

Chapter 3

Implementing Continuing Professional Education Micro-Credentials in a University Context

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ABSTRACT

Responding to unrelenting change and disruption of global macro factors, universities are rethinking the roles they play in the education landscape. The longevity of life, the complexity of the workplace, and the increasing need for workforce upskilling provide opportunities for universities to engage with lifelong learning and develop a strategic approach towards participating in the 60-year curriculum. This chapter describes the efforts of one Australian university as it commences to diversify from a dominant focus of preparing professionals to enter the professions to building a stronger program portfolio that supports ongoing professional learning. The global technological innovation of digital micro-credentials enables the university's strategic response to fulfil the need for continuing professional education. Using the university as a case study, the chapter discusses key issues and challenges in the early establishment and implementation of the strategic vision for engaging in digital micro-credentialing within the continuing professional education.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are increasingly being asked by employers, government, learners, and other stakeholders to change and adapt to the complex, macro issues that are framing the 21st century learning context. These issues include the need to manage and engage the large student cohorts of diverse learners that have

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entered universities due to massification of the system; the trend of significant reduction in government funds for public universities that have to do more with less, or find supplementary funds; the impact of the technological change brought about by the internet and online commerce and learning systems; the arrival of MOOCs—Massive Open Online Courses offering new models for formal learning; citizens living longer, often captured as the concept of the 100-year life; globalisation and its impacts on human and societal systems such as culture, economy and trade, technology, population; degradation of ecological systems and sustainability issues such as climate emergency; and now, of course, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues are vast and reflect a planet under duress from multiple, significant macro factors and denotes that living in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), we are more interconnected to natural and human systems than ever—despite rarely acknowledging it. The digitalisation revolution of 4IR—and the imminent Fifth Industrial Revolution (5IR) of personalisation and connectivity—are changing the way we live, work, learn and play. These factors provide the backstory for why the university sector is intensely under pressure to change across its multiple functions.

Of particular interest to this chapter, is the complexity of factors shaping change and innovation in the way universities are credentialing, particularly for lifelong learning associated with the workplace. In general, lifelong learning holds a broad definition where it is the learning that spans across the lifetime and includes the formal learning in the formative years of compulsory and post-compulsory education, pre-professional education (often in the vocational and higher education sectors) as well as the learning within informal (often day-to-day learning) and non-formal (often structured but not leading to certification such as community or adult education) settings (Schuetze, 2007). Yet, frequently, lifelong learning is associated with learning after the formative years of formal education, particularly within the contexts of workplace learning and Continuing Professional Education. In fact, Continuing Professional Education is seen as a subset of the broader lifelong learning concept. Ultimately, Continuing Professional Education improves professional practice and is often recognised by some form of certification or credentialing. Yet, like lifelong learning, defining Continuing Professional Education can be determined from which paradigmatic framing informs its purpose and, as Laura Bierema writes, it can:

range from instrumentalist, functionalist views that focus on improving professional knowledge, competence, and performance to critical views that focus on bettering society by improving access, equality, and reducing marginalization and oppression (2016, p.54).

It is argued that Continuing Professional Education can mitigate the ongoing changes in the workplace shaped by such macro factors as identified earlier; and provides ongoing professional learning and development to professionals as they contribute to improving the practices of their profession to better serve their clients (Bierema, 2016). Yet, as Bierema argues, the impact of Continuing Professional Education is unclear and challenges providers to rethink how to engage professionals in ongoing, lifelong learning for their workplace contexts. She suggests her “T-shaped professional framework holds promise for creating and sustaining more holistic, impactful CPE to help professionals more fluidly navigate the professional white water they encounter on a daily basis” (Bierema, 2016, p. 65). In this chapter, lifelong learning and Continuing Professional Education are used interchangeably because of the focus on upskilling of the workforce and how this might be acknowledged through micro-credentialing.

The traditional approach of credentialing in the university sector of its large undergraduate (generally preparing individuals for the professions) and postgraduate (often associated with Continuing Professional Education) programs, which are often delivered on campus, is being questioned as to whether

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