

# Evaluation and Lessons Learned from Professionalising Youth Work Micro-credentials in Fiji and the Bahamas: A Comparative Analysis

**Type:** Workshop

**Theme:** Inspiring Innovations

**Key words:**

micro-credential

small states

youth work

evaluation

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## Introduction

This workshop will describe and problematize the context, inputs, processes, and products of two complementary projects that focused on capacity building of youth work professionals in small states. Through the development of two micro-credentials (each including six courses), the Commonwealth of Learning and Lakehead University in Canada, forged partnerships with key stakeholders in the Pacific and in the Bahamas and developed micro-credentials targeting their current or aspiring youth work professionals who are on the front lines engaging with youth.

The workshop will comprise **two halves**. In the **first half**, facilitators will provide some background beginning with an overview of the context that led to the formation of each project (e.g., youth issues in the Pacific and the Bahamas, selection of stakeholders, and cultural inputs). The project team will share how a co-design workshop approach informed by participatory action research, developed meaningful relationships and collegiality among stakeholders, which led to the design of curricula aimed to upskill youth workers in each cultural and regional context. The online and in-person engagements matured to deliver impactful professional and cross-cultural learning with local ownership, while also carrying important lessons on process and implementation.

The **second half** of the workshop will be more participatory in nature. Participants will be asked to reflect on the first half presentation and then be organized into small groups. Here participants will be provided excerpts of curriculum developed for the youth work micro-credentials, and, with opportunities to observe, reflect upon and discuss the implications of cross-national curriculum development and draw on experiences in multi stakeholder projects relative to their own professional and cultural contexts. How far did the experiences from these two projects relate to their own multi-stakeholder initiatives? Was there an opportunity to reflect and implement lessons learned in a given or new project? In plenary, participants and facilitators will re-engage in an open and facilitated discussion to consider generalizations that may be made on multi-stakeholder projects of a comparable nature.

In general, participants in this workshop will learn about the following:

- Need to professionalize youth work in small states in the Commonwealth
- Reflect on personal insights and experiences with collaboration in a digital environment
- Explore power, bias, contextual and cross-cultural knowledge, building trust, sustaining participatory engagement
- Identify challenges and opportunities when implementing a participatory action research model to co-develop curriculum
- Summarise actions that can be incorporated in multi-stakeholder initiatives

The outcomes of the workshop are to: Advance understanding on mechanisms that may enable fruitful engagement across international and cultural boundaries; the centrality and value of co-development in such activities; and problematizing international partnerships in the context of project management and participatory action research with a view to forming some generalizations to the benefit of all attendees.

### **Context**

Beginning in 2019, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), in collaboration with Lakehead University (LU) in Canada, initiated a project to develop micro-credentials aimed at professionalising youth workers, or aspiring youth workers, located in the Pacific and the Bahamas.

COL and LU in conjunction with local partners, developed two online, facilitated micro-credentials, each comprised of six courses. The first micro-credential was delivered in the Pacific in 2020-21 and the second micro-credential was developed with the Bahamas in 2021 and 2022 with the launch scheduled for September 2022. In the Pacific, course development and delivery were carried out by the Pacific Centre for Flexible and Open Learning for Development (PACFOLD), located at the University of the South Pacific (USP). From this project, there were 2,503 registered learners. Pre- and post-course experience surveys, along with participant interviews, comprised rich data sources. Data collected in the Bahamas, which is at an earlier stage of implementation, included data from six interview and focus groups of ministry and post-secondary education professionals.

The Commonwealth is home to 2.6 billion inhabitants, of which 60 percent, or nearly 1.6 billion, are under the age of 30. Youth, which the Commonwealth defines as being in the age range of 15-29, are disproportionately marginalised. In comparison to older groups, youth have higher rates of unemployment, poor health and well-being, and minimal civic participation, etc. Developing the skills of youth workers to ameliorate disparities by imparting skills and knowledge to youth is one means to enhance their personal and professional lives. Such youth workers may be social workers, clergy members, non-government officials, and other professionals. These individuals have not been adequately trained or had access to re-training opportunities and the micro-credentials aim to support their professional learning. Undergirding the product of course development and delivery are the processes required to conceptualize these projects, select partners, develop relationships, commit resources, and localize learning based on the involvement of domestic and international stakeholders.

## **Research**

Given the above, a research focus was developed in the Pacific project carrying two aims: one being to ascertain learner perceptions and outcomes of learners who enrolled in the micro-credentials, and two to scrutinize the inputs and processes that enabled the projects to take root and grow along with the corresponding lessons that have been learned to carry these projects to existing and new contexts.

For the Pacific project, data collection was primarily focused on the product, which included participation data from 2,503 registered learners, and pre- and post-course experience surveys. For the Bahamian project, which is at an earlier stage of implementation, data collection included six interview and focus groups of ministry and post-secondary education professionals.

The methodology of the Pacific research was framed around Stufflebeam's CIPP (Context, Input, Process and Product) model of evaluation; a mixed methods approach to the gathering and analysis of data (Stufflebeam, 2003). We engaged in a detailed study of each one of these components with the help of a mixed methods approach comprised of the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Lessons learned from this initiative have significant considerations for the next iteration of these, as well as subsequent initiatives, including expansion to other small states within the Commonwealth.

The Bahamas research has drawn upon critical, participatory action research (CPAR) methodology. This approach concentrates on local, real-world problems, the long-term involvement of research participants, and a focus on root causes (McTaggart et al., 2016). CPAR is a cyclical and interactive process, and accordingly, our team of researchers meet regularly to discuss on-the-ground issues, problems, and realities relating to the development and execution of our youth work curriculum in the Bahamas. During these processes we analyse and synthesize our data, devise curricular solutions through the youth work micro-credentials, and then re-convene to re-evaluate the project's goals.

## **Way Forward**

As noted above, workshop participants will learn about the experiences of two complex multi-stakeholder projects focused on the professionalisation of youth workers that were both successful. Through scrutiny of procedures and relying on lessons learned between projects, participants will be exposed to varying methods to build, develop, and sustain meaningful partnerships. A participatory approach will also enable participants to share their experiences and contribute to an open session at the conclusion of the workshop to discussion potential generalizations gleaned from the facilitators' and participants' experiences alike.

Amidst these projects, there is a third project underway that aims to expand the youth work micro-credential to two other areas of the Commonwealth: Sub-Saharan African and the Mediterranean. Fusing the approaches from the Pacific (i.e., multi-country participation) and the Bahamas (i.e., sustained participation and ownership), the facilitators will share some new ideas underway to develop a participatory model in a new project that will include six other small states in the Commonwealth.

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## Facilitator Bios

Som Naidu (Pacific Lead): Dr Naidu is former Pro Vice-Chancellor (Flexible Learning), and Director of the Centre for Flexible Learning at the University of the South Pacific. Dr Naidu has spent most of his professional life in the higher education sector aimed at enhancing learning and teaching in open, distance and flexible learning and distributed learning environments. A Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Dr. Naidu is Principal Associate (Technology, Education and Design Associates), and Executive Editor of the journal Distance Education (<https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/cdie20/current>).

Gary Pluim (Youth Lead): Dr. Pluim is an assistant professor in the faculty of education at Lakehead University, Orillia Canada. His research and teaching centre on intercultural education, youth development, and education transfer, with previous work experience across the Caribbean, the Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2019 Gary has led a Lakehead team of curriculum writers and researchers that have worked in partnership with COL, USP, and BTVI on youth work capacity building projects.

Janelle Johnson (Bahamas Lead): Ms Cambridge is a 4th-year doctoral student at the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, Canada. She presently serves as Coordinator of the English Language Department at the Bahamas Technical & Vocational Institute. She has published her research in the areas of student success, student engagement, and special education.

Deepak Bhartu: Mr Bhartu is a senior engineer and project manager at Crystal Delta, Australia. Deepak has worked in the higher education sector for over a decade and specialises in designing and developing effective and engaging online learning experiences. Deepak has a master's degree in Education, Computing Science and Information Systems, Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, and is a certified Higher Education Peer Reviewer with Quality Matters. Deepak was the project manager as part of the USP team which implemented this project in the Pacific.

Mairette Newman: Dr Newman is an education specialist at the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), with responsibility for the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth. Partnering with Ministries and post-secondary institutions in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, she designs and manages projects that build capacity in open, distance and flexible learning while also facilitating the development of learning opportunities in areas relevant to small states, including skills development for youth workers.

Kirk Perris. Dr. Perris is a digital learning strategist who works across the public and private sectors in Canada and abroad. Kirk provides strategic advice, planning and evaluation, policy development, instructional design, and assessment, in relation to digital learning. He also engages in research activity and academic publishing.

Jana Semeniuk. Ms. Semeniuk is a graduate student at the faculty of education at Lakehead University, Orillia, Canada. Currently completing her Master's thesis in Social Justice Education, Jana is an Ontario-certified primary and junior educator who has worked as a camp lead and assistant to the director at various youth agencies in Ontario, Canada. Jana has also been working as part of the Lakehead team of curriculum writers and researchers on this project.

## References

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