

EDITORIAL

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# A snapshot in time: the next new normal and micro-credentials

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At the Micro-Credential Summit, held in Barcelona, Spain in March 2023, a representative from the European Commission borrowed the tagline of a global sports brand in his presentation on micro-credentials, urging those present to “Just do it”<sup>1</sup>. In this Special Issue of the ETHE, we sought to uncover what was both being done and why in order to unpack micro-credentials in the so-called next “new normal” in higher education ecosystems. As editors, our objectives were; to focus on high quality research and analysis into micro-credentials within the wider higher education ecosystem; and to enrich academic and policy debates centred on short form credentialised learning. We invited papers to engage with theoretical lenses, in-depth critique, ideological discourses and empirical evidence relating to a wide variety of domains linked to micro-credentials. The rationale for this was to act as a counterpoint to the volumes of grey literature and digital sources repeatedly echoing purported benefits and advantages of micro-credentials with little or no evidence base or informed critique (Brown et al., 2021). We speculated and indeed hoped that this special issue could become a considered and useful resource reflecting a point of time of the evolving global micro-credential movement in higher education and indeed for the wider ecosystem of learning, to support more connected systems of learning.

Since the launch of the call, national and international initiatives, policy documents and fora to stimulate global higher education systems to engage with micro-credentials have continued to be produced at pace. Significant milestones in the tidal wave of micro-credential proliferation have been realised; focusing firstly on the European context, the European Commission published the Council Recommendation on Micro-Credentials for LifeLong Learning and Employability (2022) and most recently, Cedefop (2023) has published in-depth research on evolving qualification systems in Europe. The Recommendation attempted to address some of the many issues, too numerous to mention, linked to micro-credentials, some of which are touched upon in the articles of this special edition. What is clear is that the competing drivers of employability and lifelong learning, remain to the fore of the “why engage with micro-credentials” from a European perspective. These and many other facilitating activities and publications are ongoing

<sup>1</sup> To read more on the Micro-Credential Summit, see Peters (2023). <http://etheblog.com/2023/04/18/micro-credentials-a-vehicle-for-transformation-experimentation-and-new-ideas-in-higher-education-and-lifelong-learning-for-employability/>.

globally, at all levels and across higher education ecosystems. Amongst these UNESCO's *Global Convention on Recognition* which came into play in March 2023, has the potential to be an important milestone for the recognition of micro-credentials across the globe.

In the preparation of this special issue, we were not inundated with a deluge of submissions focusing on such wider infrastructural issues related to recognition or stackability or indeed evidence-based papers considering the macro-value and impact of micro-credentials. With respect to the latter, the OECD (2023) has recently published a significant perspective paper drawing on the evidence to form some views of micro-credential impact and unearths some initial findings which may support higher education systems as they attempt to focus on bespoke and impactful micro-credential initiatives and policies. We did manage to achieve our objectives of publishing a small number of papers which provided thought-provoking and unique insights. These included the provision of a current state of play through a comprehensive review of the literature by authors based in New Zealand; a critical and thought-provoking response to a widely cited critique of the micro-credential movement from Australia, and two empirical studies, one from East Africa and one from South-East Asia. Fittingly, therefore, as one of the first special issues on micro-credentials, there are varied international perspectives within the special issue. A heartfelt thanks is genuinely extended to all of the reviewers who contributed to this special edition, and the feedback provided by them to authors.

The first two articles of the collection are both conceptual and analytical. Desmarchelier and Cary focus on offering what the authors refer to as “a more deliberative, constructive approach to micro-credentialing” (p. 3), referencing and responding to Ralston's (2021) much cited critique of micro-credentials and their alignment to neoliberalism. In doing so, the authors argue that the micro-credentialing landscape is a “multidimensional hotch-potch of credentials, providers, and platforms” (p. 4), reflecting multiplicity, rather than homogeneity. They speak to the varied drivers that institutions consider as they review and pursue micro-credential initiatives and include similar drivers (as identified recently in Brown & Nic Giolla Mhichil, 2022). Provocatively, our Australian authors ask “...what is sacred about a traditional degree structure?” (p. 5), an important question for those seeking to develop micro-credentials and one with which the European Commission has grappled with particularly in the context of the European Degree. In critiquing micro-credentials, however, as we know from the challenges that are attempting to be addressed by a multitude of actors and agencies, there is a danger in ignoring the structural problematics of higher education more generally, reifying forms of education whose relationship to social mobility can in many instances also be ambiguous. The authors' central thesis, therefore, is that micro-credentials “...may assist in upskilling and therefore finding more meaningful and lucrative participation in the workforce” (p. 6), in addition to providing for both life-long and life-wide forms of learning (p. 7). As such, the authors argue for a “both/and” view of micro-credentials, rather than “either/or”. A particularly intriguing suggestion from the authors is to tie micro-credentials more explicitly to UN SDG 4, on “relevant skills for decent work” (p. 8).

To understand the potential of this approach, it is helpful to know what has already been published in this space. To this end, Varadarajan et al. (2022) present a detailed systematic review of extant literature on micro-credentials, in which they analysed  $n=60$  studies published over the period 2015–2022. The review presents a coherent summary

of where this literature has focused, and as importantly, what it has not considered to date. Of particular value is the stakeholder-focused approach, through examining and analysing from learner, employer, educational institution and governmental perspectives. It is revealing to contrast the primary challenges identified through the thematic analysis for learners—attaining knowledge (43%), a credential being job-specific (33%), and lack of funding (23% of pieces) (p. 8)—with those identified by employers (consistency, 80%, and concern with verifiability/authenticity (38%) (p. 9). Perhaps the starkest finding is the identification from a higher education (HE) perspective of the need for academic support (92%) (p. 10), demonstrating that if conceived of as a HE-oriented offering, micro-credentials are highly-dependent on institutional buy-in. From a governmental perspective, the common confusion regarding terminology (47%) (p. 11) has undoubtedly proved a barrier. In concordance with Desmarchelier and Cary (2022), this article emphasises the need to develop “pathways”, both for learning, employment, and within qualification frameworks. Van der Hijden and Martin (2023), in their UNESCO policy paper on short courses, micro-credentials and flexible learning pathways, draw similar conclusions and provide insight into global developments of micro-credentials, including in the context of developing and emerging countries which brings us to the first of our empirical studies.

Kumar et al.’s (2022) paper is oriented towards a refreshingly practical example of the development of a micro-credential in Malaysia, where the *Malaysian Qualifications Agency* has taken an active stance in producing both policy and guidelines for micro-credentials over the last number of years. The study is a mixed-methods analysis of a micro-credential course in Instructional Design, and considers the present experiences and future expectations of a sample of student teachers. This course was delivered online, and the authors examine well the challenges that learners faced, focusing on issues of technical accessibility and the well worn debate on interaction in online courses (p. 14). The relevance and impact of the micro-credential to many learners is also illustrated through quantitative analysis which indicates that the learners valued the micro-credential in particular for its professional relevance as a facet of digital learning identity (p. 18). One tension this study highlights is the degree to which self-motivation and efficacy might be required for learners taking micro-credentials. The authors highlight that correlation between such factors “...indicated that they [participants] were comfortable and competent using technology for autonomous learning...” (Kumar et al., 2022, p. 18). While positive, this raises the question of what to expect for those who are *not* comfortable and competent using technology for autonomous learning (as an example), and what role micro-credentials might play for them across the lifespan. If micro-credentials cater primarily to what McMillan Cottom (2015) terms “roaming autodidacts”, then there is a risk of replicating and widening existing inequities.

Pertinent to these issues, our last article, Maina et al. (2022) is a further empirical study from Tanzania, in which the authors made use of the ‘Employability Skills Micro-credentialing’ (ESMC) methodology, where learners articulated themselves through interview to both course lecturers and potential employers. An important and valuable element of this study is that it contained responses from both students, lecturers and employers, albeit with relatively small samples of the latter two. From the perspectives of students and lecturers, the outcomes of this pilot were viewed positively (pp. 9–11), as were those

of employers. Rich qualitative feedback suggests that students connected what they were learning within the classroom with the external world (p. 16), and that the course helped students to realise how employable they were. Promisingly, given the nature of the pilot, the authors also note that many academics were interested in continuing to integrate the methodology within their courses (p. 17). This type of finding on a small-scale points to the types of issues that are salient on a much larger one; what are the *benefits*, tangible and/or social/cultural, from taking a micro-credential? Much more evidence is needed, in many more contexts, on what compelling reasons a diverse lifelong learner might have to take a micro-credential. Oliver's (2022, p. 50) comprehensive overview of potential value is a useful place for institutions and instructors to start to untangle these issues. Notably, the authors of this study do not contextualise the focus of micro-credential development in regional terms, where there is an emphasis on micro-credentials to support the transition from secondary schooling to further and higher education. This can be contrasted with other regions where there is a clear emphasis of micro-credentials for post-degree and/or post experience learners in continuing education.

In short, this special issue brings together diverse perspectives and a global view on the theoretical and practical implications of developing micro-credentials. We cannot claim that the collection is exhaustive as in truth, we are collectively only beginning to grapple with the opportunities and challenges which micro-credentials bring. Each article in this collection answers certain questions, and raises new ones. Recalling the plea to "Just do it", we also note an ancient Chinese proverb, that "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now". Much ink has been spilled developing frameworks and conceptualisations for micro-credentials, but, in moving from paper to practice, the challenge lies in demonstrating that a micro-credential is worth taking and can truly aid learners in their individual lifelong learning pathways, an important point called out in the *MicroCredential Summit Declaration*. Conceptualising this worth is a matter of much wider social, economic, and philosophical debate, but the time has certainly come to have it, and to invite wider stakeholder participation, from social groups, employers, and critically, potential learners. We look forward to seeing this literature blossom further in the future, and hope that it yields the rich harvest the subject matter promises.

**Authors' contributions**

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

**Availability of data and materials**

Not applicable.

**Declaration****Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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