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Micro-credentials: Common features and challenges

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Abstract:

Micro-credentials (MCs) are emerging as a viable form of non-degree qualification as they can offer flexible, inexpensive contents which closely match learners' needs. The opportunities to gain MCs are increasing and academics involved in online learning are particularly situated to help make, assess and validate MC courses. However, the lack of agreed definitions as to what MCs are can undermine their value and uptake. This presentation attempts to fill this gap by summarizing common features and challenges of MCs.

In practice, MCs tend to be offered online (Gallagher, 2018) and are often seen as short courses for learners to reskill or upskill for work (Kato, Galán-Muros & Weko, 2020). Among a large range of courses leading to MCs, the most common are MOOCs. The top five providers in 2019 were Coursera, EdX, Udacity (all US); Future Learn (UK) and SWAYAM (India) (Shah, 2019). Such courses range from general skills (language learning) to more specific ones (coding). The top three courses from the most popular MOOC provider (Coursera) in 2019 were Machine Learning; Learning How to Learn; and the Science of Well-Being. Overall, the most popular courses are business and IT-related (Shah, 2019). The majority of learners who have been awarded MCs via MOOCs "tend to be relatively well-educated, male, and within the core-working age group (25-54)" (Kato, Galán-Muros & Weko, 2020, p. 23). Not enough data is yet available as to what degree these learners have found MCs are beneficial, either professionally or personally. A further question to be asked is to what extent MCs can reach out to non-traditional learners who can take advantage of these types of lifelong, alternative learning opportunities.

One key challenge is that there are few validating frameworks that MCs fit in to. This can cause problems for both learners and potential employers as it is difficult to demonstrate what exact values MCs offer and to answer the crucial question: "Are MCs going to be useful?" This is further complicated as MCs also vary widely in terms of duration, modes of assessment, and whether they can lead to further qualifications or not. In order to overcome these challenges governments are establishing criteria for MCs. Perhaps the leading agency in this area is New Zealand's Qualifications Authority; and Australia, the EU and the US have also all created various MC models. The OECD has also produced a working paper (Kato, Galán-Muros & Weko, 2020) to guide policy makers as to what MCs are. This paper uses the term "alternative credentials" and includes certificates, digital badges and MCs within that term. It defines alternative credentials as ones "that are not recognised as standalone formal educational qualifications by relevant national education authorities".

In sum, the term MCs is a contested one and there is an ongoing debate as to how they could develop in the future. What is not contested is that the number of online courses leading to MCs will continue to grow and so academics working in online education can influence their content, quality and form.

References

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