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Short courses, micro-credentials, and flexible learning pathways: A blueprint for policy development and action

Policy paper

FLEXIBLE LEARNING PATHWAYS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

6. Experiences from developing and emerging countries

6.1. Diversification in the learning offer

Despite high motivation by various research institutions and foundations, micro-credential uptake in academic institutions remains relatively low in developing and emerging countries compared to European and other OECD countries (Fong, Janzow, and Peck, 2016). This could be attributed partly to the fact that student demographics in the Global South typically oblige HEIs to focus on a growing number of secondary-school leavers. In addition, there is a lack of awareness of the subject among employers and academic institutions, resulting in low recognition of their value (Hickey, Willis, and Quick, 2015). Learners following short courses are typically not assured of their acceptance in the labour market nor of their value for further education and training.

But shorter-term educational experiences, often organized through online teaching, are on the rise in the Global South. In India, for instance, 4 million students were enrolled in distance education programmes in 2019/20, 1.1 million of them at the postgraduate level (Malik and Annalakshmi, 2022). This could create a solid foundation for short courses leading to micro-credentials, in addition to already existing national MOOCs platforms such as SWAYAM.

When countries invest in re-skilling or up-skilling initiatives, short courses and micro-credentials can develop rapidly. The government of Costa Rica initiated a re-skilling and up-skilling programme in col-laboration with a digital learning platform, Coursera, which enabled 50,000 individuals to access selected courses in 2020 (Training Industry, 2020).

Some universities, including African ones, have started to develop initiatives for micro-credentialled short courses. The University of Cape Town (UCT), for example, includes micro-credentials in its university strategy 'Vision 2030', which aims to 'expand capacity to offer continuous education and micro-credentials' (UCT, 2021: 9). In a public lecture on the 'Changing Landscape of Higher Education', the Executive Director of the Tertiary Education Commission in Mauritius underlined the importance of stacking skill sets, known as micro-credentialing, for the future, and urged universities to consider subscribing to certification (University of Kwazulu-Natal, 2019).

More developments at the HEI level are taking place in Asia, where several universities have started to offer micro-credentials. An example is Malaysia, which offers over 300 micro-credentialled courses launched by public universities and over 2,000 courses by private universities as of May 2021. Universiti Sains Malaysia is one of the active universities in this respect.

In Thailand, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, jointly with UMAP (University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific), has launched a pilot programme to fulfil the needs of learners who seek to up-skill and re-skill, develop needed specific competencies, or simply pursue lifelong learning. The programme is composed of two strands. In strand A, participants can gain recognition for their existing competencies, earned in non-formal and informal settings. In strand B, participants can enrol in learning units offered by university providers.[29] The Ministry works with King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT),

29 https://sway.office.com/9UYg1r3d5hUtUvq2

6. Experiences from developing and emerging countries

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BOX 11

Micro-credentials at Universiti Sains Malaysia

The first university to implement flexible learning approaches through its distance education programme, in 1971, was the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The university has continued to be at the forefront of flexible learning in the Malaysian educational system by expanding its entry points into the university. USM has developed re-skilling and up-skilling programmes to meet the demands of new technically advanced job opportunities.

One of the prominent developments within Flexible Learning Pathways in USM is micro-credentials. The university has introduced full micro-credential undergraduate programmes that allow students to complete undergraduate programmes based on their competencies and capabilities. It offers seven modules for nursing for over 100,000 students nationwide and has developed about 300 modules of micro-credential programmes for various other disciplines. As a next step, USM will be forming a consortium of institutions and universities to offer the best content for students and the public at large.

Source: Mahamd Adikan, 2022: 6.

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which has created an online micro-credential programme open to enrolment as of 2022. Micro-credentials at KMUTT cover the full spectrum of social sciences, IT, liberal arts, and natural sciences. All programmes can be accessed for free. The University works with the Accredible digital badge and certificate platform to issue micro-credentials.[30]

In the Philippines the Assessment Research Centre, in partnership with the Assessment, Curriculum and Technology Research Centre (ACTRC), has investigated the feasibility of using micro-credentials for the Alternative Learning System (ALS). The ALS offers an alternative pathway to existing formal education and is available to anyone who has not completed basic education as required by the Philippine constitution. The University of the Philippines will also conduct a Feasibility Study on Micro-Certification for the ALS Philippines (ACTRC, 2021).

According to a detailed analysis of the literature by region (Brown and Mhichil, 2021: 17), in the Asia-Pacific region employability, closing the skills gap, and supporting work-based training and continuous professional development seem to be the more prevalent reasons cited for short-course and micro-credential development — unlike Europe, which lays greater emphasis on increased flexibility for learning and the promotion of lifelong learning as well as employability. This geographical difference suggests particular drivers could be more or less influential depending on the social-cultural context and the extent to which education is positioned as a private or public good.

30 https://usco2.umap.org/ProgramDetails/Details/370