© SATINBIRD EDUCATION 2022

Microcredentials

Where from, where to and what do they offer?

October 2022

Contents

Introduction 2
What are microcredentials? 2
Context 2
Covid-19 impact 3
The response 3
Key attributes and benefits of microcredentials 4
Where to next? 5
About Satinbird Education 5

Introduction

This paper will be of interest to you if:

- you want more career opportunities by building knowledge and skills;
- you are responsible for your organisation's workforce development and retention; or
- you are responsible for building sustainable improvements in productivity, revenue, customer satisfaction, and a competitive edge through capability building,

Whatever your motivation, microcredentials can help by delivering **Relevance** and **Immediacy** to the learning and training needs of you, your team and your organisation.

What are microcredentials?

The term *microcredential* describes learning material organized into courses that can be subsequently 'stacked' or 'assembled' into larger pieces of learning to form recognised qualifications or skill sets.

Each microcredential bears its own certification and is designed to meet the *'I need to learn this, right now'* approach that more traditional qualifications cannot.

Learners, and the organisations that they work in, are engaging with microcredentials in increasing numbers because they deliver a more personalised learning experience and one that can be customized to better align with rapidly changing jobs.

Microcredentials are an important, global education innovation that rebalances supply and demand in favour of the learner or those organisations seeking to enhance the skills of their workforce.

Context

Global education has long revolved around educational institutions such as schools, vocational education providers, and universities delivering proven, but highly regulated, programs through which learners can earn a wide range of certificates, diplomas, degrees, and post-graduate qualifications.

In Australia, these qualifications are managed by the Commonwealth Government via the Australian Qualifications Framework. This helps ensure that the learning and qualifications earned are nationally recognised and mean the same thing across all States and Territories. This also means that they can be internationally recognised and valued. Similar arrangements exist in other countries.

The larger educational institutions organise their academic year, their teaching resources, and their physical infrastructure around delivery of this learning content which is typically broken down into programs, courses, units and modules.

Adding to this are the complexities of prerequisites and self-accrediting institutions which means that the resulting learning is often highly structured, inflexible and not particularly transportable between tertiary institutions.

So, this is essentially a supply-driven model where teaching is more at the convenience of the institutions, not the learners or their employers. Learners are not empowered to make many choices

aligned with their learning and work situations, preferences and convenience. Similar limitations apply to organisations that might be looking to enhance the skills of their workforce.

Covid-19 impact

Whilst there had been some positive innovation and movement toward microcredentials before 2019, it was not fast enough – there was too little incentive for education institutions to change. They had too much invested in their traditional business models which appeared solid.

The Covid-19 global pandemic changed all that and changed it forever. Education had its business models uprooted almost overnight as physical premises were closed indefinitely by Government direction, staff and students were forced into hastily arranged online learning with major changes required in teaching, learning and support. Each of these areas has been the subject of many academic studies and will not be covered further here.

Covid-19 halved international student numbers in Australia. International students either went home or struggled to continue their studies in Australia. Thousands of inbound new students were blocked as student visa processing stopped and flights were cancelled. Furthermore, skilled and unskilled workers, either left Australia and returned home or were locked down in Australia without support.

These global flows in students, labour and talent have far-reaching, long-term economic and social consequences to which the education/training sector has to adapt.

The response

In addition to the teaching and learning changes mentioned above, the pandemic presented multiple business challenges and opportunities playing out in favour of microcredentials. For example:

Firstly, global investment into educational technology expanded massively and is still growing. *EdTech* became a new gold rush as investors suddenly saw new global markets for online and technology-enabled learning. With that upsurge in the availability of innovative tools and technology came greater support for more flexible forms of learning and vastly improved and differentiated learning experiences.

A prime example of this investment in disruption was Coursera which had been in the market for some years before listing. Best described as an online platform/marketplace/aggregator , Coursera capitalised at nearly USD$6 billion, being able to service the urgent uptake from education institutions caught without either business continuity or disaster recovery plans during the initial months of the pandemic.

Secondly, internet demand increased, with much of the remaining workforce now working from home (WFH) or working remotely. Individuals invested in high-speed bandwidth and additional equipment such as webcams and meeting platforms such as Zoom or Teams. Working and studying remotely became more effective as people learned to work with online meetings.

Despite fears of a drop in productivity resulting from WFH, many organisations saw productivity remain the same or improve. Better still, the work/life balance for many staff also improved dramatically with WFM, cutting out long and wasteful commutes and giving back time to family

life.The protracted nature of the pandemic then led to a new working paradigm with many office workers reluctant in returning to the office.

Thirdly, the impact on global and local workforces began to play out in the recruitment and retention of workers. The shortages outlined above, caused many organisations to rethink how they could upskill or reskill their workforce and more importantly, how quickly they could do it to suit their own specific needs. The *'I need to learn this, right now'* driver became very real, very quickly resulting in many businesses deciding to design, deliver and certify their workplace learning where educational institutions could not deliver what they wanted.

Sitting behind this push for change was an already long-held view that educational institutions were failing to deliver graduates with work-ready skills and that impacted the individuals, the organisations, and Australia's economic development. Many organisations already have their own educational offerings, think Deloitte University, Microsoft, Google and professional certification courses, and this trend will continue.

Reskilling for ever-changing jobs presents a further challenge as workers and organisations seek to do this quickly and efficiently and are looking at microcredentials as a potential solution.

Key attributes and benefits of microcredentials

So the forces of change have now met traditional education models head-on, one result of which is the welcome formation of a National Microcredentials Framework.

Although this might be seen by some as a step toward more layers of regulation, it is a valuable development providing a reference point for course developers, educators and learners.

The National Microcredentials framework defines microcredentials as a certification of assessed learning or competency, with a minimum volume of learning of one hour and less than an AQF award qualification. It is a piece of learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification.

This definition is supported by several unifying principles that microcredentials should be:

- Outcome-based
- Responsive to industry-need
- Tailored to support lifelong learning
- Transparent and accessible.

These attributes, together with the benefits of online delivery, fully support learning in a rapidly changing world and mean that individuals and organisations can access the learning they need, when they need it – **Relevance** and **Immediacy**.

So, instead of enrolling an employee in a long course for which only part of the content may be relevant to their needs, employers can select from a 'buffet' of courses and put together highly relevant training programs. The employee can apply their learning more rapidly in the workplace and the employer has much less down time.

For individuals, they have the benefit of choosing topics of immediate interest and consequently will likely learn more through better engagement with the subject matter. Add to that the benefit of

receiving a digital badge or certificate as evidence of learning and that will help boost a resume or CV in an increasingly competitive job market.

Where to next?

A key to the future for microcredentials will be a demonstrable improvement in both new skills development and the reskilling and upskilling of the workforce.

Replacing those jobs lost during the pandemic through new skilled migration targets and temporary worker visas requires more training to replenish lost skills.

Developing employees and building their required skills quickly and efficiently for the jobs of the future is a form of insurance against future pandemic-like events. Microcredentials will also play an important part in enabling employees to switch roles to fill temporary shortages and vacancies in the workplace.

Businesses and educational institutions each have critical roles to play in further developing this new approach to learning and accreditation, as do individual learners. Businesses and learners must continue to apply pressure to educational institutions by demanding learning experiences that meet flexible workplace skill development and to ensure that microcredentials are recognised and made 'stackable' by both businesses and educational institutions.

Educational institutions recognise that microcredentials have intrinsic business value and can build more learning products and experiences to support and encourage them. The ultimate career goal is life-long learning.

About Satinbird Education

Satinbird Education is an Australian online education business. Established in 2019 it presents a range of business and industry microcredential courses and issues secure digital badges for successful completion of each course. For more information please drop us a line at contactus@satinbird.au.