Micro-credentials Untethered: A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing?

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Micro-credentials are the latest shiny new thing increasingly attracting educators’ attention. Indeed, 2021 may become known as the year of micro-credentials. On the surface, the micro-credentialing movement offers great promise in helping to redesign and even reimagine more future-fit and complementary credential frameworks to enhance employability, continuous professional development and the goal of a thriving learning society. But is there a danger the micro-credential may be a wolf in sheep’s clothing?

Introduction

In June 2021, Google announced 1000 scholarships for free study for Dublin jobseekers (O’Dea, 2021). Successful recipients can complete a range of online courses delivered through Coursera. Google has a stated goal of disrupting established education models through their new Career Certificates, which they claim will be recognised as the equivalent of a full bachelor’s degree for recruitment purposes (OECD, 2021a). Other high-profile companies are also offering new types of learning experiences that both challenge and complement the traditional university degree.

Removing the Sheepskin

There is a growing assertion that “…skills, rather than occupations or qualifications, form the job currency of the future” (Deloitte, 2019, p.19). The ‘sheepskin effect’ of higher education where its ‘intrinsic worth’ has little to do with the time and effort that students devote to their studies, but rather the parchment obtained at the end, is believed to be losing its employability value (Technológico de Monterrey, 2019). Whether or not this claim is true, it is one of the reasons cited why Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) need to develop a micro-credential strategy. There is evidence from around the globe that like sheep an increasing number of institutions are rushing to follow early micro-credentialing pioneers by repackaging their traditional offerings to prepare more work-ready graduates (Brown, et al., 2021a). Cote and White (2020) expand on why HEIs need to embrace micro-credentials:

First, traditional teaching and learning models have not adapted adequately to changing student demands and labour market needs. Higher education—particularly the university sector—has been confronted with a growing list of critiques to the still-dominant, campus-focused program models: long and relatively inflexible programs; inadequate recognition of prior learning; slow or limited innovation in pedagogy; insufficient student supports for career-readiness; weak alignment to labour market needs; and a limited commitment to online and digital-enabled learning (p. 8).

Beware of the Wolf

Just another fad? In a stinging critique of micro-credentials, Ralston (2021, p. 83) argues they are nothing more than a case of ‘learning innovation theater’. At a deeper level, he argues that HEIs are selling their soul to business interests and market forces by unbundling the degree to quickly bolster their profits. The emphasis on future skills is at the expense of educating the whole person, as Ralston (2021) writes:
The craze represents a betrayal of higher education’s higher purpose and a loss for students and faculty who continue to see university learning as more than vocational training (p. 92).

This line of critique argues the drive to unbundle the traditional degree can be traced to the forces of the ‘neoliberal learning economy’ (Ralson, 2021, p. 83). From this viewpoint, Higher Education has become a form of a commodity, marketed and sold and acquired like any other commodity. Wheelahan and Moodie (2021, p.1) offer a similar line of critique arguing that micro-credentials are ‘gig qualifications for a gig economy’. While critique is usually a valuable source of insight, sweeping generalisations though are unhelpful as micro-credentials are being developed in a multitude of contexts with a variety of objectives from fulfilling lifelong learning to broadening participation. They should, therefore, not be treated as a single uniform entity.

Charting the Field

The field of micro-credentials is complex. There is no global consensus on the conception of the term ‘micro-credential’ (Oliver, 2021). To further confuse matters, several other labels are commonly used instead of, or interchangeably with, the term. Despite this problem, in response to the COVID pandemic, many governments around the world have been attracted to micro-credentials as part of their strategy to get people back to work (OECD, 2021b). In Ontario, Canada, for example, the Provincial Government announced in November 2020, $59.5 million over three years for a major micro-credential development programme (Ontario Budget, 2020). The previous month an exciting Irish initiative, MC2 was launched, with €12 million available under the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) to develop a national multi-campus micro-credential system over five years (IUA, 2020). The growing investment in this area is evidence:

Micro-credentials are seen as a valuable tool by institutional leaders (OECD, 2021b, p. 3).

Interestingly, Usher (2021) describes the current attraction of micro-credentials as being like “catnip to politicians”. While cats might be less dangerous than wolves there is a degree of memory loss in some of the claims about the potential of micro-credentials. After all, micro-credentials are already “huge and hiding in plain sight” (Campus Morning Mail, 2021). An Australian study found there were 2.6 million people already enrolled in non-qualification ‘training bundles’, primarily to meet regulatory requirements in workplace safety, emergency preparedness, and authority to operate (Palmer, 2021). The study also found this market is largely ‘private’ with largely no government contribution. In Canada, the St. John’s Ambulance has been offering fee-paying short courses in basic First Aid for well over a century. In fact, these courses were first offered in 1833 and now more than half a million Canadians annually seek to complete St. John’s certificates (Toronto Workforce Innovation Group, 2021). In 2020, over 10,000 jobs posted online in Toronto were found to have required some form of first aid training.

While we have limited Irish data on similar courses, the key point is that smaller formal and non-formal training bundles have existed for many years. Therefore, the concept of micro-credentials is not a new one (Oliver, 2019). Hudak and Camilleri (2021) reiterate this point:
For decades, short courses have been an essential part of adult education and have had a prominent role in continuing professional education in many professions. In diving instruction, vendor-led IT certification, and in medical continuing professional development, they are even the dominant form of education. The idea of ‘unbundling’ Higher Education into smaller parcels, functions and courses has been frequently mentioned in literature since at least 1975, while in European policy making the idea of offering short courses for reskilling has been present since at least 2001 (p. 5).

Remapping the Landscape
An important distinction needs to be made between ‘older’ and ‘newer’ types of micro-credentials. Importantly, many of the older types of alternative credentials appear to serve different purposes from traditional macro-credentials. They are often awarded by different types of organisations based on different standards, professional frameworks and/or quality assurance processes.

Figure 1: The New Credential Ecology

To help illustrate the relationships between different types of credentials, Brown, et al. (2021a) have attempted to map the new and emerging credential landscape. Figure 1 presents four credential quadrants across two axes. At one end of the y-axis, we position traditional macro-credentials and credit-bearing micro-credentials. On the x-axis, the degree to which credentials and related units of learning are bundled together by the awarding body is depicted; in contrast at the other end to the level of personal choice learners have over how they wish to make up their own learning bundle. In this typology, micro-credentials are differentiated from other types of credentials on the basis of their unbundled, credit-bearing, and stackable nature. However, the distinction between quadrants is not as clear-cut in reality. To help add more clarity, the European Commission’s Higher Education Consultation Group on Micro-credentials proposed the following truncated definition:

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards (European Commission, 2020, p. 10).
This definition makes it explicit that a micro-credential is a documented award by a trusted body to signify that a learner upon assessment has achieved learning outcomes of a small volume of learning against transparent standards and in compliance with agreed quality assurance processes (Brown, et al., 2021a). Ideally, micro-credentials should be referenced to, or embedded within, the European Qualification Framework (EQF) as well as National Qualification Frameworks (MICROBOL, 2021). However, our Irish national survey of employers shows that this definition needs to take greater account of industry settings and workplace training (Nic Giolla Mhichil, et al, 2021).

**Better Plotting the Literature**

While progress has been made on the definition front, there remains a lack of data on the value of both older and newer types of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are largely data deserts when it comes to understanding tangible individual and societal benefits. Accordingly, in 2021 we undertook a ‘state-of-the-art’ literature review on micro-credentials for the European Commission (Brown, et al., 2021b). After following a tripartite methodological approach, outlined in Figure 2, the search strategy identified 149 relevant publications. A second set of inclusion criteria were then developed to screen those publications most relevant to the European context. For comparative purposes, this subsample of publications (n=45) is presented alongside the larger sample.

Figure 2: The Tripartite Methodological Approach

Figure 3 illustrates the drivers and attractors identified in analysing the literature. We found inherent tensions, mutually nested connections and competing worldviews in the positioning of micro-credentials. On the premise that ‘It is theory that decides what we can observe’ (Stachel, 2002, p. 238), the literature serves to remind us that education systems consist of palettes with conflicting ideological, epistemological, and pedagogical assumptions. While overly simplistic at the root of these assumptions are two broad worldviews: (a) the tradition of the Learning Society, and (b) the influence of the Knowledge-Economy.

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Figure 3: Drivers and Attractors for Micro-credentials

Not surprisingly, a strong Knowledge-Economy discourse is woven throughout our analysis of the wider sample of literature covering areas related to employability (64%), closing skill gaps in response to the changing nature of work (60%) and to support CPD and workplace training (60%). These drivers were often supported by publications making bold predictions such as “…that around 85% of the jobs that today’s learners will be doing in 2030 haven’t been invented yet” (The Institute for the Future, 2017, p. 14).

At the same time, understanding the rapid growth of the micro-credential movement requires a type of ‘double vision’ as imbued in the discourse are efforts to support new models of pedagogy (18%), increase flexibility for learning (54%), enhance access and new pathways to formal education (20%), and promote life-long learning (48%). From a learner perspective, micro-credentials are posited to provide an alternative approach to promoting flexible, accessible to learning that today’s learners increasingly require, as:

Frontloading skills and competencies through our schools and universities is not sufficient to prepare active and well-educated citizens for the rapidly changing nature of work and to actively participate in building a more sustainable future (Brown, et al., 2021a, p. 2).

What is clear from the above drivers is that the competing languages of persuasion associated with the micro-credential movement are part of a complex milieu of change forces and social, cultural, and economic influences. Notably, explicit neo-liberal economic drivers were evident in fewer than 15% of publications. While micro-credential drivers in the highly relevant sample centred on a wide range of societal issues, particularly employability (85%) and life-long learning-related agendas (67%), other key policy areas such as the Green Deal, and equity and social inclusion were only sparsely mentioned in the literature.
In Search of Greener Grass
The answer to the question of whether micro-credentials are a wolf in sheep's clothing depends to a large extent on which underlying drivers you choose to emphasise. The lesson for Irish HEIs is to clearly define their own drivers and the outcomes they seek rather than blindly following the rest of the flock. A stronger focus needs to be placed on the demand-side of micro-credentials as opposed to adding to the supply with limited understanding of the emerging market. It follows that deeper consideration of ‘possible’, ‘probable’, and ‘preferable’ futures is required as there are risks of unintended consequences and the grass may not end up being greener.
References


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