



For immediate release

New HEQCO report brings clarity to the confusing world of microcredentials

May 5, 2021 - [*Making Sense of Microcredentials*](#), a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), provides a clear definition for microcredentials and insight into their perceived and potential value for employers, government, postsecondary institutions and potential students.

Working with the Business + Higher Education Roundtable (BHER), Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICAN) and Abacus Data, HEQCO surveyed 201 employers, 2,000 working-age Canadians and 161 representatives from 105 postsecondary institutions across the country on their experiences, awareness and perception of microcredentials. Researchers conducted followup interviews with employers and postsecondary leaders. These surveys and interviews revealed that many are unaware of microcredentials and among those who are aware there remains a great deal of confusion about what they are and who they serve.

“We have seen significant interest and investment from the postsecondary sector, employers and government in these new training opportunities, and we are excited to provide some clarity about the role microcredentials should play in Ontario’s postsecondary system,” said Janice Deakin, President and CEO of HEQCO. “As with any innovation there are still many unknowns. HEQCO is committed to continuing research in this area so our partners can make strategic decisions about program design, delivery, quality assurance and assessment. At the end of the day, we want these programs to lead to positive outcomes for students.”

HEQCO developed a practical and concise definition for microcredentials that is informed by international examples and discussions with sector experts. This simple definition is flexible and inclusive, while focusing on the essential elements of being narrow in scope and short in duration.

HEQCO’s microcredential definition: *A microcredential is a representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials.*

Employers and prospective students showed interest in microcredentials when presented with this definition. Nearly 75% of working-age Canadians surveyed displayed interest in this definition of microcredentials for either professional development, personal development or both. Prospective students care that microcredentials are affordable and that employers see value in them. Employers favour microcredentials that are competency-based and respond to industry or community needs. Postsecondary institutions should be clear about the ways microcredential offerings deliver on these expectations as well as other “quality markers” such as whether microcredentials are flexible, assessed, accredited, standardized and stackable.

Respondents from all groups surveyed showed mixed levels of interest in the concept of stackability, which is the ability to combine multiple microcredentials into a larger credential. While the authors advise colleges and universities to be transparent about how microcredentials, and other credentials, relate to one another, they also advise focusing less on deconstructing existing curricula for stackability purposes, and more on designing innovative, focused content that serves a new market of students.

The 2020 Ontario budget committed nearly \$60 million towards a microcredential strategy for employment-related upskilling. Institutions and governments should focus their strategies on upskilling adult learners with specific training needs, whose prior learning and experience has already provided a strong foundation of knowledge and transferable skills. Microcredentials may also serve current postsecondary students looking to develop transferable skills or recent graduates exploring potential career paths. The goal of microcredentials should not be to replace traditional programs or address the comprehensive reskilling needs of learners. Governments and institutions should consider competency-based education programs for the latter.

To support postsecondary institutions, the Ontario government should work towards establishing a common framework for microcredentials. The quality markers desired by prospective students and employers should be clear and communicated effectively. Institutions are encouraged to innovate, including experimentation with mastery-based programs that focus more on measuring competency and less on seat-time. Future HEQCO research in this field will focus on issues of quality, including evaluations of these programs and their outcomes.

[*Making Sense of Microcredentials*](#) was written by Jackie Pichette, Sarah Brumwell, Jessica Rizk and Steven Han, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Media contact:

Matt Ross
Director, Communications
HEQCO
mross@heqco.ca
416-624-3250

Brief overview of selected survey results:

- Most employers were unclear about the meaning of microcredential — 59% of respondents were “not familiar at all” with the term, and only 10% indicated they had a good understanding. Related or similar terms had even less familiarity.
- About 60% of employers indicated microcredentials would increase their confidence in a prospective employee’s skills. Most employer respondents (70%) indicated that

microcredentials could facilitate employee retention.

- Only one-quarter of the Canadians surveyed had heard of microcredentials, and only 19% could provide some kind of definition. Awareness of the term was higher among younger, working-age Canadians; those with greater household incomes; and those with a university education.
- Most postsecondary institutions see microcredentials as a way to access a new market of students. More than 90% say current programs target working adults who are looking to change their occupation and/or employees/potential employees of industry partners.
- More than one-third of respondents from postsecondary institutions were indifferent about whether a microcredential needed to be offered online.