OCUFA

Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des associations des professeurs des universités de l'Ontario

Micro-credentials briefing note

What are micro-credentials?

Micro-credentials is a term that has gained increasing popularity in the postsecondary sector. Generally, it refers to short-term, highly targeted certificate courses focused on a specific skill or knowledge acquirement. These can be completed quickly, and often online. They are also referred to as micro-programs, nano-degrees, badges, and micro-masters.

Micro-credentials are delivered in a variety of ways ranging from stand-alone, customized programs designed for specific employers; to individual components of a diploma or degree program that can be "stacked" into a larger credential; to program "add-ons" that can be collected by students in addition to their degree requirements with the hopes of increasing their chances of employment. The length of micro-credentials varies. Some are 10-weeks long and others involve only a few hours of seminars; postsecondary institutions are also offering boot-camp courses that are about two days long.

Why micro-credentials?

Proponents of micro-credentials argue that they help close the skills gap for individuals who need to "upskill" or "re-skill" in a short time frame in order to access certain work opportunities without having to enroll in a full degree or diploma program. Some argue that micro-credentials are a way to bypass the "red-tape" and "bureaucracy" of postsecondary degrees and institutions in favour of more focused knowledge and skills.

These skills and credentials are used to bolster resumes and job-seeking profiles.

To give an example, this is how Humber college explains micro-credentials: A micro-credential is a single, shareable endorsement or attestation of a learner's achievement of specific knowledge, skills or even competencies. Micro-credentials are signified by a digital badge that can be included in an online resume, portfolio, or website. They contain embedded data about the micro-credentials, where and when they were earned, and the competencies assessed to gain them.

Micro-credentials tend to be more popular in the college system, although they are steadily creeping into the university sector in Ontario. In the last few months, McMaster University, OCAD University, and Ontario Tech have launched micro-credential programs.

Micro-credentials in Ontario

In Ontario, the Ford government has opted to invest in micro-credentials as part of its COVID-19 recovery response to offer "quick pathways to employment, minimizing the amount of time workers are removed from the labour market compared to more traditional credentials."

In November 2020, as part of the budget announcement, the Ontario government announced a $59.5 million investment in micro-credentials over three years. The government will invest this new funding for micro-credentials in:

- ▶ creating an online portal to access micro-credential training opportunities;
- ▶ creating new micro-credentials in response to regional labour market needs;
- ▶ strengthening partnerships between postsecondary institutions, training providers and employers;
- ▶ launching a public awareness campaign to promote micro-credentials among learners and employers;
- ▶ supporting students with financial need to pay for education geared to in-demand jobs, through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP);
- ▶ developing a virtual passport that tracks a person's learning experience.

The micro-credential funding announcement came on the heels of a series of consultations by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities earlier in the summer. Both OCUFA and the OPSEU unit representing college faculty (CAAT-A) were invited to a consultation session with a 24-hour notice. Ministry officials informed OCUFA and OPSEU that micro-credentials were a high-priority policy area that the Ministry was interested in exploring. At the meeting, both OCUFA and OPSEU noted their concerns and strong opposition to the introduction of micro-credentials in an already underfunded system that offers pathways for reskilling and upskilling through recognized diploma and certificate programs.

Prior to rolling out this new funding, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities also ran two pilot programs—one of which was through eCampusOntario—to test the potential for micro-credentials. eCampusOntario's pilot program included multiple partnerships with universities.

Furthermore, the Ontario government has also indicated that students taking micro-credentials would be eligible for OSAP, without increasing the already limited pool of OSAP funding available, and despite the $671 million OSAP cut the Ontario government implemented two years ago. Opening up OSAP to those pursuing micro-credentials will put additional pressure on an already very limited student assistance budget. Instead of granting OSAP access for credentials with questionable prospects, the Ontario government would be better off improving the quality of and access to existing postsecondary programs.

Micro-credentials in other jurisdictions

Within Canada, the Alberta government has heavily promoted micro-credentials. Several universities and colleges in Alberta are already experimenting with micro-credentials and the current Alberta government, similar to the Ontario government, is showing interest in micro-credentials as a reskilling instrument where the postsecondary sector would provide the labour market with in-demand skills.

The *Alberta Colleges Economic Recovery Task Force* report lists several recommendations regarding micro-credentials, including:

- the Alberta government directly funding the industry to contract with colleges;
- investing top-up funds in the Canada-Alberta Job Grant to offer upskilling and reskilling to existing employees in the private sector at no cost to businesses;
- offering financial support to unemployed Albertas who wish to pursue micro-credentials.

The report also calls for "the creation of a system to measure core skills to help the shift from credential-focused recruitment to skills-based recruitment."

Most recently, the government of British Columbia has also announced a $4 million micro-credentialing program funded jointly by the federal and provincial governments. The program will provide 24 micro-credential options offered through 15 postsecondary education institutions in the province.

As more provinces are considering micro-credentials, the infrastructure for providing and administering them is also being quickly developed both at federal and provincial levels. In December 2020, The Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC) announced the launch of a national, bilingual "credential wallet" called MyCreds/MesCertif. The wallet and the comprehensive website that supports it will be available to postsecondary education institutions to help them in delivering digitized and portable credentials and transcripts, including badges and micro-credentials.

While micro-credentials are a fairly new addition to the Canadian postsecondary system, they have been implemented and tested in other countries over the last few years.

For example, in an August 2020 report presented by PricewaterhouseCoopers to the Australian government, the multinational recommended micro-credentials as the "flexible and modular" educational pathways that will be needed post-pandemic. PwC is arguing that "business-led upskilling can drive productivity and growth" through a national micro-credentialing system. It is important to note that Australian employers cut their investment in employee training by 40 per cent in the last two decades.

Companies like Coursera and edX have also been partnering with universities in recent years to build certificates and offer micro-credentials and MOOCs. In a 2019 study on the benefits and costs of alternative credentials, researchers revealed survey data of learners who had participated in micro-credential and MOOC programs showed that, unlike what was advertised, these programs did not have any meaningful impact on the learners job prospects or career development. The study also showed a low completion rate for these credentials and concluded that "apparently low program completion rates likely reflect that most learners do not perceive the benefits to outweigh the costs."

The problems with micro-credentials

Micro-credentials and COVID-19 pandemic recovery

Micro-credentials have gained popularity in the wake of COVID-19 and are falsely being presented as a solution to the economic crisis accompanying the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted already existing uncertainties and unpredictability for students and workers. These times of extreme uncertainty have proven the importance of a university education that can adapt to the ever-changing economy and labour market. Furthermore, recognized degrees are essential for providing workers with the skills to adapt to this ever-changing economy.

University education provides students with a well-rounded education that includes deep and consistent engagement with a variety of forms of knowledge—including debates and controversy—preparing students for work and life afterwards. The role of a postsecondary degree cannot be reduced to teaching a particular skill, and its benefits should last well beyond a few years.

In comparison, micro-credentials are very short-sighted. They flatten and simplify learning and a wholesome university education into a supposedly easily measured skillset. They deny students the well-rounded knowledge they need to survive and thrive in our ever-changing world. They promise fast degrees and fast results that supposedly meet momentary labour market needs, but which cannot keep up with labour market needs or advances in knowledge.

Furthermore, most micro-credentials are only provided online. OCUFA's recent poll of faculty, students, and staff at Ontario's universities speaks to the importance of relationships and human interaction in the teaching and learning process, which have been missing with the move to emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19.

The increased attention micro-credentials are receiving is alarming, especially in light of the pandemic. As workers are losing their jobs, micro-credential advocates are promising band-aid solutions instead of real investment to ensure that students and workers have the well-rounded, wholesome education and training they need to survive and thrive in our ever-changing world.

De-skilling workers: A whole is greater than the sum of its parts

De-skilling workers and students is certainly not the answer to the economic aftermath of COVID-19. While micro-credential advocates suggest that "stacking" micro-credentials will eventually lead to degrees or full credentials, this vision misses the key point that a degree is more than the sum of its parts. Stacking many micro-credentials into a degree won't lead to a wholesome education or comprehensive training. Research shows that employers clearly distinguish degrees as "more substantive job qualifications that represent a greater level of commitment, depth, achievement and perseverance" and "an achievement that is distinct from simply mastering the knowledge and skills in a particular program."

Further, de-skilling has many negative implications, some deadly. While not a result of micro-credentialling, nursing education is a good example of the detrimental impacts of de-skilling. In recent years, several jurisdictions, including Ontario, have explored the option of offering stand-alone college-level nursing degrees, independent from universities. Decoupling nursing education from research-based universities can shift the focus from a well-rounded, research-based education to a narrowly focused technical one, thus harming both the graduates and the broader public in time. Nursing degrees awarded by universities, as

research institutions, ensure that graduating students have a well-rounded, research-based education that gives graduating nurses the research, scientific, and technical skills they need to serve their patients and keep up with the ever-changing landscape of medicine, as the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown.

There is ample evidence, including a 2016 study in multiple European hospitals, showing that the proportion of nurses holding a university bachelor's degree positively impacts the quality of care for patients and results in reduced mortality rates.

De-skilling undermines workers' earning potential and largely benefits employers at the expense of their staff. It allows employers to pay less for workers who have badges and micro-credentials as opposed to those with full training and degrees. Furthermore, data from Australia suggests that employers are spending less on employee training and are increasingly offloading this responsibility onto employees. Instead of preparing students for stable long-term jobs, micro-credentials support the gig economy that is based on exploiting workers. Gig economy workers do not have collective bargaining rights, access to health care, guaranteed minimum wage, or paid sick leave.

De-skilling benefits no one. Whether through micro-credentials or otherwise, it is a cynical cost-saving measure by the government that will undermine a worker's autonomy and create more precarity in Ontario's workforce.

Undermining the value of a university education

One of the main attractions to micro-credentials is the increasingly exorbitant cost of a university education, which is a barrier to many. Yet, instead of investing in accessible postsecondary education and doing away with high tuition fees, governments are turning to band-aid, cost-saving solutions such as micro-credentials.

In a chronically underfunded postsecondary system, micro-credentials serve to distort university priorities even further. The Ontario government's funding of micro-credentials—the only new funding promised other than funding for postsecondary infrastructure, provides fast cash to universities that are starved of public funding. Government funding of micro-credentials encourages universities to provide these badges to gain promised additional public funding and may sideline the pedagogical considerations and adverse implications of micro-credentials.

While micro-credentials may promise fast returns, in the long term they will have adverse impacts on students' job prospects and the value of their education. The short-sighted vision of micro-credentials will threaten the purpose of a university education in the long-term.

Regulation of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials are not universally defined or regulated, which raises questions about their portability and the quality and effectiveness of the training they provide.

Because micro-credentials are not universal, and not uniformly defined, their regulation is weak or non-existent, which brings into question the quality of the training or education they

provide. This disadvantages students, as these badges may not deliver what they promise. The fees institutions can charge for them are also not regulated.

There is a further question about governance and curriculum when it comes to micro-credentials. There is a glaring lack of control over micro-credentials due to the lack of regional accreditation standards attached to them. It is unclear who will teach them, how their curricula will be developed, what resources will be dedicated to developing them, and who will be tasked with doing so.

This lack of standardization of badges and micro-credentials disadvantages their earners, both in terms of their transferability, their value, and the quality of knowledge and training they provide. By comparison, university degrees are universally recognized and give their holders a certain level of mobility and transferability of skills across professions and jurisdictions, which micro-credentials do not provide.

As an example, McMaster University plans to use "a blockchain platform for students to store micro-credentials on an app downloaded to their phones." In effect, this would mean that students become the "custodians of the qualification without the need for verification by a university registrar."

Further, it is unclear whether students who are enrolled in these programs have access to university supports or representation through their students' union or an institution's existing appeals process.

It is important for micro-credential providers to be clear about what micro-credentials are and what they are not. Students who have not completed an undergraduate degree should be made aware of the pros and cons of these alternative credentials.