

MICRO- CREDENTIALS

Mainstreaming Mid- Career Skills Development

Roadmaps and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between post-secondary credentials and the labour market is a complicated one. Credentials are meant to signify the holder's mastery of certain bodies of knowledge or palettes of competencies. Only rarely do they signal the specific skills related to specific positions, since post-secondary education is designed to provide information of a more general nature, applicable either across an occupation or entire industries, but at the very least they signal the capacity to absorb and apply material at a particular level of intensity.

One important property of credentials is that they take a long time to obtain. This can be a good thing for individuals just starting out in the labour market. With few skills and little to no experience, the length of the credential provides a signal to employers that the holder has the patience, drive and stamina to complete a credential. That's important information to employers, even if they do not understand all of the credential's specific features (e.g. the nature and quality of the study program and institution).

But that equation changes for mid-career learners. Once an individual has a track-record of achievement with various employers, what needs to be signalled by credentials changes? General skills fade in importance while more technical ones become more prominent. There is less of a need to show broad determination and patience, and a greater need to demonstrate specific competencies.

This has led in the past few years to a focus on what are called "micro-credentials". This phrase has a number of quite different meanings, which we review in section 1. In this paper we restrict the analysis specifically to refer to credentials which are made up of a single or very small group of courses, aimed mainly but not exclusively at mid-career learners, which provide evidence of mastery over very small topics and skills.

While micro-credentials may sound brilliant in theory, bringing them to market in a way that shows they have demonstrable labour market value is incredibly hard. Degrees issued by universities are widely accepted as a "currency" for skills because they have been around for several hundred years and employers all understand what the term means, even if they may evaluate their worth

differently based on the specific type of degree and the institution which issued it. New credentials take time to be accepted by the market: the introduction of degrees issued by colleges in Ontario, for instance, took several years to become widely acknowledged and appropriately compensated.

This delay creates a catch-22 for new initiatives like micro-credentials. Learners—particularly mid-career learners with high opportunity costs and many demands on their time—will not sign up for relatively unknown new credentials unless they have a reasonable expectation of a return on investment in the form of higher wages, greater job mobility, etc. But if employers do not understand a new credential, they will not reward it. And they are unlikely to understand it unless they start seeing the credential on a large number of CVs and understand the value of the holders' skills. And thus a promising initiative to raise the skill levels of mid-career workers becomes something of a hostage to a chicken-and-egg situation.

Though there are significant challenges to mainstreaming micro-credentials, there are also some clear paths to doing so. The purpose of this paper, prepared specifically for clients of *Higher Education Strategy Associates* and *The Strategic Counsel*, is to provide something of a roadmap for institutions interested in developing micro-credentials.

Thus, in **section 1**, we discuss briefly the multiple meanings of the term “micro-credential”, based on a detailed survey of over 30 micro-credential suppliers across North America, Asia and Australasia, and describe three prominent models from Singapore and the United States. In **section 2**, we show the results of an extensive survey of Canadian workers and employers and their views on skills and training and use it sketch the potential size of the micro-credential market in Canada. In **section 3** we review some the evidence about barriers to accessing programs like micro-credentials, and note the provisions in the new Canada Training Benefit/Canada Training Credit which could act as a real financial boon to micro-credentials, while in **sections 4** and **5**, we provide concrete advice to institutions with respect to design options for micro-credentials at Canadian universities and colleges.