viewed as universally favourably.
- The structure and course scheduling of some programs can make it difficult for students who transfer into them to catch up efficiently on program requirements.

NEXT STEPS

The study of excess credit accumulation can provide valuable insights into the workings of a higher education system; as such, BCCAT and other stakeholders in BC's higher education system should continue to monitor and periodically study the incidence of excess credits to graduation at postsecondary institutions in BC.

A detailed analysis pertaining to transfer-specific advising would be warranted given some of the feedback received as part of this study. Although extensive reviews of academic advising in British Columbia have been conducted (i.e., Pardy, 2016), the specific aspects of academic advising as they relate to student transfer have not been explored in depth.

BCCAT, in partnership with BC institutions, could undertake an analysis of the structure of various undergraduate programs in BC to better understand student pathways and the degree to which program structures impact the time-to-completion and excess credit accumulation of new-to-program students.

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Appendix A:

Student Invite Email Template

Hello,

The University of British Columbia is currently participating in a research project funded by the BC Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) and conducted by Academica Group. The goal of this research is to better understand students' motivations for credit accumulation – we hope to improve the experience of post-secondary students across BC, and to ensure that BC system of higher education is as efficient and successful as it can be.

We are inviting you, as a post-secondary student in the 3rd or 4th year of their studies (upper level) to share your experiences at your current and (if applicable) past college/ university, to discuss your post-secondary education history, and to offer thoughts on academic credit accumulation.

Your participation would involve 1 telephone interview that will take 30-45 minutes. In appreciation for your time, you will receive \$50 for completing the interview.

By completing the interview, you acknowledge that you have consented to participate in this study and have given permission for the data you provide to be used in the study. Participation is voluntary; you can stop participating at any time, and you can skip any question you don't want to answer. No significant harms, risks or discomforts are anticipated from participating in this study.

Your individual answers will remain confidential to the fullest extent possible by law. Interviews are being conducted by Academica Group on behalf of BCCAT. Your interview responses will not be shared with your university and will not affect your evaluation or grades in any way. Your information will be encrypted and stored securely in Canada. Following completion of the study, the responses will be securely destroyed.

It is anticipated that the results of the study may be published at the BCCAT website.

To schedule your interview, please respond using the following link: [Yes, I would like to participate.](#)

If you would like more information, please contact:

Drew Pihlainen, Academica Group: drew@academicagroup.com

OR

Anna Tikina, BCCAT: atikina@bccat.ca

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

We appreciate your time. Thank you in advance for contributing to this project.

UBC Human Ethics ID: H20-03403

Appendix B:

Student Interview Guide

Section 1: Demographics

<Derived from institutional data>

1. Age
2. Gender
3. International status
4. Transfer status
5. Current program

Section 2: Academic Journey

1. At which institution did you begin your PSE studies?
2. Did you start in a specific program?
 - a. If yes, which program?
3. Did you switch institutions during the course of your studies?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Were you able to transfer some credits from your previous institution? Why or why not?
 - ii. What challenges did you experience while trying to transfer credits?
 - iii. Did you know who to contact about transferring credits?
 - iv. Was the process straight-forward and easy to understand?
4. Did you switch programs during the course of your studies?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Were you able to use some credits already taken towards your new program? Why or why not?
5. Have your studies every been interrupted at all over the course of your PSE career?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Why? (i.e., family obligations, work, other, etc.)
6. What is your current program of study? (i.e., Majors, Minors, concentrations)
 - a. When did you choose this current area of study?
 - b. What led you to your current area of study?
7. Do you/have you accessed advising services at your institution?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Were you satisfied with the advising you received? Why or why not?
 - ii. Did you experience any challenges when accessing advising services at your institution? (i.e., scheduling, availability, etc.)

- b. If no:
 - i. Why did you not access advising services? (i.e., did not realize they were available, didn't have time, etc.)
 - ii. Were there any barriers that prevented you from accessing these services? If so, what were they?
- 8. Is there a degree planner available at your institution? (A degree planner would be an online tool that assists with course planning and ensuring completion of degree requirements)
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Have you used the degree planner?
 - 1. If yes: How satisfied were you with the degree planner? How helpful was it?

Section 3: Credits and Graduation

- 9. Do you keep track of the number of credits you accumulate during your studies as a whole? Per year? Per semester?
- 10. Do you know how many credits are required for your current program?
- 11. Are you aware of the number of credits you have accumulated during your studies?
- 12. Are you aware of the number of credits you require to graduate from your program?
- 13. Have you taken credits that are not part of your program requirements? (i.e., any Majors, Minors, or concentrations)
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Did you see any of these courses as being related to your program, even if not directly?
 - 1. How were they related?
 - ii. Did they teach competencies that helped you in your academic program?
 - iii. Did they teach competencies that you believe will help you in your planned career?
 - iv. Were they taken purely out of interest?
 - v. Other reasons for taking courses outside your program?
- 14. Have you currently taken more credits than required for your specific program of study?
 - a. Will you have taken more credits than required for your specific program by the time you graduate?
 - i. What were the factors that led to this?
- 15. How do you feel about accumulating excess credits, generally? (i.e., resentful, happy to explore other subjects, etc.)
- 16. Would you advise other students to acquire more credits than they need?
 - a. Why or Why not?

Section 4: Transfer Students

- 17. Did you transfer credits from your previous institution(s)?
 - a. If yes, how many? If you don't remember exactly how many, approximately what proportion did you transfer over?

18. Did you have credits that you had hoped to transfer from your previous institution(s) that did not transfer?
(Whether not they applied to your new program)
 - a. Do you know why these credits did not transfer? Were you given an explanation?
19. Were there credits that you successfully transferred that you hoped to apply to your new program, but could not?
 - a. Do you know why these credits could not be applied to your new program? Were you given an explanation?
20. Did you access advising services at your previous institution(s)?
 - a. If yes:
 - i. Were you satisfied with the advising you received? Why or why not?
 - ii. Were you satisfied with the advising you received regarding transfer? Why or why not?
 - b. If no:
 - i. Why did you not access advising services? (i.e., did not realize they were available, didn't have time, etc.)
 - ii. Were there any barriers that prevented you from accessing these services? If so, what were they?
21. Did you use the online BC Transfer Guide (BCTransferGuide.ca) before you transferred?
 - a. If no, are you aware of the BC Transfer Guide?
22. Have you taken any courses at your current institution that duplicated coursework you completed at your previous institution(s)?
23. How did you feel about the transfer process generally?
24. Any other additional comments?



BCCAT

Your guide through post-secondary education.