

To Understand the Non-degree Credentialing World, Go Global

Program on Skills, Credentials & Workforce Policy, George Washington Institute of Public Policy, George Washington University: Holly Zanville, Senior Scholar; Stephen Crawford, Research Professor; Kyle W. Albert, Assistant Research Professor

Many nations are witnessing an explosion of interest in non-degree credentials such as certificates, industry-awarded certifications, occupational licenses, digital badges, and other microcredentials. While these credentials play a unique role in talent development and labor markets globally, surprisingly little is known about their prevalence, quality, evolution, and value for workers and employers. Not surprisingly, American scholars who study these issues are disconnected from their counterparts in other nations.

In a global economy, developing and holding research data within your own nation's knowledge halls is ill-advised. First, because major employers and many workers operate across national boundaries. Second, because advances in digital data standards for describing credentials enable for the first-time new levels of transparency and comparability -- across nations' credentialing systems. Put plainly: important work could go faster and better if we could access information and share ideas beyond our national borders.

In a world trying to recover from a pandemic grimly shared -- facing recovering economies, inequitable impacts on diverse populations, and unheralded upheavals in workforce systems -- this is the time to work together. This is why we're exploring the idea of an international "network of networks" focused on nondegree credentialing. The new alliance could be comprised of formally and informally organized groups already operating in other nations. The mission: to come together to share knowledge and conduct cross-national research about nondegree credentialing with the goal of helping us all.

A quick look around the world

Efforts to understand and recognize non-degree credentials in the U.S. are still in the early stages. Many organizations are working on these issues such as [Credential Engine](#), [Workcred](#), [Corporation for a Skilled Workforce](#), [Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#), [Education and Employment Research Center](#) at Rutgers University, and Northeastern University's [Center for the Future of Higher Education and Talent Strategy](#). Our own [Non-Degree Credentials Research Network](#) (NCRN) founded at George Washington University in 2018 with assistance from [Lumina Foundation](#) currently sponsors information sharing and collaborative work among 77 research members and 97 affiliated stakeholders.

Interest in short-term and non-degree credentials as tools for achieving public policy objectives was growing prior to COVID-19. In the wake of the pandemic and mass unemployment accompanying it, such interest is only intensifying. In the U.S., there is bipartisan support in Congress for expanding Pell grant eligibility to non-degree, short-term training programs. Two major federal grant programs intended to provide relief from COVID-19 in the summer of 2020 -- the Department of Education's *Education Stabilization Fund* and Department of Labor's *Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants* -- explicitly noted the potential role of non-degree programs in enabling a rapid economic recovery.

Despite these developments, the U.S. trails many nations in work on non-degree credentials. GWU's early studies of what other countries and regions are doing to increase access to non-degree programs has already identified many examples -- in Europe, Asia-Pacific, Canada, Africa, Australia, and multinational projects that are benchmarking various countries to identify and promote best practices related to credentialing and skill development. Our preliminary investigations have resulted in several takeaways:

- Many nations are more advanced than the U.S. in addressing the policy issues associated with nondegree credentialing, as part of both their initial education pathways for students and as part of continuous (lifelong) learning processes linked to workforce needs and upward mobility for individual workers.
- There is especially noteworthy effort in Europe. A 2020 report to the European Commission identified an "urgent need" to expand the number of short-term programs available and opportunities to access such programs. The fall 2020 European Commission's Communication on the *European Education Area* featured a commitment to work towards a European approach to microcredentials. This approach

was also included in the *European Skills Agenda* launched in July that is expected to contribute to implementation of the European Commission's *Digital Education Action Plan*.

- There is also growing interest in non-degree credentials among employers. In recent years, some of the largest global corporations, such as Google, Apple, Starbucks, and IBM, have stopped requiring specific test scores or degrees from candidates applying for certain positions. These policies are being applied in some cases on a worldwide basis, bringing significant changes to recruitment of employees and human resource management practices in some parts of the world. New technologies for processing and evaluating candidates have the potential to both amplify the role of non-degree credentials (e.g., by weeding out candidates without specific credentials or combinations of credentials) and to replace credentials with assessments of competency. At the same time, platforms are emerging to provide students, employers, and universities with micro-internships that can result in microcredentials, potentially transforming access to work-based learning.
- The providers of postsecondary education and training have also been demonstrating growing interest in non-degree credentials. U.S. community colleges are increasingly embedding certifications into their curricula and awarding sub-baccalaureate credentials incrementally as individuals complete requirements. This enables individuals to potentially earn several non-degree credentials concurrently with, or in the process of attaining, a degree. Similar developments are occurring in universities and non-traditional training providers. Europeans are also being offered new opportunities to earn non-degree credentials while working toward degrees. Several leading institutions are collaborating to create an entirely new virtual university based upon microcredentials, the European Council of Innovative Universities. Interest in work-based microcredentials in STEM occupations is also growing, with trade associations and labor unions in both Europe and the U.S. investing in the apprenticeship model for training skilled technical workers.
- Researchers and policymakers in other nations appear to be focusing efforts initially on their research universities and microcredentialing at both the undergraduate and graduate level. In contrast, professional and trade associations seem to play a comparatively outsized role in the provision of nondegree credentials in the U.S., where most focus has been at the undergraduate level.
- The importance of platforms – using technology to link education providers with companies and with student needs – and to verify learning via blockchain (learning passports/ wallets) are major concerns of the research and policy community globally.
- Scholars in most nations appear to be receiving funds for work in this area from national ministries; This is not the case for U.S. researchers given our nation's more decentralized systems.

What could we work on together?

The global network of scholars could work on answering questions we would all benefit from knowing more about, such as:

- What typologies or glossaries of key terms are in use by nations to describe nondegree credentials and how useable are the databases to support cross-national work?
- What are the key networks of researchers in the nondegree credential area worldwide? What does each network focus on? How long have they been in existence? Who funds the networks? What are the key products of the network?
- In what ways are national qualification frameworks adding nondegree credentials to their frameworks, how are skills and competency frameworks being handled in these developments, and how could qualification frameworks be better designed to meet the needs of learners and employers in changing education and job markets?
- What are the top five areas of overlap in research interests between member networks in area of nondegree credentials? Why are these urgent, and what are the plans if any to conduct research, and over what timeline?

- What are the main data sources researchers are using for their research and to what extent are they usable for international researchers?
- What is the landscape of employer-awarded nondegree credentialing worldwide, and to what extent are companies partnering with higher education in offering nondegree credentials, or working on their own and/or with third-party organizations or vendors?

Call to action

Interest in non-degree credentials is high as non-degree credentials take their place on the worldwide stage. We can find ways to share knowledge and assist one another in disseminating information to communities worldwide as nations and regions plan and implement innovations in non-degree credentialing. None of us can afford to study key credentialing system changes in a vacuum. Lacking knowledge of international data and lacking a common language around non-degree credentials will disadvantage U.S. researchers in their work – and researchers around the world. To understand the nondegree credentialing world, the call to action must be: “go global.”