



Making micro-credentials work *for learners, employers and providers*

Executive summary

Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver
Deakin University

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About the author

Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver is an education change leader, a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and an Australian National Teaching Fellow. She was Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education at Deakin (2013–2018) and continues to research and publish in areas such as digital education, micro-credentials, curriculum transformation, quality assurance and graduate employability (tiny.cc/agc).

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Download a digital copy of the full report or executive summary at <http://dteach.deakin.edu.au/microcredentials/>.

Executive summary

Short courses are not new. For decades, extension courses have enabled further education, community engagement and lifelong learning. Since 2012, online short courses – often called massive open online courses (MOOCs) – have been offered by hundreds of providers, mostly universities. Employers have offered their own in-house training programs for years, and industry bodies have managed certifications and licences to practice. These various forms of non-formal learning have enabled learners – working or not, and across the lifespan – to stay engaged with intellectual challenges, and to remain current in their working lives.

The disruption coming to the world of work is well documented. Micro-credentials and other forms of non-formal learning are emerging as potential solutions to the rapid upskilling that will be required. The formal qualification system is unlikely to cope, burdened with ever-increasing cost. The very people who could use micro-credentials most – mature learners already in the labour force – are engaging less in certified learning just when certification of skills will be required more. But micro-credentials alone will not meet any nation's future educational needs: the key opportunity is to enable formal qualification systems to evolve to include short form credentials, some of which might be credit-bearing. This report focuses on higher education qualifications, but the recommendations might equally apply to vocational education.

Micro-credentials have evolved in recent years and are lauded by many as a great idea. While many do work economically, they are also causing confusion. Rapid innovation can be exhilarating, but it can also confuse the very people who might benefit most. Stakeholders are asking:

- What is a micro-credential – and what is not?
- What do they all mean when they are all shapes, sizes, prices and brands?
- Which should **learners choose**, which should **employers trust**, and how might **providers judge** which should earn recognition of prior learning? How do **policy makers** manage quality and standards, and tap their potential to supplement formal qualification systems?

This report recommends immediate next steps to make micro-credentials work – or work better – by **building trust, adding value** and **achieving sustainability**.

Agree a clear definition of micro-credentials that maps to the internationally agreed ISCED definition of non-formal learning: this report proposes that:

a micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a formal component of a formal qualification.

Clarify the standards expected in micro-credentials that earn admission or credit towards a formal qualification. This report proposes that:

credit-bearing micro-credentials include assessment aligned to a formal qualification level. Achievement of the learning outcomes leads to an offer of admission to or credit towards at least one formal qualification, regardless of whether or not the offer is taken up by the learner. Credit-bearing micro-credentials mirror and contribute to the academic standards required in the target qualification(s). The duration and effort required by the learner are in keeping with amount of credit earned in the target qualification(s).

To assist busy employers and learners, **concise critical information** summaries might signal key quality markers: the level of the skills certified, how they were assessed, academic integrity safeguards, academic credit earned. An appendix includes examples of what such a summary might look like.

To **add value**, micro-credentials need to provide robust evidence that they enable skills education that is strongly related to work and results in work opportunities; deliver benefits commensurate with the investment of time and money required, and lead to more precise recognition of prior learning, particularly for mature learners with extensive experience. To **achieve sustainability**, traditional and emerging providers might focus resources on assessment, and consider licensing, co-creating or re-using learning assets, training more adjunct assessors, particularly industry expert, use online or blended provision with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous experiences that enable mature learners to combine learning with work and caring responsibilities.

But micro-credentials alone will not create a future fit 21C education system. Strategic national conversations are required. Public engagement and consultation are required to ensure learners are prepared for forthcoming changes to the world of work, and why and how education will need to adapt.

To enable the current system to evolve, policy makers could engage with employers and providers to:

- Create a **national credit framework for formal qualifications**: in England, an opt-in credit framework, respecting providers' autonomy and academic judgement, clarifies that effort related to a single credit point is about ten hours of endeavour, and that a qualification is comprised of an agreed quantum of such points. Clearly mapped to the European system, this enables not just clarity of expectations but portability across borders. It also makes credit pathways easier to navigate, including those comprised of credit-bearing micro-credentials.
- **Create catalysts to recognise prior learning for mature learners** to lower the barriers to participation such as lack of time and financial constraints. Micro-credentials that validate and certify mature learners' experience have a particular role to play in this regard: credit granted for learning already achieved not only decreases learner costs but makes retention more likely. National strategies are in place to manage this issue at scale in Sweden, France and the United States.
- **Implement lifelong learning accounts**: not a new idea, but perhaps an idea whose time has arrived. Korea, China, Singapore and Europe have instigated digital systems so that their citizens can log their credentials, bank their credit, and find new opportunities for formal and non-formal learning to find or create meaningful work, or advance in their careers. With all due regard for privacy, policy makers can use such system to adjust the levers and incentivise education that meets the needs of learners, employers and providers.

National systems of this scale require strategic leadership, long term planning, policy development, good governance and substantial ongoing resources. Security and privacy issues will be of paramount concern and crucial to winning learners' confidence. Planning would need to take account of the barriers to success, and the incentives required to encourage buy in by individuals, educational providers and employers, and the lessons to be learned from implementations elsewhere.

Our 20C higher education systems have generally served us well.



Generic and professionally-oriented Bachelor and Master graduates have been prepared for engaged citizenship and professional practice.

Many more would like to participate, but the barriers include time spent working and caring for family, and money.



Rapid development of automation means our working and cultural worlds are on the cusp of change.

Formal qualifications will still be needed, but that system is already under stress. Micro-credentials are a tantalising opportunity, but they alone will not meet new needs.



An evolved 21C education system will include interoperability between formal and non-formal learning so that new and prior knowledge and skills can be certified – rapidly, repeatedly, accessibly.

