Foreword

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Micro-credentials and their use are hot topics in higher education in 2021. As the World Economic Forum Jobs 2020 report (World Economic Forum, 2020) noted, there is an increasing need to provide short-timeframe opportunities for re-skilling and upskilling that will not diminish as we move forward. Driven by this need to reskill or upskill learners, institutions are looking closely at new practice models that will allow them to offer training and certification in smaller units of learning directly tied to workplace needs. This opportunity to create customizable learning experiences for individuals has catalysed a movement to harness ideas originally designed for open badging (OpenBadges.org, 2020) with the developing requirement for institutions to offer digital credentials for all learners (AACRAO, 2020). The resulting fusion has led to the exploration and development of micro-credentials, inspired by the collective value proposition for learners, higher education institutions and employers.

Micro-credential definitions exist but there is no standard. Recently, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario offered a definition for consideration in the Canadian context, based on a synthesis of research it had carried out. HECQO's definition stated that, "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." (Pichette et al., 2021)

The move to upskill and re-skill individuals for a dynamically changing economic environment has become integral to recovery and resilience strategies for a post-COVID world (Davidson, 2020). Consequently, the need to harness digital transformation in ways that better equip individuals and institutions to respond to opportunities for further learning and differentiated employment is imperative. Micro-credentials provide a viable and expedient pathway to explicitly certify competence and facilitate the match between individuals and employment opportunities. Higher education institutions are well-placed to develop and advance this space as providers; however, they will need to pivot away from conventional thinking on assessment and credentialing to more streamlined and authentic processes.

In a 2018 paper, Gary Matkin of the University of California (Irvine) presented a clear and cogent overview of the need to rethink the way in which higher education institutions provide credentials for their students.

Matkin noted:

Alternative Digital Credentials (ADCs) will significantly transform the relationship between higher education institutions and society. By providing fully digital, workplace-relevant, and information-rich records of an individual's skills and competencies, ADCs will render traditional university transcripts increasingly irrelevant and obsolete. Universities and colleges that do not adopt in some measure the ADC movement will begin to experience a slow decline in market position and patron support. (Matkin, 2018, p.1)

He outlined the evolution of digital credential thinking from the early days of the open badge specification (2013) to the idea of alternative digital credentials, which he suggested, were a better match with current societal realities driven by the needs of learners and employers. Digital credentials can capture rich, dynamic and verifiable information about the skills and competencies that individuals possess and the shelf life of those skills. Matkin proposed that digital learning records would evolve and grow over time as the individual acquired additional knowledge and skills inside and outside classrooms. He noted that today's learners, many of whom already hold traditional higher education credentials, are looking for shorter, more targeted learning and skill development opportunities.

Digital micro-credentials, therefore, reflect the short- and long-term transformations occurring in the workplace and education sectors. Digital micro-credentials present a unique opportunity to acquire specific knowledge or skill captured in

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a credential that accurately verifies what its holder can do. And, while debates on standards for micro-credentials unfold, governments and their institutions of higher learning must recognise the opportunity presented by micro-credentialing to underpin new approaches to workforce development.

This special issue of the Journal of Innovation in Polytechnic Education (JIPE) explores a range of issues and practices associated with the development and use of micro-credentials from authors in a variety of education and workplace settings.

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