

PCF10 Conference Piece

The opportunities of nano- and micro-credentials for industry and the workforce

Abstract:

We are hearing a lot at the moment about ‘the great resignation’; Covid has exposed a number of hard truths to people about what they want from life, from their careers and this is leading to people changing jobs, careers, and in many cases, leaving the workforce altogether, leading to huge gaps. With the climate emergency and other global geo-political factors, there are growing industries out there that need a massive influx of employees, and a number of other industries which are going to be hemorrhaging employees in the not too distant future due to changes in working practices. Smaller-formed courses which give employees the opportunity to learn at their own pace and achieve in shorter time frames with smaller costs and with recognition, at an industry and/or national level is a huge impetus to learners to upskill and reskill and join these industries which are crying out for new workers. This video will detail the different ways that industry and the workforce can use and utilise nano- and micro-credentials to motivate more people into particular industries with the right skills and knowledge set required to provide the workforce industry needs right now.

By Stuart Martin, Skills Consulting Group

Hello, thank you for taking the time to watch this presentation, my name’s Stuart Martin, I’m Specialist Consultant- Credentialing at Skills Consulting Group, based in New Zealand and I’m here to talk to you about the opportunities of nano- and micro-credentials for industry and the workforce.

Nano- and micro-credentials have no fixed definition which has added to both its complexity, misunderstanding and the idea that they are a catchall for everything that exists in education. So what are they? I’m basing my interpretation on micro-credentials on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) definition. They have developed the most rigorous micro-credential definition and policy in the world, currently New Zealand is the only country that defines a micro-credential by its size, in this instance between 5 credits and 40 credits, or 50 hours to 400 hours. The intention of a micro-credential is to not cover the same content that a learner can get in a qualification but to focus on skills and knowledge required by industry now. To really show the importance NZQA have also made it mandatory that any micro-credential on the NZQA register must have an annual review to ensure that the skills and knowledge being taught are still current and still required by industry. The way I see micro-credentials is that a micro-credential that is available right now shouldn’t be available in the same format and same content in for example five years. The point of a micro-credential is to be relevant and necessary for what industry requires right now. In five years the skills needed will be different and so the micro-credential will have been updated or changed entirely to reflect that change.

The way that I see a micro-credential’s benefit is that they’re short courses that exist to ensure that skills and knowledge required right now by industry can be taught in a quick timeframe. By having them separate from qualifications which take significant amounts of time to create, are reviewed sparingly and are usually quite large, micro-credentials can be created relatively quickly, within months. For people who are in the workforce, who need to upskill or reskill, they already have knowledge and skills, they don’t need a massive qualification for this next step, they just need a certain set of new skills or knowledge and that’s where the micro-credential can work, it doesn’t do everything, it just does what is needed, what is necessary. Saying that, NZQA and Australia now allow micro-credentials to ‘stack’, this is where a learner could take several micro-credentials over time along with other courses potentially, and once they’ve taken all of those, they could receive a qualification for that. This is where I see the huge benefit of micro-credentials for anyone, because they are small, and usually at least partly on-line, there is an on-demand aspect to them which means a learner can take these credentials at a time that suits them, after work, weekends, and because they are short, they are easier to complete when you in full time employment, if you can stack over time, learners will have more impetus, and more ability to be able to upskill and reskill. I see this method as the future of education, people can’t afford to not work whilst studying, if they can learn and undertake training simultaneously, this will be hugely beneficial to the workforce and the individual.

I’ve spoken thus far about micro-credentials, but what of nano-credentials? New Zealand has no policy on nano-credentials at the moment and around the world it seems many people use the words nano-credential and micro-credential interchangeably. I see nano-credential as taking up the under one credit to 4 credit space. There are a

lot of skills and knowledge that be learned and assessed in 40 hours or less and I see this space as being just as, if not, more important than the micro-credential space.

The addition of being able to 'stack' nano-credentials into micro-credentials or a mixture of both and forming a qualification on it could also be exceptionally useful.

The main issue at the moment is that everyone uses the terms interchangeably and some with very different definitions as well. Not just country to country, but even within the same college there can be multiple competing definitions. There are also for instance other terms, 'courses', 'MOOC's' all of which I would say fit into the definition of micro and nano credential.

So how can all of these be a benefit to industry and the workforce apart from in the ways I've spoken about?

We are hearing a lot at the moment about 'the great resignation', Covid has exposed a number of hard truths to people about what they want from life, from their careers and this is leading to people changing jobs, careers, and in many cases, leaving the workforce altogether, leading to huge gaps. With the climate emergency and other global geo-political factors, there are growing industries out there that need a massive influx of employees, and a number of other industries which are going to be haemorrhaging employees in the not too distant future due to changes in working practices.

With changes like this occurring and only going to get more prevalent, industries who need these workers coming to them as a matter of urgency need to start to thinking about what do their prospective employees already have? What skill set do they have that can relate well to this new type of work? If you think for instance of workers in the fossil fuel industries, what skills do they have which could work well in for instance solar panel construction and installation? Or electric car charging stations? There will be skills that can interrelate, what these new sectors need to focus on is finding out what will interrelate and what are the new skills and knowledge. By creating nano or micro-credentials and offering prospective employees from these industries jobs in these growing areas and all they need is their current experience and then needing to take a free course created by these industries to fill the gaps, it's going to be a gamechanger in terms of being able to attract the people that are required to work in these industries. There are so many jobs out there currently asking for experience or qualifications that people just don't have. Industry needs to be more pragmatic with their approaches and understand who is best suited to these roles and find the best ways of training them and getting them in the industry. If they can offer prospective employees a credential which they can take with them, and show them that their experience, whilst in a different field, is hugely valuable, they will attract the employees that they need and get their loyalty.

From a workforce's perspective as I've previously mentioned, people who are currently in full time employment and looking to change jobs are busy people. They don't have the time or the money necessarily to complete qualifications which can take years and thousands of dollars. What they can do are short-courses, mostly online, on-demand at their pace. The EU are currently working through a new micro-credential definition and framework with the intention of having one space where all EU accredited micro-credentials exist, and Australia are also doing something similar with an Australian collection where learners will be able to see all existing micro-credentials to be able to access. Having standardised definitions and the ability for countries to recognise each other's courses is going to be very important in portability.

I've spoken mostly so far about people already in the workforce, and mostly taking the skills that they have already and upskilling and reskilling. For those people not in the workforce yet, or very new to it, younger people in particular, this is another way for industries to identify, and target what is it that these new people need to have to work there. They won't need the same skills and knowledge in the beginning as these existing workforce learners will. I see it as beginning by identifying the different roles in these industries and what is it that someone brand new needs to be able to show and do. If there are particular nano or micro-credentials that can be created, either by an industry leader, or a collaboration amongst the industry to create an industry-accepted credentialing system, preferably free, so that either, this can be promoted and prospective employees can undertake these free online, on-demand courses before applying, or use as a form of induction. People want to achieve success, and if these courses are credentials, whether they are on a nationally recognised framework or not, if they come with a digital badge (a sort of online certificate which showcases the knowledge and skills and competencies learned and achieved) or certification, something portable which a learner can evidence rather

than just an internal course, that's the type of course that people are looking to have, to showcase what they can do and have evidence to back it up.

Nano and micro-credentials are a huge asset and potential game changer across multiple industries around the world. It has the opportunity to help both the employer and the employed, to have the people who are essential to keep industries going trained to the right level and skillset in a format that works best for both the employer and the employed. Recognition of these credentials is also of huge importance, both for industry and for the employees to feel valued and recognised for what they can do and achieve. The opportunity to help upskill and reskill employees into what industry genuinely and urgently needs in a quick timeframe is vast and these types of credentials I foresee only getting more important with the creation of these new training databased across the world. There is a vast amount of potential out there and with these credentials, industry can tap into that on a scale hitherto unseen, the education and public sector are ready to help industry achieve this.