Making sense of Microcredentials

September 9, 2021
Bringing evidence-based research to the continued improvement of the postsecondary education system in Ontario. Focused on:

Access

Quality

System design

www.hecqo.ca
Interest in microcredentials

Traditional Model:
- Learn
- Work
- Retire

Lifelong Learning Model:
- Learn (Foundational Skills)
- Work
- Upskill
- Retire

Source: Adapted from McGowan & Shipley (2017)
Project Goals

1. Facilitate a common understanding

2. Provide evidence, i.e., insight into end-user perceptions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Prospective student survey</th>
<th>Canadian employer survey</th>
<th>Canadian PSI survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>n</strong></td>
<td>n(organizations)=44; n(individuals)=60</td>
<td>n=2000</td>
<td>n=139</td>
<td>n=131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrator</strong></td>
<td>Conducted by HEQCO</td>
<td>Conducted by Abacus Data.</td>
<td>Conducted by HEQCO.</td>
<td>Conducted by HEQCO.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Recruitment</strong></td>
<td>Voluntary sample recruited through employer and PSI surveys, BHER, CAUCE and snowball sampling.</td>
<td>Random sample drawn from survey panels.</td>
<td>Voluntary sample recruited by BHER.</td>
<td>Voluntary sample recruited by BHER, CiCan and CAUCE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target population</strong></td>
<td>Representatives of businesses/employers, postsecondary institutions and NGOs/not-for-profits; experts and consultants.</td>
<td>Canadian residents aged 18-64 not currently enrolled in PSE.</td>
<td>Representatives of Canadian employers.</td>
<td>Representatives of Canadian colleges, universities, institutes, polytechnics and CEGEPs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sampling</strong></td>
<td>Non-random and not representative.</td>
<td>Weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matched Canada’s working age population according to age, gender, educational attainment, and region.</td>
<td>Non-random and not representative.</td>
<td>Non-random and not representative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Margin of error</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/- 2.1%, 19 times out of 20.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results
HEQCO’s definition

“A microcredential is a representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials.”
Employer Perceptions

How familiar are you with the following terms for short, flexible credentials?

- Competency-based education
- Microcredential
- Digital/open badge
- Microcertification
- Stackable credential
- Alternative credentials
- Nanodegree
- Micromaster
- Short learning degree
- Nexus degree

- Extremely familiar
- Very familiar
- Moderately familiar
- Slightly familiar
- Not at all familiar

[Bar chart showing the percentage of familiarity for each term]
Figure 8. Level of Awareness or Experience with the Various Types of “Microcredentials” that May Appear on a Candidates’ Resume

- **Verified Certificate** (e.g. Coursera, EdX): 20% I have hired someone who earned this, 30% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 23% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 24% I have never heard of this, 3% Don’t know/not sure
- **Digital Badge**: 14% I have hired someone who earned this, 25% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 34% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 22% I have never heard of this, 3% Don’t know/not sure
- **MasterTrack Certificate**: 13% I have hired someone who earned this, 25% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 27% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 32% I have never heard of this, 4% Don’t know/not sure
- **Microdegree**: 11% I have hired someone who earned this, 22% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 28% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 34% I have never heard of this, 4% Don’t know/not sure
- **MicroMasters**: 10% I have hired someone who earned this, 19% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 31% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 36% I have never heard of this, 4% Don’t know/not sure
- **XSeries certificate**: 10% I have hired someone who earned this, 16% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 23% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 46% I have never heard of this, 6% Don’t know/not sure
- **Nanodegree**: 7% I have hired someone who earned this, 19% I have encountered this in screening/hiring candidates, 27% I have heard of this, but don’t know much about it, 41% I have never heard of this, 5% Don’t know/not sure
Imagine you came across a microcredential on the application of a job candidate. How favourably would you consider the following features of that microcredential?
Employer Perceptions

Imagine that your organization is considering offering microcredentials for internal staff training/development. How favourably would you consider the following possible features of a microcredential?

- Competency-based: 69% highly favourable, 21% slightly favourable, 6% neither
- Industry-aligned: 60% highly favourable, 26% slightly favourable, 9% neither
- Flexible: 61% highly favourable, 21% slightly favourable, 10% neither, 6% slightly unfavourable
- Accredited: 59% highly favourable, 29% slightly favourable, 8% neither
- Affordable: 52% highly favourable, 27% slightly favourable, 16% neither
- Standardized: 45% highly favourable, 32% slightly favourable, 17% neither
- Short: 43% highly favourable, 27% slightly favourable, 22% neither, 6% slightly unfavourable
- Transferable: 42% highly favourable, 33% slightly favourable, 20% neither, 5% slightly unfavourable
- Issued by a Canadian university: 41% highly favourable, 31% slightly favourable, 22% neither
- Online: 38% highly favourable, 29% slightly favourable, 24% neither, 5% slightly unfavourable
- Issued by a Canadian college: 38% highly favourable, 38% slightly favourable, 19% neither, 6% slightly unfavourable
- Verifiable: 37% highly favourable, 34% slightly favourable, 25% neither
- Stackable: 33% highly favourable, 34% slightly favourable, 29% neither
- Digitally integrated: 27% highly favourable, 26% slightly favourable, 40% neither, 5% slightly unfavourable
- Digitally secure: 23% highly favourable, 18% slightly favourable, 53% neither

Legend:
- Highly favourable
- Slightly favourable
- Neither
- Slightly unfavourable
- Highly unfavourable
Employer Perceptions

Figure 10. Importance of Credential Issuer Attributes in Signaling Quality

- Validation by industry/evidence of alignment with employer needs: 19% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 37% Important, 10% Somewhat important, 1% Not at all important
- Experience with previous hires and performance results: 19% Extremely important, 36% Very important, 31% Important, 10% Somewhat important, 3% Not at all important
- General reputation and brand: 18% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 33% Important, 14% Somewhat important, 3% Not at all important
- Operating history/longevity: 16% Extremely important, 36% Very important, 33% Important, 13% Somewhat important, 2% Not at all important
- Transparency and granularity in terms of competencies and outcomes: 45% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 38% Important, 13% Somewhat important, 2% Not at all important
- Issued by a local and well-known organization: 13% Extremely important, 31% Very important, 33% Important, 18% Somewhat important, 5% Not at all important
- Third-party endorsement of quality or accreditation: 11% Extremely important, 24% Very important, 35% Important, 24% Somewhat important, 7% Not at all important
Have you heard of the term microcredentials?

- Yes, definitely: 8%
- Yes, probably: 17%
- No, probably not: 26%
- No, definitely not: 37%
- Unsure: 12%

While 25% have heard of microcredentials, only 8% say they know the term well.
Prospective Student Perceptions

Would you be interested in microcredentials for…

Professional development
- Yes, definitely: 27%
- Yes, probably: 42%
- No, probably not: 14%
- No, definitely not: 7%
- Unsure: 10%

Personal development
- Yes, definitely: 25%
- Yes, probably: 43%
- No, probably not: 16%
- No, definitely not: 8%
- Unsure: 10%
Prospective Student Perceptions

Microcredentials can have a variety of different characteristics. How important are the following potential characteristics of a microcredential?

- Affordable: 39% Extremely important, 30% Very important, 19% Somewhat important, 3% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Employer recognized: 32% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 21% Somewhat important, 4% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Flexible: 30% Extremely important, 34% Very important, 23% Somewhat important, 4% Not that important, 7% Not at all important
- Accredited: 29% Extremely important, 32% Very important, 24% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Transferable: 28% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 24% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Standardized: 24% Extremely important, 35% Very important, 26% Somewhat important, 4% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Short: 23% Extremely important, 35% Very important, 27% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Competency-based: 23% Extremely important, 35% Very important, 27% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 8% Not at all important
- Online: 22% Extremely important, 30% Very important, 29% Somewhat important, 7% Not that important, 9% Not at all important
- Verifiable: 21% Extremely important, 34% Very important, 26% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 12% Not at all important
- Local: 20% Extremely important, 32% Very important, 29% Somewhat important, 8% Not that important, 9% Not at all important
- Stackable: 18% Extremely important, 33% Very important, 31% Somewhat important, 7% Not that important, 10% Not at all important
- Industry aligned: 18% Extremely important, 36% Very important, 28% Somewhat important, 5% Not that important, 10% Not at all important
- Digitally integrated: 15% Extremely important, 26% Very important, 31% Somewhat important, 12% Not that important, 5% Not at all important

Legend:
- Extremely important
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not that important
- Not at all important
- Unsure
Prospective Student Perceptions

Stackability
- Would lead to additional education or training in the future

Value
- Better value
- More benefit to my job or career advancement

38% Relevance
- Required in my field of work
- Better fit for my personal needs
- More applied/relevant to my work

28% Streamlined
- Faster
- Cheaper
- More convenient

2 in 5 Americans [38%] say the most important factors in choosing an education program are whether it is related to their work and suited to their personal needs.
How favourably would you consider the following possible features of a microcredential?

- Industry-aligned: 74% highly favourable, 12% slightly favourable, 6% neither, 17% slightly unfavourable, 9% highly unfavourable, 3% not sure.
- Short: 74% highly favourable, 13% slightly favourable, 3% neither, 14% slightly unfavourable, 7% highly unfavourable, 6% not sure.
- Common understanding/definitions: 70% highly favourable, 14% slightly favourable, 7% neither, 17% slightly unfavourable, 12% highly unfavourable, 9% not sure.
- Competency-based: 67% highly favourable, 19% slightly favourable, 7% neither, 17% slightly unfavourable, 12% highly unfavourable, 9% not sure.
- Stackable: 64% highly favourable, 17% slightly favourable, 6% neither, 24% slightly unfavourable, 9% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Verifiable: 61% highly favourable, 17% slightly favourable, 12% neither, 21% slightly unfavourable, 9% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Flexible: 59% highly favourable, 21% slightly favourable, 12% neither, 24% slightly unfavourable, 9% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Transferable: 55% highly favourable, 29% slightly favourable, 9% neither, 24% slightly unfavourable, 17% highly unfavourable, 8% not sure.
- Affordable: 48% highly favourable, 27% slightly favourable, 17% neither, 12% slightly unfavourable, 9% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Recognizes prior learning: 47% highly favourable, 33% slightly favourable, 12% neither, 20% slightly unfavourable, 10% highly unfavourable, 8% not sure.
- Digitally integrated: 47% highly favourable, 24% slightly favourable, 18% neither, 33% slightly unfavourable, 12% highly unfavourable, 8% not sure.
- Digitally secure: 43% highly favourable, 22% slightly favourable, 20% neither, 21% slightly unfavourable, 10% highly unfavourable, 9% not sure.
- Accredited: 32% highly favourable, 29% slightly favourable, 10% neither, 21% slightly unfavourable, 7% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Standardized: 28% highly favourable, 30% slightly favourable, 9% neither, 22% slightly unfavourable, 6% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
- Online: 26% highly favourable, 28% slightly favourable, 7% neither, 22% slightly unfavourable, 6% highly unfavourable, 7% not sure.
Quality Markers

**Relevant**
Consulted or involved industry/community

**Accredited**
Recognized or issued by a professional accrediting body

**Standardized**
Meets a government-set quality standard

**Assessed**
The learner must demonstrate skills/knowledge to earn the credential

**Flexible**
The pace and/or structure of learning can be personalized

**Stackable**
Can be "stacked" or combined toward a larger credential, e.g. a diploma or degree
WHO IS THE LEARNER?

PSE Student
- Develop transferable skills
- Broader knowledge base
- Participate in workplace training

Employed Adult
- Adapt to changing job requirements
- Upskill (develop competencies aligned with prior experience)

Recent Graduate
- Address skill gaps for employment

Unemployed Adult
- Explore new opportunities
Thank you!

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