

The Contribution of Microcredentials to Lifelong Learning

April 2023

FutureLearn Australia

GUS Education Australia



Contents

Executive Summary	2
About FutureLearn	2
Discussion	3
Part 1: Lifelong learning and the need for federal policy.....	3
Part 2: The capacity of microcredentials to meet the shifting demands of lifelong learning.....	4
Part 3: Development of credit accumulation models that recognise lifelong learning.	6
Recommendations.....	8
References.....	9

Executive Summary

Lifelong learning is not a new concept in Australia. OECD and UNESCO argued in 1996 that lifelong learning is essential for both economic prosperity and social stability. Whilst major reviews of early childhood education, schools, universities and vocational education were undertaken through the 2000s, policy momentum for lifelong learning has continued to stall at both the national and state levels. According to Watson (2004) major reviews of lifelong learning were put into the national education policy 'too hard' basket and Brown (2019) almost 2 decades later submits that inactivity in this policy space has continued.

Traditional education methods that dominate Australian higher education are being challenged with an upsurge in online learning. Unlike traditional forms of education, online learning is flexible, adaptable, scalable, and highly affordable (if not free), making it the ideal way to respond to today's changing educational needs. In our skills-based knowledge economy, microcredentials have capacity to significantly impact and promote lifelong learning. Microcredentials are one of the most effective online ways for people to learn, upskill, and reskill.

FutureLearn Australia welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Review. The inquiry is timely and an essential step in ensuring that Australia can continue to flourish in our skills-based, global community where lifelong learning is essential for the individual, to society and to the economy. We are acutely aware of the need for stakeholders to partner this reform, ensuring that collectively our expertise builds flexible, innovative and sustained education pathways that respond to an ever-changing, dynamic world. We would welcome the opportunity to expand on the recommendations listed below.

Our submission makes recommendations pertinent to the growth and scalability of lifelong learning in Australia responding to **Question 15, What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?** and **Question 16, What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?**

About FutureLearn

FutureLearn is a leading global online learning marketplace, offering courses from 260 of the world's best universities and education providers. It is an established and trusted higher education partner known for its open and flexible approach to online learning within the APAC region.

Our mission is to transform access to education so that millions across the globe can develop the skills they need to achieve their personal and professional goals. Access to microcredentials enable learners, wherever they may be, to obtain credible and flexible learning experiences from short courses through to traditional degrees. To date, we have connected over 18 million global learners to more than 1800 online courses. FutureLearn focuses on 6 career-based skill areas: Healthcare and Psychology, Business and Management, Digital and Technology, Teaching and Education, Creative Arts, Law, many of which address priority skill shortages in Australia.

FutureLearn offers a fully integrated OPM end to end service with a focus on delivering student focused online learning across the APAC region; learning designed to engage and retain students through their sustained career journey, enabling people to upskill and reskill, and realise the lifetime value of online learners. To learn more, visit www.futurelearn.com

Microcredentials have been heralded as cornerstones of lifelong learning and employability (Oliver, 2019) and potentially an attractive way of diversifying and expanding learning opportunities for Australians. However, progress at the operational level has not matched the rhetoric.

Principle recommendation: A sector wide microcredentials taskforce is established that operates as a crucial enabler for the growth of microcredential policy, credibility, portability and transparency in Australia. Partnerships in the creation, development, and delivery of microcredentials can create best practice in the burgeoning space and future-orientate lifelong learning. The Universities Accord can enable and support this reform. It is essential that clear, mapped pathways for credit into macro-credentials are created.

We focus our response on the credible contribution that microcredentials can have towards growing a culture of lifelong learning and remove barriers particularly in the post-school sector. Our submission addresses and make recommendations central to:

- The nature and attributes of lifelong learning (see part 1)
- The capacity of microcredentials to meet the shifting demands of lifelong learning (see part 2)
- The development of credit accumulation models that recognise microcredentials as supporting lifelong learning (see part 3)

Discussion

Part 1: Lifelong learning and the need for federal policy

In our skills based economy characterised by complexity and rapid change, lifelong learning is now necessary for people to adapt, modify and build the skills and knowledge they need to live rich and fulfilling lives. The nature of work is changing and, at the same time occupations are evolving demanding differing job types and skills. Saccardo (2020) provides example of construction workers who traditionally built projects using physical tools and measurement techniques who now work with drones and satellite imagery to plan and complete projects. Various research reports reveal the everchanging nature of careers and occupations and the need for workers to reskill and upskill throughout life. It has been predicted that the half-life of a skill has dropped from 30 years to an average of six years (Yuen, 2018).

The literature also points to the growing importance of core competencies, or ‘employability skills’, and non-specialist skills to ensure workers’ continued success in the workforce. Industry 4.0 has been driven by connecting technological change and Industry 5.0 will be human-centric synchronising highly skilled people with technologies, adding further to the complexity of required skills of workers and skill gaps. Individuals can no longer expect that traditional modes of formal learning or current post-school education models will provide them with the skills and capabilities for a lifelong career in this dynamic evolving context. Such development will ultimately be of benefit to the Australian society and economy. The fast pace of transformation is forcing industry to identify skills gaps and prepare workforces to meet future skillsets adding further momentum to the lifelong learning agenda.

UNESCO states that lifelong learning encompasses learning activities for people of all ages (children, young people, adults and older people) in all life-wide contexts (i.e., family, school, community and workplace) and through a variety of modalities (formal, non-formal and informal) meeting a wide range of learning needs and demands that may be personal and/or professional. Becoming an effective lifelong learner involves a cumulative process, which starts in infancy and is influenced thereafter by the institutional arrangements that provide opportunities to learn (OECD, 2019). Built on assumptions about the importance of skills in the new economy, lifelong learning requires a cultural shift and the recognition that continuous learning, skilling, upskilling, reskilling will create several professional, social, personal and intrinsic benefits to the individual. A future focussed, lifelong learning agenda enhances social inclusion, equity, active citizenship, and individual development, increasing employability (Ates & Alsal, 2012). There is global agreement that to respond to, engage in and prosper from our increasingly complex environment, people must continually develop a range of skills and capabilities.

Lifelong learning is not a new concept in Australia with early interest coinciding with global policies when OECD and UNESCO argued in 1996 that lifelong learning is essential for both economic prosperity and social stability. However there has been inactivity in the Australian policy space for a long time. Disconnected attention given to this agenda in recent years include the Senate established select committee for 'Future of Work' (2017); pre-election Labor commitment to an inquiry (which never materialised due to a Liberal win); and The Business Council of Australia (2017) who advocated for the need to develop a 'culture of lifelong learning.' To date in Australia, the area of adult education and lifelong learning exists fundamentally in a policy vacuum.

In Australia there continues to be a call for a detailed policy agenda and accompanying funding to harness lifelong learning and adult education. For example, Adult Learning Australia (ALA) arranged a National Lifelong Learning Seminar in 2018 and appealed for a comprehensive, inclusive national learning policy framework aiming to 'put lifelong learning in the centre stage' of Australian discussion (ALA, 2018). They argued for a broader concept of learning, one that accompanies a skills strategy that embraces broad lifelong learning opportunities removing barriers to learning. Five years later, little evidence of growth has been witnessed, opening a great opportunity for this government to address the void through the Universities Accord.

A commitment to the development of an Australian lifelong learning policy must be made with complementing policies embracing and promoting more inclusive and action oriented adult learning. As Brown (2019) attests: Australia needs a long-term approach to lifelong learning which recognises the relationship between informal, non-formal and formal learning using a whole of government and sector approach. The Accord could enable higher education institutions and providers to become informed and guided by such policies and be positioned to provide the appropriate learning content, access, funding, and support. The agility to respond to emerging individual, skill and industry needs will be enhanced by a collaborative approach by policy makers, higher education, private higher education providers and industry stakeholders.

Of particular interest to the higher education sector and this Australian Universities Accord discussion is the role higher education providers, including private providers such as FutureLearn can play in producing lifelong learning opportunities for learners and thus increasing access and impacting on the requisite skills need now and into the future. In many ways private providers are more adept and agile to do so than traditional universities.

Recommendation 1: Lifelong learning agendas will be strengthened by a federal government commitment to a lifelong learning policy. A national lifelong learning policy must define roles and responsibilities for community, school systems, higher education, private providers, business, and all levels of government. A commitment to the development of an Australian lifelong learning policy must be made through the Accord reform, embracing and promoting more inclusive, flexible and action oriented learning responding to the needs associated with creating, advancing and changing careers.

Part 2: The capacity of microcredentials to meet the shifting demands of lifelong learning

The 21st century has seen profound changes in how knowledge is produced, accessed and absorbed across the globe which impacts individuals, industries, the workplace now and in the future. Traditional post-school education pathways will no longer provide the skills and capacities needed for a lifelong career. Today it is common for individuals to have multiple careers, often transcending different industries and occupations. Learning is complex, continuous and multifaceted over a lifetime as opposed to formal linear learning trajectories of the past. Many universities have not moved into this complex space, valuing traditions of the past. Quality private providers however have proved themselves to be far more responsive.

Research by the World Economic Forum 2020 states that changing workforce dynamics, automation and economic uncertainty caused by the pandemic will shift the division of labor between humans and machines,

leading to 85 million jobs being displaced and 97 million new ones created by 2025. Other key findings of this report indicate skills gaps will continue to be high as in-demand skills across jobs change in the next five years including the need for soft skills such as critical thinking and analysis as well as problem-solving, and skills in self-management such as active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility. Deloitte (2022) similarly projects that two-thirds of all Australian jobs will be soft-skill intensive by 2030.

The Future of Jobs report also states that companies estimate that around 40% of workers will require reskilling. As skills become the new currency of the workforce occupations have started to be viewed through the lens of skills and capabilities. In our skills based economy Deloitte (2022) broadly define “skills” to encompass “hard” or technical skills (such as coding, data analysis, and accounting); human capabilities or human skills (such as critical thinking and emotional intelligence); and potential (including latent qualities, abilities, or adjacent skills that may be developed and lead to future success). The future of education in this nation requires a paradigm shift to address this change and the Accord must enable this reform or Australia may not remain a quality and equitable education provider in the future.

Flexible, accessible learning pathways are required to ensure upskilling, reskilling or transiting to new occupations is possible. This requires increased focus on developing Australia’s post-school ecosystem – supported by a national lifelong learning. Unlike traditional forms of education, online learning is flexible, adaptable, scalable and highly affordable if not free, making it the ideal means to respond to today’s changing learner. Whilst most attention has been given to operationalising microcredentials in the post-school sector, microcredentials also have value in secondary school contexts providing high school students with opportunities to build skillsets needed for the workforce and or further education. Microcredentials are one of the most effective online ways to for people to learn, upskill, and reskill. For example:

- (i) Microcredentials are increasingly in demand due to their modular structure (often short, bite-sized curriculums); modern skills-based content responsive to industry demands (often created conjunctly between industry, professional organisations, higher education institutes and OPM’s); transparency and accessibility; and capacity to boost skills and employability.
- (ii) For the learner, microcredentials are affordable, personalised, relevant and often stackable, grouped, and aggregated creating options for the achievement of recognisable, cohesive, accredited awards.
- (iii) Microcredentials have the potential to ameliorate issues of access and inequity due to cost points, employer concerns about graduate skills and competencies, changing and developing skill demands, and global relevance.

Other benefits of microcredentials for lifelong learning in this dynamic environment include:

- **Enhanced flexibility:** Shorter forms of learning may enable people to respond rapidly to changes in the labour market, and meet skills needs in real time online, both asynchronously and synchronously.
- **Enhance shared understanding:** Development of shared understanding and language will develop consistency and promote transparency and portability of learning.
- **Enhanced value:** Industry value skills and employees require skills to be successful in their occupations. Microcredentials value is in their availability, accessibility, and affordability - their price point often supports equitable engagement. Microcredentials allow workers to show their experience, training, and capability in particular skillsets in a timely manner.
- **Enhanced connections:** Expertise can be harnessed through a range of partnerships with industry, higher education providers, the providers of massive open online courses (MOOCs), online program management (OPM) providers, governments and community. Connecting across the sector can create and offer unique and innovative learning opportunities targeted directly to need.

Recommendation 2: The establishment of partnerships in the creation, development, and delivery of microcredentials that will create best practice and reduce barriers to learning in the burgeoning space and future-orientate lifelong learning.

MicroCred Seeker is a nationally consistent platform that will enable learners to compare short courses offered by tertiary education providers. Partnerships with other knowledge partners and OPM providers with differing expertise and reach can also promote microcredentials and lifelong learning drawing further on expertise. Partnerships build shared understanding, collective language and scale. For example:

- **Partnerships can enrich credibility creating end-to-end online education for people that need new or upgraded skills to remain employable.** OPM providers are a growing segment of service providers that enhance competitive advantage, support emerging business models, provide new types of learning environments, unite expertise and support the student experience. Collaborating in the current challenging and changing environment will create innovative practices that support post-secondary learning, upskilling and reskilling.
- **Strategic partnerships can deliver agile local and national networks aligned to local and national workforce needs supporting economic growth.** The diversity of the microcredential sector is a strength, and incentives should reward stakeholders and providers to grow their high-quality provision and partnerships.

Moving forward to the future...

Part 3: Development of credit accumulation models that recognise lifelong learning.

Microcredentials can serve various learning intentions. They can be bespoke or ‘one-off’ experiences addressing the learning ambitions of individuals and the employability agenda. Microcredentials can also be grouped or ‘stacked’, and can be built into larger, and more recognisable, aggregated awards. Microcredentials can be used as credits and weighted towards large credentials including diploma’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

The argument for credit-bearing microcredentials is that it provides the learner with options – that is, undertaking learning needed instantly, but also with potential to be stacked into formal qualifications. **Currently the credentialing capacities and regulations leave microcredentials in murky waters.** In Australia these qualifications are currently unregulated, are not part of the national accreditation system and sit outside the Australian Qualifications Framework (see McGreal & Olcott 2022; Selvaratnam & Sankey 2021).

There have been numerous calls for microcredentials to be assessable, quality assured and offer a transferable, understandable unit of exchange for credit (see Desmarchelier, 2021) ensuring their capacity to stack to formal qualifications. Much needs to be done to safeguard the credibility, portability and transparency of microcredentials in the Australian education sector. Hindering cohesive understanding and uptake of microcredentials currently is a range of documented factors including:

- lack of a supporting national framework
- lack of agreed academic standards between providers
- lack of agreed credit schema to determine academic value
- lack of a national system to record credentials

Standard 2 presented in the Universities Australia, *Guidance for Portability of Australia Microcredentials report* (2021) highlights the need for microcredentials to have an understandable unit of exchange. **This next step in the microcredential ‘story’ is significant.** This concurs with Brown et al.’s (2021) categorisation of microcredentials as “unbundled, credit-bearing, stackable credentials” (p. 232) it is essential that clear, mapped pathways for credit into macro-credentials (e.g., degrees) are created. The benefits of this next step are well documented (e.g., European Commission, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022).

Recommendation 3: The Accord considers actions to bring to fruition a schema for nationally (and internationally) aligned microcredential credit that includes:

- 1. Creation of a working party with representation of all stakeholders (e.g., Higher Education institutes, providers, vocational education providers, OPMs, government, professional organisations, industry) to combine expertise.**
- 2. Build a shared understanding of the role of microcredentials as credit bearing learning.**
- 3. Develop a system that can determine terms of and value of a standardised unit of credit.**
- 4. Create pathways for integrating microcredentials into existing qualification regulations for lifelong learning.**
- 5. Build sectoral agreement on standardised credit to ensure portability and transferability of microcredentials and recognition among institutions and, ultimately, global platforms.**

Building a shared commitment to creating an innovative pathway to obtain qualifications will ultimately develop confidence for stakeholders - the learner, society and industry. It encourages learners to build knowledge and capacities outside of traditional discipline areas and that align with skill need. Maximising portability of credentials increases 'currency'.

Collectively we have the capacity to develop a system that would permit learners to have unique, tailored, diverse and culturally rich educational experiences. A commitment to develop a national credit accumulation and transfer system would be a world-first, innovative and ultimate accomplishment for the sector.

Microcredentials offer exciting opportunities however, as it is early days, the benefits are yet to be realised or proven in many cases (Oliver, 2021). It is now time to address the next stage of microcredentials development in Australia to create mechanisms to connect vocational and higher education and workplace learning. Encouraging and enabling lifelong learning and integrating microcredentialing will require funding, credit recognition, regulatory changes and a collaborative partnership between all stakeholders enacting systems change.

Recommendations

Our recommendations endorse microcredential conceptualisations that contribute to the lifelong learning agenda in Australia:

1. A sector wide microcredentials taskforce is established that operates as a crucial enabler for the growth of microcredential policy, credibility, portability and transparency in Australia. Partnerships in the creation, development, and delivery of microcredentials can create best practice in the burgeoning space and future-orientate lifelong learning. The Universities Accord can enable and support this reform. It is essential that clear, mapped pathways for credit into macro-credentials are created.
2. Lifelong learning agendas will be strengthened by a federal government commitment to a lifelong learning policy. A national lifelong learning policy must define roles and responsibilities for community, school systems, higher education, private providers, business, and all levels of government. A commitment to the development of an Australian lifelong learning policy must be made through the Accord reform, embracing and promoting more inclusive, flexible and action oriented learning responding to the needs associated with creating, advancing and changing careers.
3. The establishment of partnerships in the creation, development, and delivery of microcredentials that will create best practice and reduce barriers to learning in the burgeoning space and future-orientate lifelong learning.
4. The Accord considers actions to bring to fruition a schema for nationally (and internationally) aligned microcredential credit that includes:
 - Creation of a working party with representation of all stakeholders (e.g., Higher Education institutes, providers, vocational education providers, OPMs, government, professional organisations, industry) to combine expertise.
 - Build a shared understanding of the role of microcredentials as credit bearing learning.
 - Develop a system that can determine terms of and value of a standardised unit of credit.
 - Create pathways for integrating microcredentials into existing qualification regulations for lifelong learning.
 - Build sectoral agreement on standardised credit to ensure portability and transferability of microcredentials and recognition among institutions and, ultimately, global platforms.

References

- ALA. (2018). *Learning changes lives*. Year of Lifelong Learning discussion paper. Adult Learning Australia. <https://ala.asn.au/wpcontent/uploads/2018/02/YOLL-summit-discussion-paper.pdf>
- Ates, H., & Alsai, K. (2012). 'The importance of lifelong learning has been increasing', *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 4092–4096. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2012.06.205>
- Brown, M., & Mhichil, M. N. C. (2021). Unboxing Micro-credentials: an inside, upside and downside view. Accessed from: <https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/inline-files/unboxing-micro-credentials-2021.pdf>
- Brown, M., Mhichil, M. N. C., Beirne, E., & Mac Lochlainn, C. (2021). The global microcredential landscape: charting a new credential ecology for lifelong learning. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 8(2), 228–254
- Brown, Tony. (2018). Lifelong Learning: An organising principle for reform. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*. 58, 312.
- Deloitte, (2022). The skills-based organization: A new operating model for work and the workforce. <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/organizational-skill-based-hiring.html>
- Desmarchelier, R. (2021). Microcredentials: what are they, and will they really revolutionise education and improve job prospects. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/microcredentials-what-are-they-and-will-theyreally-revolutionise-education-and-improve-job-prospects-169265>
- McGreal, R., & Olcott, D. Jr. (2022). A strategic reset: Microcredentials for higher education leaders. *Smart Learning Environments*, 9, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-022-00190-1>.
- OECD (2019), *OECD Skills Strategy 2019: Skills to Shape a Better Future*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264313835-en>.
- Oliver, B. (2019). *Making micro-credentials work for learners, employers and providers*. Melbourne: Deakin University. <https://dteach.deakin.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/103/2019/08/Making-micro-credentials-work-Oliver-Deakin-2019-full-report.pdf>
- Saccardo, D. (2020). The Impact of emerging technology on the value of construction projects, [unpublished paper], Bond University. <https://bond.edu.au/files/5115/Saccardo%20report.pdf>
- Selvaratnam, R. M., & Sankey, M. D. (2021). An integrative literature review of the implementation of micro-credentials in higher education: Implications for practice in Australasia. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 11(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2021vol12no1art942>.
- Shapiro, H. (2020). Background paper for the first meeting of the Consultation Group on Micro-credentials. https://www.heilbronn.dhbw.de/fleadmin/downloads/news/ab_2014/Background_paper_on_Microcredentials.Pdf
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2020). Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: contribution to the Futures of Education initiative, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg, viewed 29 Mar 2023, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112>
- Universities Australia. (2021). Guidance for the portability of Australian microcredentials. Retrieved from: <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/210929-Guidance-for-portability-of-Australian-microcredentials-UA.pdf>
- Watson, L. (2004). Lifelong Learning in Australia: a policy failure. Refereed Conference Paper delivered to the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) National Conference, 28 November - 3 December, Melbourne. Retrieved from <https://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2004/wat04356.pdf>
- World Economic Forum (2020). The Future of Jobs Report 2020. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020>
- Yuen, P. 2018. *The 7 forces that will change the way you work*. Geneva: World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/09/here-are-seven-ways-your-job-will-change-in-the-future>