



Provocation

Subject to Editor review, Provocations are intended to be short and showcase thought leadership and expert commentary on the future of credentials for work in a disrupted world.

Micro-credentials: A learner value framework

Beverley Oliver¹

Corresponding author: Beverley Oliver (b.oliver@deakin.edu.au)

¹Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. ORCID: 0000-0002-2971-714X

Introduction

Much has been made of micro-credentials, and the ‘craze’ (Ralston, 2021) and ‘hype’ (Roy & Clark, 2019) they generate. One of the barriers to their success is that a definition of micro-credentials has not been widely agreed (Kato, Galán-Muros, & Weko, 2020). However, to succeed, micro-credentials need not just a definition, but a way to ensure they are valued, and bring value to key stakeholders: particularly learners, employers¹ and providers. To this end, this provocation proposes a micro-credential value framework that sets out their key benefits and costs for learners.

Gallagher asserts that a “more standardised taxonomy and a common language for naming, describing and communicating new forms of credentials would be helpful in accelerating adoption and *ensuring value for both students and employers*” (2016, p. 170, emphasis added). Some relevant micro-credential frameworks have been suggested: Oliver (2019) offers a simple typology to elucidate the main elements of micro-credentials (what they are intended to signify, where they are offered, and so on). Taxonomies of micro-credentials were investigated in Ifenthaler et al. (2016); however, these are predominantly concerned with badges, digital portfolios and interactive gaming.

On the topic of value, Rossiter and Tynan state that the micro-credential learner *[first] enters a period of discovery, information gathering and understanding, exiting with a good grasp of the value proposition of the micro-credential* (2019, p. 8, emphasis added). However, little research has been done to understand the common elements of such a value proposition, or indeed the actual value derived from a micro-credential. This provocation draws on the marketing literature: if a customer value proposition is *a strategic tool that is used by a company to communicate how it aims to provide value to customers* (Payne, Frow, & Eggert, 2017, p. 467), then for micro-credentials, such a

¹ Not all micro-credentials are employment-related, but those that are need to be understood and valued by potential employers.

definition might be reworded as ‘a strategic tool that is used by an education provider to communicate how it aims to provide value to learners’.

The framework

The micro-credential learner value framework proposed here is based on the assumption that value is derived when the benefits of a credential are equal to or outweighed by the costs incurred in its attainment: that is,

the VALUE of a micro-credential equals BENEFITS realised minus COSTS incurred.

However, for learners, benefits and costs depend to some degree on an individual’s motivation, circumstances and preferences: what one learner sees as a benefit (for example, challenging assessment), another might see as an imposition. To ensure they deliver expectations, providers should know and understand as much as feasible about the target learners’ motivations, previous education, and circumstances, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Learner Motivation, Education, Circumstances and Preferences that Influence Perceptions of Credential Value

Motivation	Seeking to credential new skills or prior skills
	Seeking a credential for career advantage (finding or securing work), or for personal interest
Education	Previous educational qualifications
	Quality of previous educational experiences
	Eligibility re pre-requisites
	Prior knowledge and experience
Circumstances	Life stage
	Career stage
	Capacity to pay or secure funding
	Capacity to invest time in learning
	Capacity to engage in the mode of delivery (eg online, onsite)
	Competing obligations
Preferences	Preference for mode of delivery, assessment type, peer engagement

Notwithstanding learner differences, this provocation proposes a framework (set out as Table 2) that maps the principal learner benefits and costs of engaging in micro-credentials. Learners are categorised as **those seeking career advantage** and **those seeking personal interest** learning (not all benefits and costs will apply equally to both types, and sometimes personal interest leads to career advantage and vice versa). The framework sets out **eight headline benefits** of micro-credentials: outcomes, certification, signalling power, interoperability with other credentials, quality and standards (including industry endorsement or accreditation, if relevant), assessment and feedback, engagement and convenience (whether the micro-credential can be achieved on demand, or not). These are weighed against the **two costs**: money and time (effort required, time lost in travel, and whether the learner could have been using their time more effectively). Comments and questions prompt the reader to understand what each of these might entail.

Table 2: The Micro-credential Learner Value Framework

		Learners seeking		Explanatory comments and questions about a micro-credential
		Career advantage	Personal interest	
BENEFITS	Outcomes	Knowledge/skills		Includes new knowledge skills or insights that are validated
		Employability		Includes recruitment, promotion, salary, job security
	Certification	Type of attestation		Includes paper, digital certificate, badge or a combination
		Portability		Is it recognised elsewhere (professionally, geographically)?
		Security		Is the certification tamper proof and verifiable?
	Signalling power	Provider brand		What is the standing of the provider including in industry?
		Partner brand		If there is a partner provider, what is their standing?
	Interoperability	Micro-credentials		Does it lead to other micro-credentials?
		Macro-credentials		Is it a (credit) pathway or supplement to a qualification?
	Quality and standards	Quality assurance		Is the provider accredited and quality assured?
		Industry-accredited		Is it recognised and accredited by industry?
	Assessment and feedback	Assessment		What is the quantum and quality of assessment?
		Identity verification		Is academic integrity assured?
		Main assessor		Is assessment mainly by educators, peers, technology?
		Feedback		Is formative feedback provided?
	Engagement	With educators		Is there meaningful engagement with educators?
		With peers		Is there meaningful engagement with peers?
		With industry		Is there engagement with industry? Career advice?
	Convenience	Flexibility		Scheduled or on demand; synchronous or asynchronous?
	COSTS	Financial	Course fee	
Payment method				Is cost upfront or is delayed payment available?
Temporal		Effort		What is the likely quantum of effort required?
		Travel time		Fully onsite; mostly onsite; mostly online, fully online?
		Opportunity		Could the learner use this time more effectively elsewhere?

This provocation aims to be a conversation starter with regard to what a micro-credential learner value framework might entail, and more importantly, how it might be refined and used by providers to ensure maximum value, and thereby success, through micro-credentials.

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