



Exploring the Potential of Micro-credentials and Digital Badging: Scoping the Potential of Micro-credentials to Develop the Workforce

July 2021

**Dr Mary Pryor, University of Aberdeen
Dr Joy Perkins, University of Aberdeen**

Introduction

The economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 global health pandemic has heightened awareness of workforce upskilling, reskilling, and career change. Mary Pryor and Joy Perkins sketch out the need for employers and universities to reach out to each other, so that both understand how best to unlock the potential of micro-credentials, to reshape workforce development and short course learning.

Universities across the UK have a long-established history of delivering degrees across a multitude of academic and professionally accredited subjects, from Accountancy to Zoology. Typically, undergraduate degree courses, or macro-credentials, are studied over a three to five-year period, or even longer on a part-time basis. Economically, the higher education sector is relied upon to ensure academic rigour, as an integral underpinning of degrees, to supply a workforce with high-quality and relevant qualifications. Employers are also fully cognisant of the specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that they need to facilitate productive graduate transitions from higher education to the workplace. The impact of technology and automation advancements, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, however, have hurled the world of work into a state of flux. Shifting business needs, remote working patterns, displaced careers, and changing job roles, all necessitate urgent upskilling and reskilling of employees. Universities and employers find themselves at a critical juncture; opportunities for the workforce to engage with smaller, more flexible units of learning, so called 'micro-credentials', therefore, have gained traction as vehicles for the enhancement of present skills-sets and development of new proficiencies.

Emerging Alternative Credentials

Micro-credentials, discrete packets of short course learning and skills acquisition, may be recognised by the award of a digital certificate or badge. They can be a standalone qualification or form the starting point for degree-level study, by awarding credits for each successfully completed component. Also known as nanodegree, micro-degree, MOOC, micro-certification, amongst a litany of other variants, it is clear from our engagement with employers that the multiple terminologies are not well understood. Given that employers and employees are becoming prime consumers of micro-credentials, it would be ironic if the confusion of terms proved to be a barrier to their optimum use and implementation in the workplace. For change to happen, it is imperative that employers, universities, and other micro-credential providers are appraised of, and agree, the use of terminology to facilitate micro-credential awareness, approval, and acceptance.

Upskilling and Reskilling the Workforce

The [World Economic Forum, 2020](#), forecast that employers are expecting to reskill and upskill approximately 70% of their employees by 2025, to accommodate the need for broadening and augmenting employees' skills-sets. Demand for employer-supported reskilling and upskilling opportunities, including the uptake of micro-credentials is, thus, predicted to soar. Micro-credentials are designed to enable employees to be competent and productive, and organisations to remain competitive and address skills gaps in their workforces. Universities could capitalise on the situation by offering agile, rapid, and short course learning micro-credentials to reskill employees, and to foster a culture of lifelong learning. Given the pace of workplace change, however, it is vital that universities and organisations work synergistically to co-design appropriate micro-credentials, to ensure industry standards and to learn from each other. Taking a holistic approach to the development of micro-credentials is imperative, to add significant value to organisations across different employment sectors and organisational sizes, from micro-businesses to super corporates.

The Talent Pipeline

Given the growing interest and implementation of competency-based selection approaches by employers, there is unlocked potential in micro-credentials for job candidates and recruiters. These mini-sized qualifications have potential for applicants to showcase their proficiency in a skill or specialist area to the employer and could evidence a differentiating point between applicants, during the selection process. The current lack of awareness across the business world and industry, however, mitigates against their full use in recruitment and selection processes. Applicants could also be underselling their competencies in written applications and at interview because of their lack of understanding of the relevance and value of supporting micro-credentials.

Much stronger and clearer messages regarding micro-credential use and benefits should permeate universities, in tandem with the business world. By seeking to facilitate skills-based micro-credentials acquisition for students, during their period of studies, universities will be investing in student employability readiness for transition into the talent pipeline. A tangible benefit of such internal practice would be an enrichment of universities' credibility with employers. Already, university-employer partnerships are being forged to offer relevant workplace-related micro-credentials for employees at all stages of their working lives.

Interest Lifelong Learners

Accelerated by the pandemic, micro-credentials achieved through short learning courses have grown in popularity, not least with individuals on furlough, or who find themselves displaced in their career trajectory. The areas for learning are boundless, for example, Scottish Heritage, Android Development, Sustainability, and Mindfulness; opportunities to hone skills including programme coding, creativity, and business management are of appeal not only to employees but also to retirees. A whole new future beckons those who, hitherto, have only dreamed of studying in a particular subject area! Typically, a 10-credit micro-credential, studied flexibly over a 10-week period, would take 100 notional study hours. Compared to a typical Scottish 4-year undergraduate programme of 480 academic credits and 4,800 notional hours of study, their short time frame is clear. Micro-credentials offer universities an opportunity to engage with a wider segment of society, addressing and transforming the way degrees are studied, through stackable micro-credentials, which afford incremental credit acquisition for each successfully completed component. In addition, micro-credentials offer exciting opportunities for learners seeking flexible learning pathways, which may facilitate widening participation in Higher Education from under-represented societal groups.

The Future of Micro-credentials?

Micro-credentials afford a novel and exciting approach to enrich workforce development. The challenge now is for employers and universities to reach out to each other to forge productive partnerships to:

- Agree a clear and universal micro-credential language across stakeholders, to help rationalise micro-credentials terminology.
- Provide a much stronger and transparent message regarding the workforce benefits of micro-credentials, micro-credential standards, and how they can be used.
- Identify gaps and address demand-led skills and knowledge needs to fully cater for business, industry, and third-sector requirements.
- Co-create quality assured micro-credentials for reskilling and upskilling the workforce.

The next practical step is to agree collectively how best to achieve these goals.



Dr Mary Pryor is the Senior Academic Skills Adviser in the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Aberdeen. She works with students at all levels of study to develop their academic writing and critical thinking skills, and with Schools and disciplines to facilitate exchange of pedagogic ideas and skills development across the University. Her research interests include, embedding graduate attributes in the curriculum, and engaging employers to enhance teaching and learning.



Dr Joy Perkins is the Educational & Employability Development Adviser in the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Aberdeen. She works in partnership with academic Schools and other stakeholders, to enable cross-fertilisation of employability ideas and practice across the University. Her research interests and recent publications are in areas such as: enterprise education, work-integrated learning, and the role of employer engagement in curriculum development.

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2021
18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 0141 572 3420

Web: www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk