Chapter 2
Micro Credentialing in the Landscape of Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on micro credentials, which are shorter, industry-specific courses designed to demonstrate competencies in a specific skillset, this chapter aims to contribute by analyzing and assessing the use of micro credentialing in the higher educational landscape. The chapter will begin with an overview of micro course, focusing on their history and current use in higher educational institutions. Next, the chapter will assess the strengths, limitations, and impacts of micro courses. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a reflection on the lessons universities can learn from the existing structures of micro course programing with the aim of providing administrators, instructors, and educators insights into the impacts these courses could have on broader continuing education programs.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, technological progress, and the COVID-19 pandemic are helping to redefine the approach higher education (HE) institutions are taking towards continuing education programs (Encyclopedia, 2019, online). Defined as "education provided for adults after they have left the formal education system, consisting typically of short or part time courses," continuing education is a significant asset.

It aids economic and social development because it contributes to providing more employment opportunities, greater job retention and career growth (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2021). In addition, these programs are not limited by campus walls and extend resources of the university to a wide array of diverse populations (Schejbal and Wilson, 2008) Furthermore, as the global workforce shifts from an analog, industrial economy to one that is digital and information driven, continuing education programs are becoming increasingly popular among learners needing to acquire specific skillsets or upgrade existing ones to remain competitive in their industries (Reed, Whitten, Swank, Gioia, Marr, Woods, Jeremiah and Westernamn, 2018). In the 2019 annual report from the Learning House, which sought the views of 1500 online students in undergraduate, graduate, certificate or licensure programs, about 47% of respondents indicated that they were planning on taking additional classes after graduating in order to remain competitive in their fields (Lederman, 2019). The students surveyed appear to be aware of the need for constant upskilling and reskilling and willing to invest in continuing education to better prepare for the future. This perception may also be common amongst the wider student community.

However, despite these factors, accessing continuing education can be challenging due to the time required to undertake lengthy certificate programs, financial barriers, and inflexible learning options for those employed full time (University of Toronto, 2020). In response, many universities around the world have adopted micro-credentialing to help address some of these issues. Defined as certifications that are shorter, which more readily cater for individual needs and help to demonstrate competency in a specific skillset, micro-credentialing courses can be taken as single units, leading to an electronic digital badge (e-badges) signifying skills acquired in a specialized area, or can be stacked towards a professional certificate (National Education Association, 2021). As Horton (2020) notes, while university degrees are still valued and needed in the job market, micro-credentialing can adapt more readily to the skills gap caused by new technologies and digital transformations occurring in various industries (Horton, 2020). Micro-credentialing has become popular in countries such as New Zealand, Australia, Asia, the European Union, the UAE, Africa, Canada and the United States because they provide more flexible learning options that take into account factors such as cost and relevance to commerce/ business. (Chaktsiris, McCallum, Luke, Cukier, et. al 2021). Micro-courses have therefore appeared on a number of top trends list, including the EDUCAUSE 2019 Key Issues in Teaching and Learning (Mallon, 2019, p. 117).

This chapter provides an analysis and assessment of the use of micro-credentialing in the HE landscape around the world but will provide more detail about what is happening in Canada. It will begin with an overview of micro-credentialing, focusing on its history, emergence in HE institutions around the world, typical learner profiles, the accreditation processes and affiliation with industry. Next, their strengths,

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