Micro-Credentials and the Problem of a Currency

What a Short Qualification Can Be Worth, and to Whom

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Micro-credentials have moved in five years from a proposal to a policy instrument with a European definition, a standard and a public register. This article examines what a short qualification can certify, the conditions under which an employer will accept it, and the reason that a proliferation of credentials produces a currency that nobody quotes. It argues that the value of a micro-credential is borrowed from the institution that issues it rather than created by the format, and that the instruments which matter are assessment, volume and a register.

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1. A Format and a Definition

A micro-credential is a record of a small unit of learning, assessed and certified, with a stated volume and a stated level. The definition is unremarkable and it took five years to agree, because the agreement required a compromise between two purposes.

The first purpose is the labour market's: an employer wishes to know what a candidate can do, and a short credential that states a competence is more informative than a degree that states a field. The second purpose is the institution's: a university wishes to make its teaching available to people who will not enrol in a programme, and a creden-

tial is a container for a module that has been taught to a different audience.

A credential's value is borrowed from its issuer, not created by its format

The compromise produced a format that serves both and a vocabulary that serves neither, because a credential that is defined by its volume and its level is a credential that describes its packaging rather than its content. The definition is a necessary first step and it is the least important part of the question, which is why the sector has spent so long on it.

2. What a Credit Point Cannot Carry

The European approach to micro-credentials attaches a volume in credits to every credential, and the attachment is the source of the format's principal weakness.

A credit is a measure of workload, and a workload is a measure of the time a learner has spent rather than of what she has learned. A credential of five credits states that its holder has worked for a defined number of hours, and it does not state what she can do, at what standard or with what reliability. The information that an employer needs is in the assessment, and the assessment is not part of the volume.

The consequence is a proliferation of credentials with the same volume and different content, which is a market in which a buyer cannot compare. A register that lists two hundred credentials of five credits each has described two hundred equal objects and has not described a single competence.

3. The Three Things That Determine Value

The value of a micro-credential to an employer depends on three things, and the format is not one of them.

The first is the issuer. An employer who recognises a university's degree will extend a presumption to its credential, and an employer who does not will not. The presumption is the credential's principal asset, and it is the reason that the universities which have entered the market have done so with their own names rather than with a new brand.

The second is the assessment. A credential that is awarded on attendance is a certificate of presence, and an employer who has been disappointed once will not read the next one. The third is the specification:

a credential that states what its holder can do, at what standard, with what evidence, is a credential that a hiring manager can use.

The three are properties of the issuing institution, and a policy that regulates the format without regulating the three has regulated the label on a package.

4. The Register and Its Function

A public register of micro-credentials is the instrument that a system builds to make the market legible, and its function depends on what it records.

A register that records the issuer, the title and the volume has produced a catalogue. A register that records the assessment, the standard and the evidence has produced a description that an employer can use, and the difference is a set of fields that an issuer must complete and that a ministry must verify. The fields are the whole policy, and the platform is the easy part.

The systems that have built a register report the same difficulty: the issuers complete the fields that are easy and leave the assessment to a sentence. The remedy is not exhortation but a rule that an entry without an assessment description is not published, which is a decision that a ministry can take and that a university will resist because it delays a launch.

5. The Institutional Calculation

A university that considers issuing micro-credentials makes a calculation with four terms, and the calculation is rarely written down.

The first term is the revenue, which is a fee per learner and which is small per unit. The second is the cost, which is the design of a short course, its assessment and its administration, and the administration is the term that institutions underestimate because a short course requires the same registration, the same records and the same appeals as a module.

The third term is the risk to the degree: a university that awards credentials in a field may find that a credential is used as a substitute for a module, and the substitution erodes the programme's revenue. The fourth is the reputational term, which is the one that matters most and

that is not in the spreadsheet: a credential that is awarded carelessly damages the presumption on which every other qualification of the institution depends.

Determinant	Instrument	Visible to
Issuer	Institutional name	Employer
Assessment	Stated task and standard	Register
Specification	Competence statement	Hiring manager
Volume	Credits	Recognition officer

Table 1 Three determinants of value and their instruments

6. The Employer Who Does Not Read

The policy discussion assumes an employer who reads a credential, and the assumption is the format's largest unexamined premise.

A hiring manager in a small firm receives two hundred applications and reads a curriculum vitae for forty seconds. A credential that requires her to consult a register, resolve a level and interpret a competence statement will not be consulted, and the information that a candidate wishes to convey will not be conveyed.

The instrument that survives this constraint is a credential whose title states the competence and whose verification is a single click: a link, a date, an issuer and a signature. The design constraint is severe and it is the one that the format's advocates should apply, because a credential that requires an explanation has already failed with the reader it was designed for.

7. The Recognition Question

A micro-credential is not a qualification, and the distinction determines what a system can do with one.

A qualification confers an access: to a profession, to a further programme, to a register. A credential certifies a unit of learning and confers no access unless an institution decides to grant one. An institution that admits a holder of a credential to a master's programme on the strength of it has made a recognition decision, and the decision requires the same procedure as any other.

The instrument that makes the decision manageable is a published policy: which credentials the institution will accept, for which programmes, with what conditions. The policy is the credential's route into the formal system, and its absence is the reason that a holder of a credential frequently discovers that her credential is worth nothing for admission.

8. The Public Register and the Private Market

A public register of credentials and a private market in credentials are not the same thing, and the difference determines who benefits from the format.

A register is a public good: it is maintained by an authority, it is free to consult and it is open to every issuer that meets the conditions. A market is a set of platforms that host credentials, that charge for verification or for placement, and that compete for issuers. The two can coexist and the coexistence has a predictable outcome, which is that the platforms become the interface through which a credential is seen and the register becomes the record that nobody consults.

The consequence for an institution is a decision about distribution. A credential published only on a platform is a credential whose visibility depends on a commercial arrangement, and an institution that has chosen a platform has delegated the presentation of its qualification to a company whose interests are not the institution's. A credential published in a register and exported to any platform is a credential that the institution controls.

The instrument is a requirement in the institution's own practice: every credential is deposited in the public register, with the assessment and the standard, and the platforms are a channel rather than a home. The requirement costs a form and it is the difference between issuing a qualification and renting a listing.

9. Who Pays for the Assessment

The cost that distinguishes a credible credential from a certificate is the assessment, and the assessment is the element that no business model in the sector has solved.

A credential assessed by a task requires a marker, a standard and a moderation, and the three cost more per learner than the teaching that precedes them when the cohort is small. A five-credit credential with a cohort of twelve and a properly moderated task has an assessment cost per learner that exceeds the fee that the market will bear, which is why the sector has gravitated toward multiple-choice tests and attendance records.

The institution's response has three options, and each of them has been tried. The first is to assess at scale with an automated instrument, which is cheap and which certifies a narrow competence. The second is to price the credential at its cost, which restricts it to learners whose employer pays. The third is to embed the assessment in an existing module, so that the credential is awarded to a student who has already been assessed, which is the cheapest option and which limits the credential to enrolled students.

The third option is the one that most universities have in fact taken, and it explains an oddity in the market: many micro-credentials are awarded to students who are already in a programme, which means that the format has served internal flexibility rather than external access. That is a legitimate use and it is not the use that the policy promised, and the gap between the two is the reason that the statistics on credential uptake are so difficult to interpret.

10. Conclusions

Micro-credentials have acquired a definition, a volume and a register, and the three describe a package rather than a competence. Their value depends on the issuer's name, the quality of the assessment and the specificity of the specification, and the format determines none of them.

Three conclusions follow. A register should record the assessment and the standard, and an entry without them should not be published, because a catalogue is not a description. An institution should issue credentials under its own name and with the same assessment standards as its modules, since the presumption of quality is the only asset that the format has. And every institution should publish a policy on the credentials it accepts for admission, because a credential without a route into the formal system is a certificate that its holder cannot use.

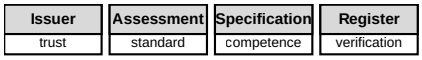

Figure 1 What a credential needs

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Biography:

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