Provocation

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Microcredential learners need quality careers and employability support

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Providers, industry, and governments have embraced microcredentialing as a solution to the volatility and velocity of changes in labour markets, workplace competencies, and the needs of the 21st century lifelong learner (Oliver, 2019). However, microcredentials do not, in and of themselves, guarantee career or employment success. Seeking a microcredential is one *adaptive career behaviour* that people might enact in pursuit of their career goals (Lent & Brown, 2013). Similarly, holding a microcredential is one form of *employability capital* that people might highlight when seeking employment (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2020).

As Kift (2021) has noted, microcredentials should be designed and delivered in a *lifelong learning ecosystem* of educational, employment, and social support systems. One crucial element of this support is ensuring that learners have the requisite career management skills and labour market literacy to make the best use of microcredentials to achieve their goals (Kift, 2021; Oliver, 2019). In this essay, I pick up this point to argue that career development practitioners (CDPs) have a crucial role to play in helping learners approach microcredentials as part of a cohesive career strategy, integrate them into their career narratives, and express their value to employers.

Challenges for microcredential learners

People may employ a broad range of adaptive career behaviours as they make career decisions, pursue career goals, or face career challenges (Lent & Brown, 2013). However, many lack the information or insight needed to make good decisions, while career information and advice is not always reliable. This may be particularly true for microcredentials, which are often marketed to beginners (Oliver, 2020).

Learners are subject to several potential challenges when selecting microcredentials and subsequently using them in employment seeking. Firstly, microcredentials may not actually be necessary for the learner's particular goals. Secondly, learners may miscalculate the labour market demand for certain

skills, or select microcredentials that do not meet explicit or implicit requirements for entry into their desired profession. Thirdly, reactive or anxious learners may accumulate microcredentials haphazardly, with little coherent purpose or strategic intent. Finally, learners may lack the job application skills needed to express the value of their microcredentials to employers or integrate them into a coherent employability narrative (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2020).

Career development support for microcredential learners

Microcredentials have not yet been subject to focused study in the field of career development. Nonetheless, the acts of earning credentials or learning new skills are a central concern in career development research and practice. There is ample evidence that quality career development support positively influences learners' career decision-making, problem-solving, adaptability, and identity formation; their academic commitment and achievement; and their employment outcomes and job satisfaction (Healy, et al., 2020).

Career decision-making is one of the most studied themes in the career development literature and is often the focus of conversations between CDPs and their clients (Healy et al., 2020). To support informed career decision-making, CDPs frequently encourage adaptive career behaviours such as reflection on career interests and values, career exploration, occupational research, and strategic networking. Certain microcredentials offer a dual advantage to some of these activities, as they present low-cost and low-commitment opportunities for career exploration, in addition to the skill development and credentialing they are designed for.

Recent trends in career development theory and practice have focused on the importance of future-oriented mindsets and meaningful work (Healy et al., 2020). CDPs assist their clients in adopting proactive, optimistic, and adaptable attitudes, often by helping them compose, or recompose, meaningful agentic career narratives. In disrupted labour markets, such as those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, career narratives can be traumatic. A microcredential is unlikely, in and of itself, to transform such a career narrative without an associated process of personal reflection and reinvention.

Similarly, microcredentials are unlikely to serve as tickets to employment in their own right. Recruitment is a complex, subjective process of discerning a broad range of employability signals and capitals (Tomlinson & Anderson, 2020). For example, a given microcredential may be a signal of technical competence, of a proactive attitude, or a certain set of values. CDPs use their knowledge of hiring practices to help learners understand explicit and implicit selection criteria and integrate their microcredentials into a persuasive employability narrative in response.

Conclusion

Microcredentials are promised to support lifelong learning and careers and employability success, but will not meet this potential in the absence of intentionally designed ecosystems of educational, vocational, and social support (Kift, 2021; Oliver, 2020). Education providers have a responsibility to ensure that career information and support is actively offered to microcredential learners, just as it is for students in degree programs. Governments should ensure that quality career information and advice is available to all who need it, particularly when they enact policies that encourage people toward study and upskilling. Both should recognise that CDPs have a crucial role to play in the design and delivery of educational ecosystems that enable true lifelong learning for all members of society.

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