Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

# National Union of Students (NUS) and Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

# Micro-credentials consultation paper

September 2019

![capa - Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated](logo)

## Executive summary

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) are seeking to reach a position on micro-credentials for the purposes of their national advocacy efforts. It is anticipated that both organisations will reach a similar position, so we have decided to conduct consultation with our members in a single process.

CAPA is the peak body representing the interests of the over 425,000 postgraduate students in Australia; and the NUS is the peak body for the over 1.3 million post-secondary students, particularly undergraduate university students, in Australia. Both organisations are linked through the Spring Agreement which encourages collaboration across the peak bodies (NUS, CAPA, CISA, & NATSIPA 2017).

This discussion paper outlines the definition and anticipated issues around micro-credentialling, and invites responses from NUS and CAPA affiliates, as well as other interested stakeholders. We are particularly interested in canvassing views on the following issues:

1. Should micro-credentials be delivered as voluntary, extracurricular components to degrees?
2. Should micro-credentials be delivered as part of professional development training for postgraduate research students?
3. How should micro-credentials interact with and complement traditional degree programs?
4. How should assessment work in micro-credentials?
5. How much should it cost to complete a micro-credential?
6. Do you have any other concerns or comments on micro-credentials?

## Definition of micro-credentials

A micro-credential is a certified short course that focuses on a specific skill or area of knowledge. In recent years, micro-credentialling has been of interest to the higher education sector due to its disruptive potential for degree programs. Micro-credentials are attractive to employers due to their cost-effectiveness and signalling capacity for particular workplace skills. A micro-credential is a smaller quantum of knowledge than an entire subject: for example, at the University of Melbourne, a micro-credential is the equivalent to four weeks of a full-sized subject.

Micro-credentials are typically recognised with digital badges, which contain information on the credential completed. Digital badges can be displayed online, such as on the learner's LinkedIn profile, and therefore can provide public recognition of skill attainment.

There are three emerging types of micro-credentials:

- Micro-credentials which are delivered as an extracurricular component of a university program, with the intention of making the student more attractive to employers upon graduation;
- Micro-credentials delivered in a corporate environment to individuals who are not otherwise enrolled in a university program (Oliver 2017); and

- Micro-credentials delivered by online training providers (such as Coursera) which are stackable into micro-masters and other qualifications.

Micro-credentials are typically delivered online by non-university providers; however, universities have increasingly expressed interest in developing their own micro-credentialling programs. We are seeking to canvass views on university-delivered micro-credentials for student populations.

Standards do not yet exist for the size, learning activities, and assessments of micro-credentials. Some universities and sectoral bodies are currently investigating and making decisions on the provision of micro-credentials; this consultation process by NUS and CAPA will allow the peak bodies to have an informed contribution to these initial discussions.

## International Contexts

In many instances, Australian universities are responding to international demand for micro credentialing in employment opportunities and broader technological advancements. Around the world, the systems for cataloguing and assessing quality of microcredentials is different. New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States all have slightly different models for this.

### New Zealand

Since 2018 Micro-credentialing in New Zealand has been recognised by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This move followed a series of pilots followed by NZQA including Otago Polytechnic and two online course developers: one non-for-profit New Zealand based company, Young Enterprise Scheme, and an international commercial group, Udacity (NZQA, 2017).

In New Zealand, the programs are also referred referred to as nano-credentials. To qualify for recognition as a micro-credential, the content must be a standalone education product -- not a mandatory part of a degree or a subject for another qualification -- and provide strong evidence of need (NZQA, 2018). Each micro-credential must pass an annual review process and have a statement of purpose, clear assessment element, and appropriate learning options. It must also develop skills not currently catered for through other tertiary education systems.

Through the New Zealand Qualifications Framework micro-credentials have an equivalent credit value which, after completion, can be used toward approved coursework programs.

### United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has one of the most established micro-credentialing programs, recognising extracurricular programs as well as professional development short courses and other areas not directly related to a course curriculum. Micro-credentials in the UK are not typically based at individual universities; rather, they are developed and issued through third-party providers and promoted by universities as an important element of employability.

The Open University in the UK has the longest-running continuing set of professional development programs aimed at post-graduate students in full time work seeking soft skill recognition. All micro-credentials offered with the Open University are endorsed by CPD

standards and students receive certificates upon completion using blockchain technology that can be displayed on LinkedIn.

The Online Badge Academy (OBA) created by DigitalMe and customisable by universities was one of the most established providers of micro-credentials across the UK. Coventry University has the largest university based micro-credentialing programs with Online Badge Academy (OBA) which was offered for free for enrolled students or as part of a paid service called Open Badge Academy Pro. Each badge has at least three assessment components which are often reflection pieces on extracurricular activities such as running in a student union election and networking at an event. Coventry University OBA is set to close in 2020 and will be replaced by larger, centralised micro-credentialing companies such as DigitalMe. This switch has raised concerns about what happens to the credentials that students have earned on the university-based platform, and how involved they need to be in transferring credits into a new platform.

Credly is a widely used verification platform for micro-credentials and macro-credentials (standard degrees) and acts as an online version of a traditional transcript. Credly is owned by DigitalMe and has a function to add micro-credentials to a LinkedIn profile. It also allows students to transfer multiple micro-credentials from different institutions and stack them to receive credits in other courses.

### United States

Digital badging services are becoming more popular in the United States, particularly amongst public undergraduate institutions (Fong et al 2016). 56% of institutions offer full digital certificates in business, 51% in education, and 8.5% of institutions offer digital badges in each of these. When it comes to employment, the business and IT sectors are "the leading adopters of verified digital credentials in the form of badges" (Fong et al 2016). While digital badges are being taken up by more institutions, and micro-credentials have become more popular, they are not being regulated in the same fashion as in New Zealand.

Described as being at a 'wild west' stage of development (Priest 2016), micro-credentials are still experimental and differ significantly from equivalents internationally. A Congress-authorised non-for-profit, Digital Promise, is a key provider of micro-credentials. Digital Promise defines micro-credentials as being personalised, competency-based learning components that can be pieced together by educators to form a 'learning pathway' (Priest 2016). Digital Promise has achieved a unique position by collaborating with other institutions and cataloguing their micro-credentials, and even offering credentials developed by other organisations through their platform. This level of partnership has created a degree of distinction for badges issued by Digital Promise, setting them apart from micro-credentials offered through other services.

In some instances, gaining a micro-credential translates directly into pay increases: teachers in the Kettle Moraine district earn an increase to base salary of around USD200. Micro-credentialling in the United States is divided in focus: at an institutional level, it is targeting undergraduate students still studying in traditional degree structures, whereas external organisations seem to be targeting people already in the workforce for post-facto recognition of a prior developed skill, or for recognition of further non-traditional development.

## Australian universities offering micro-credentials

Deakin University and Macquarie University are at the forefront of micro-credential delivery to Australian students. Macquarie University has developed a new curriculum model, to be introduced from 2020, which integrates micro-credentials into postgraduate coursework degrees (Matchett 2018). Their draft policy delineates that micro-credentials can range in size from 15 to 75 hours, as compared to a full postgraduate subject which is equivalent to 150 hours (Macquarie University 2018). The micro-credentials will be mostly online, but may involve on-campus intensive sessions. Meanwhile, Deakin University has integrated micro-credentials into postgraduate coursework degrees, and also delivers micro-credentials to a corporate audience through DeakinCo (Oliver 2017).

The University of New South Wales has rolled out micro-credentialling as a form of external course credit for some cohorts. Students enrolled at the UNSW Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra, in some postgraduate degrees can undertake two micro-credential subjects as the equivalent of one traditional subject (UNSW Canberra 2019).

A recent review commissioned by DeakinCo (the commercial arm of Deakin University) revealed that six universities - Edith Cowan, La Trobe, Swinburne, Melbourne, Sydney, and Western Sydney - are currently developing micro-credentials (Carine 2019). A further three universities are beginning discussions on micro-credentialling at their academic board meetings, and three more are developing a policy framework for micro-credentialling (Carine 2019). Only eight universities are not currently pursuing or investigating micro-credentialling programs (Carine 2019).

## Issues

### Issue #1 - Purpose

The purpose of micro-credentials to the corporate world is clear. Micro-credentialling is attractive to employers as delivery of micro-credentials is cheap, fast, and provides translatable recognition between companies. It allows the learner/employee to learn a skill without the financial or temporal cost of developing a broad knowledge base through undertaking a full qualification. The Business Council of Australia promotes the approach of micro-credentials being undertaken by workers simultaneously to their employment, with the cost of study to be rolled into their proposal for a reformed student loans scheme (BCA 2018, p. 17).

However, it must be considered if micro-credentials are beneficial to learners in addition to meeting industry needs and signalling employability. It may be that the skills and knowledge delivered in micro-credentials are, or should be, included in full degree programs. We need to define what we believe micro-credentials should be in order for them to be beneficial to students.

### Issue #2 - Quality and pedagogy

The brief nature of micro-credentials could be regarded as a risk to the quality of learning. Tick-box online modules have been the target of critique by students; it is possible that universities will roll out micro-credentials of this nature despite their questionable benefit. As micro-credentials are a new and emerging way of learning, there exists little literature on consistent or effective pedagogies for micro-credential delivery. Until such a body of literature

develops, NUS and CAPA are seeking to define our perspectives on quality and pedagogy of micro-credentials based on our affiliates' beliefs and experiences with other short-form credentials.

Presently, micro-credentials are largely delivered in an online environment. A consideration for the current consultation is if university-delivered micro-credentials should have face-to-face components for those enrolled as on-campus students.

Assessment is another issue which must be considered. Potentially, micro-credentials could be assessed through ongoing assignments, a final exam, participation, or some combination of these.

### *Issue #3 - Cost*

There is a cost associated with the delivery of micro-credentials. It remains open to question whether micro-credentials will be delivered as a free extracurricular component to degree programs, or on a cost-recovery basis, or as a profit-making exercise for universities. It is anticipated that universities will charge international students higher fees for accessing micro-credentials. One possible model is to deliver the course content for free, but to charge a fee for sitting the exam and attaining the digital badge.

As mentioned earlier, there are micro-credential programs which are delivered to non-students in a corporate setting. For securely employed workers, the cost of micro-credentials would likely be sponsored by the employer. If a university or training provider delivers micro-credentials in both settings, they could charge different prices for each.

US-based online providers of micro-credentials (such as Udacity and Coursera) typically charge a few hundred to a few thousand dollars per course (Pickard 2018).

### *Issue #4 - Inclusion in Australian Qualifications Framework*

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is a national policy for regulated qualifications. It consists of ten levels, from certificates (level one) to doctoral degrees (level 10). Under the AQF, each level has defined learning outcomes. The AQF also delineates pathways between qualifications. All qualification types listed in the AQF must be quality-assured, either through regulation by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) or the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). In summary, the AQF sets minimum standards for the content and nature of different qualifications.

Micro-credentials are typically not included in the AQF. However, a current review of the AQF is investigating how micro-credentials and other short-form credentials can be incorporated into the framework (DET 2018). The AQF review panel considers that inclusion of short-form credentials in the AQF will increase transparency of available courses and their outcomes, but is grappling with difficulties in how to assign short-from credentials to AQF levels (DET 2018). In regards to micro-credentials specifically, the AQF review panel asserts that lack of regulation and quality assurance are the main challenges to including micro-credentials in the AQF (DET 2018).

### *Issue #5 - Consequences for income support eligibility*

Recognition of micro-credentials may impact Austudy and Youth Allowance eligibility for postgraduate students. This is because the small proportion of postgraduate coursework degrees

which attract income support payments do so on the basis of the course being the minimum legal or professional entry requirement for a profession, or the fastest or only pathway offered by the provider to gain an entry-level role (DSS 2018). A micro-credential which styles itself as the fastest entry point to a profession would therefore displace Masters courses from Austudy eligibility. CAPA has previously discussed this issue in a submission to the AQF review (CAPA 2019).

*Issue #6 - Use of casual labour*

One concern in the delivery of micro-credentials is reliance on casual or contract teaching staff. As micro-credentials are inherently short-form in nature, we anticipate that universities will employ teaching staff on short contracts with a large number of teaching and marking hours during delivery of the course, and no hours thereafter. We furthermore anticipate minimal job security from course to course, as universities will likely seek to retain flexibility in staffing decisions subject to student enrolments in each period that a micro-credential is delivered.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has collected data and raised awareness of the increasing reliance of universities on precariously employed workers. The degree of insecure employment has been steadily increasing over the past fifteen years, with 43% of all university staff being employed as casuals, and a further 22% on limited fixed-term contracts (Kneist 2018).

Both the NUS and CAPA have expressed opposition to insecure work in universities, on the basis of promoting high-quality and sustainable learning conditions for students. CAPA furthermore opposes university use of insecure labour as an issue that directly impacts its constituency, with approximately one third of postgraduate research students being employed in universities in teaching or research roles (Edwards, Bexley & Richardson 2011). We anticipate that postgraduate research students would be employed in the delivery of micro-credentials

## Questions for consultation with NUS and CAPA affiliates

1. Should micro-credentials be delivered as voluntary, extra-curricular components to degrees?
2. Should micro-credentials be delivered as part of professional development training for postgraduate research students?
3. How should micro-credentials interact with and complement traditional degree programs?
4. How should assessment work in micro-credentials?
5. Usefulness of micro-credentials based on the 'you do the evidencing we do the credentialing' program?
6. How much should it cost to complete a micro-credential?
7. How should special consideration and digital literacy support programs be integrated to micro-credentials assessments?
8. Do you have any other concerns or comments on micro-credentials?

# References

Business Council of Australia [BCA] 2018, Future-proof: Australia's future post-secondary education and skills system, accessed from https://www.bca.com.au/future_proof_australia_s_future_post_secondary_education_and_skills_system

Carine, H 2019, Micro-credentials: Review of offerings at Australian Universities, accessed from https://www.deakinco.com/uploads/DC1_Microcredentials-market-in-Australian-universities-report.pdf

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations [CAPA] 2019, Submission to Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework, accessed from http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/CAPA-AQF-submission.docx

Department of Education and Training [DET] 2018, Incorporating shorter form credentials into the AQF, accessed from https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/aqfshortercredentials.pdf

Department of Social Services (DSS) 2018, Guidelines for the approval of Masters courses for student payments, Australian Government, accessed from https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2018/2018_guidelines_for_the_approval_of_masters_courses_for_student_payments.pdf

Edwards, D, Bexley, E, and Richardson, S 2011, Regenerating the academic workforce: the careers, intentions and motivations of higher degree research students in Australia: findings of the National Research Student Survey (NRSS), Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, accessed from https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1490940/RAW_Combined.pdf

Fong, J, Janzow, P and Peck, K 2016, Demographic Shifts in Educational Demand and the Rise of Alternative Credentials, accessed from https://upcea.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Demographic-Shifts-in-Educational-Demand-and-the-Rise-of-Alternative-Credentials.pdf

Kneist, P 2018, The Flood of Insecure Employment at Australian Universities, National Tertiary Education Union, accessed from http://www.nteu.org.au/library/view/id/8988

Macquarie University 2018, The MQ Model: Micro-credentials and continuing professional development curriculum architecture principles (final working paper draft), accessed from http://teche.mq.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/MQ-Model-Micro-Principles-only-13-July-2018.pdf

Matchett, S 2018, July 20, Macquarie U close to adopting a completely new curriculum model, Campus Morning Mail, accessed from https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/macquarie-u-close-to-adopting-a-completely-new-curriculum-model/

National Union of Students [NUS], Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations [CAPA], Council of International Students Australia [CISA], and National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association [NATSIPA] 2017, The Spring Agreement, accessed from http://www.capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Spring-agreement-PDF.pdf

Oliver, B 2017, Micro-credentials within degrees at Deakin University, accessed from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/blog/micro-credentials-within-degrees-deakin-university

Pickard, L 2018, Analysis of 450 MOOC-based microcredentials reveals many options but little consistency, accessed from https://www.classcentral.com/report/moocs-microcredentials-analysis-2018/

Priest, N 2016, Digital Badging and Micro-Credentialing, accessed from https://bostonbeyond.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Digital_Badging_Paper_NMEF.pdf

University of New South Wales [UNSW] Canberra 2019, Postgraduate credit and micro-credentials, accessed from https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/study/professional-education-courses/accreditation