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CAUCE Research Report
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PROJECT: Students' experiences of microcredentials in Canada since 2020:
Perspectives and possibilities

Acknowledgements:

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The University of Regina is situated on Treaty 4. These are the territories of the nêhiyawak, Anihšīnāpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda, and the homeland of the Métis/Michif Nation.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, interest in and the development of microcredentials in Canada has accelerated. Much attention has been paid by provincial governments, universities, and colleges—and to a lesser degree, employers and industry—to this growing trend in higher educational offerings.

While it can be argued that the ways in which microcredentials have evolved is an extension of the ongoing and long-standing work of continuing education units (at universities and colleges) in Canada, there has been a gap in our understanding of microcredentials as they have emerged since 2020. Specifically, especially at the time this research was proposed, little had been known about students' own expectations and experiences of microcredentials.

CONTEXT

Alongside the acceleration of microcredential offerings, in Canada and around the world, literature examining microcredentials has accelerated, especially in 2021, when the research was proposed. For instance, the organization, *Microcredentials Sans Frontiers* had produced a curated list of highlights published since 2018 and a “deep dive” into articles published about microcredentials since 2019 (2021).

In both sets of articles, little attention was paid to student experiences, though the implied recipient of microcredentials is, of course, students—the learners. One exception to this dearth of student-focused research is Oliver's (2021) proposed learner value framework—a set of microcredential characteristics that may be considered by students weighing the benefits of microcredentials for either career advancement or personal purposes. And, yet, students' own input into such a framework is absent. In other words, like much of the literature reviewed (Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2021), the focus of the impact of microcredentials is not on the learner but, rather, is on the provider and higher education more broadly. Indeed, this provider focus supports the worrisome claim that microcredentials may indeed be a “craze” (Ralston, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the context of this growing literature and interest, this CAUCE-funded research study aimed to address that gap by asking the following research questions: What are students' experiences and perceptions of microcredentials in Canada from 2020 - 2022? And, what can be done to create better experiences for students working to achieve microcredentials given this knowledge about their experiences?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ANALYSIS

An expert in quantitative research and survey design was hired to support the survey instrument design; a University of Regina research centre was later hired to build the survey in Qualtrics and produce a summary report on the data collected.

The methodology for the survey followed the questionnaire model available at Qualtrics. The survey was constructed following the University of Regina Research and Ethics Board (REB) guidelines and was approved by the REB. The questionnaire had 37 questions about the subject and one validation question. There were also two questions about a follow-up to the survey.

Notes:

- Questions did not have response requirements such as 'force response' or 'request-response.' All participants could exit the survey (and enter the incentive draw) easily without submitting their responses.
- It is the view of the researcher that the lack of response requirements, a condition of the REB approval in this case, limited the amount of data submitted that was considered valid.

SURVEY SECTIONS

Survey participants were asked about their microcredential history, including questions about how many microcredentials they'd completed; how much and who paid for the microcredentials; and which microcredentials they'd completed. Questions about the microcredentials format (online, hybrid, f2f, etc.) and what they received (e.g. digital badge, paper certificate, nothing, etc.) were also asked. Bio-demo data questions were included at the end of the survey.

The before/after (expectations/experiences) questions were focused on the following:

It would/it did help me to get a job
It would/it did help me to develop in my existing career
I could/I did complete it on my own time
I could/I did complete it quickly
It would/It did lead to personal satisfaction with a new skill or skills
It would/It did lead to personal satisfaction with new knowledge
It would/It did lead to salary increase
It would/It did lead to promotion

KEY OBSERVATIONS

1. We need more reliable data—and methods for collecting that data, nationally—into student experiences of microcredentials and continuing education (and all non-degree formal learning) more broadly. It is the view of the researcher that Statistics Canada could play a valuable role in collecting data of national value to the non-degree post-secondary education ecosystem in Canada.

2. Microcredentials' most valuable characteristics *may be* that they are short and fast.

DATA CHALLENGES

The orientation of the survey—to be as open as possible as an attempt to seek national-level data—resulted in significant data that was excluded from analysis due to a number of factors. While over 300 submissions were collected, after careful review of the validity of the data, 40 respondents had their questionnaires examined for full analysis.

WHAT THE DATA SUGGESTS

Even with limited data, the top three expectations of a microcredential (i.e. before taking a microcredential) were:

- It would lead to personal satisfaction with a new skill;
- It would lead to personal satisfaction with new knowledge; and
- I could complete it on my own time.

And, the top three experiences of a microcredential (i.e. after taking a microcredential) were:

- It led to personal satisfaction with new knowledge;
- It led to personal satisfaction with a new skill; and
- It helped me to get a job.

Within the qualitative data, a few additional characteristics of microcredentials expectations and experiences were highlighted, namely that they are short/fast, inexpensive, and directed towards creating good job-related outcomes.

RECOMMENDATION: A CASE FOR NATIONAL NON-DEGREE LEARNING DATA COLLECTION

The limited results of this survey support the case for better national data collection on education beyond the K-12 and the credit post-secondary system. An updated version of the Access and Support to Education and Training Survey (ASETS) offered by Statistics Canada in 2008 would be welcome. Indeed, the November 2022 Labour Force Survey included a handful of questions about non-degree learning happening in Canada. Excellent data and insights came from those questions, emphasizing the reach and breadth of Statistics Canada's work at a national level.

When the data collected nationally only considers for-credit programs, we only see a limited picture of the educational landscape in Canada. More comprehensive national data is needed to help make Canada's educational system and ecosystem even better, especially at a time when we are investing in skills.

REFERENCES

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