

WHAT ARE, AREN'T AND MIGHT BE MICRO-CREDENTIALS?

In comparison to traditional courses and ways of learning, micro-credentials value self-directed learning and recognize that learners will complete smaller units of learning experiences at a pace that meets their learning needs and styles. As a result, micro-credentials should be flexible, and where possible learners should complete them at a pace that works best for them. Traditional courses and delivery methods focus on structure and specific due dates for assessments; however, micro-credentials provide learners with flexibility on how slowly or quickly they want to progress with their learning experience. In some offerings, there are no specific due dates except for the end date.



Micro-credentials are opportunities to help learners ‘specialize’ in a particular area or topic; for example, preparing healthy menus. An employer interested in hiring would be able to determine if candidates have a specific skill set depending on the micro-credentials they completed. In the example above, an employer would be able to recognize that the candidate is able to prepare healthy menus and had had training and education in this area. Micro-credentials do not only conform to semester in-takes; they should be readily available to learners and should be offered multiple times. In comparison to traditional courses, micro-credentials can be taken at any time, or be offered as much as possible.

Micro-credentials are:

- Shorter learning experiences that hone-in on a specific topic or identified skill-gap in ways that are flexible and readily accessible for learners. This means there is variety in the ways micro-credentials can be offered and designed.
- Designed to focus on a specific skill, subject or topic area; this focus differs based on the needs of the learners, employer and industry partners. As a result, micro-credentials can be skills and competency-based, and they can also be outcome-based with measurable learning objectives. Offerings could be stand-alone credentials, or they could be

part of a series of micro-credentials that make up a program or certificate.

- Credit-bearing or non-credit bearing. The design of each micro-credential is contextual and should reflect the needs of specific learners, industries and professions, and institutions.
- Industry focused with assessments to support learners with retraining, upskilling, or pursuing a career change. For example, learners who want to enter the food service industry may take a micro-credential on “Preparing Healthy Menus.” Learners who are successful in completing the micro-credential should be able to effectively prepare healthy menus, and therefore, learning activities and assessments should be *aligned* with this competency or ability.
- Developed and designed with industry experts to ensure that retraining and upskilling accurately reflect industry needs and recognized with some form of certificate or digital badge outlining the learning outcomes or competencies that learners achieved.

Micro-credentials are not:

- Intended to be delivered using a traditional face-to-face delivery; but rather, flexible delivery modalities should be adopted such as online asynchronous delivery, hybrid, or in some instance, face-to-face, depending on the subject, skill, knowledge or area that is being instructed.
- Traditional courses that tend to cover an array of topics and subject areas over a 12 or 13 week academic term. For example, a 45-hour program that focuses on Mental Health and Wellness might address a number of topics such as diagnostic assessment, diagnosis, and treatment; however, a related micro-credential may only focus on the assessment component of mental health.

It is important to note that micro-credentials can be stand-alone credentials and not always a series that make up a larger program. For example, an employer may only need a learner (or employee) to complete one stand-alone micro-credential; therefore, recognition for this completion should be documented or recorded in some capacity such as a digital badge or certificate, along with the stated competency or learning objectives that were successfully met. Micro-credentials can also be stackable; for example, a learner that completes five micro-credentials in “Caring for Wound Infections” may be able to receive credit for a course or two in the Personal Support Worker Program; this depends heavily on the instructional hour for each micro-credential, as well as the

learning outcomes or competencies that were achieved, including the assessments that were selected.

Micro-credentials should be designed to quality standards and include instructional design principles such as appropriate measurable competencies, or learning outcomes and objectives, as well as instructional materials and resources, learning activities and intentional assessments that measure the stated competencies or objectives. Ideally this would need to be decided at the beginning of design of any micro-credentials, with considerations regarding pathways or transferability should be discussed and considered through Program Coordinators, Chairs, and the Registrar's Office. Similarly, clear expectations concerning grades or benchmarks such as "Pass or Fail" in related to its targeted skill or competency need to be developed. They should provide learners opportunities to become proficient with a specific skill or competency and provide multiple opportunities to practice before completing the summative or final assessment which will determine if the learner has successfully mastered that skill or knowledge.

Micro-credentials have the potential to fill skills gaps in both the current and future labour market. Although many stakeholders in the micro-credential ecosystem have different definitions and understandings of micro-credentials, significant progress has recently been made toward a consensus of definition and conceptual convergence, both globally and in Canada. Increasingly, Canadian stakeholders see micro-credentials as being:

- Defined by a focus on specific skills and competencies;
- awarded on the basis of assessment;
- employer- or employment relevant;
- flexible in terms of their connection to other forms of accreditation; and
- accrediting courses of short duration.

Micro-credentials have a lot of promise, which is why it is important to separate the genuine opportunities from the significant hype that has built up in recent years. Micro-credentials offer the possibility of making higher education more convenient, flexible, and accessible and, in so doing, more inclusive and diverse.