Microcredentials and Digital Badges
Opening Higher Education in South Africa through Innovative Recognition

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✓ Too few students can access HE

✓ Too few complete their studies

✓ Too many graduates are unemployed / underemployed

✓ Graduates & ‘drop outs’ have huge debt
How could microcredentials and digital badges contribute towards social justice in South African Higher Education?
A digital form of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component of a formal qualification (Oliver, 2019)

**Microcredentials**
- Recognition of smaller units of learning than a full diploma or degree
- Have a work-related or professional value
- Promote innovation in HE
- Can fill gaps between HE programmes and world of work skills
- Digital badges provide a visible motivation for the learner of learning that has been achieved
- Microcredentials verified by a reputable issuing authority

**Microcredentials**
- Can improve agility and efficiency of HE

**Digital badges**
- Can be shared in applications for employment or for further study
- More flexibility in how learning is recognised

**Ways of integrating microcredentials into a formal qualification**
- Embedded model
- RPL model (for alternative access/credit)
- Modular model (stackable towards a qualification)
Policies

✓ Draft Open Learning Policy Framework for Post-School Education and Training
✓ Recognition of Prior Learning, Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and Assessment in HE

Prior research focus areas

✓ Microcredentials & digital badges
✓ Open learning and OERs
✓ Social justice (Nancy Fraser)
Methodology

Qualitative: Interviews (virtual)

1. Primary research site:
   - North-West University
     ✓ Academic staff

2. Additional informants
   ✓ South Africa
   ✓ Canada
   ✓ France
   ✓ New Zealand

Pilot projects

Different perspectives

Photo by Anna Shvets from Pexels
North-West University pilot projects

Economic inequities remedy
✓ Microcredential credit transfer may facilitate mobility
✓ Digital badges are extrinsically motivational
✓ May reduce costs to students and the HE system

Cultural inequities remedy
✓ Recognition of non-academic achievement (e.g. leadership, mentoring, tutoring, CE)
✓ Digital badges for staff CPD/KPIs & promotion
✓ Digital portfolios of holistic learning for students and staff

Images: Photo of logo from website. Digital Badges provided by NWU
North-West University pilot projects

**Lesson:**
Institutional leadership needs to operationalise microcredentials if they are to become scalable, stackable, interoperable, portable, sustainable, and of economic benefit to both the university and students/staff.
✓ HE needs to rethink qualification pathways towards more flexible and online models that incorporate microcredentials

✓ Linking microcredentials to qualifications frameworks gives them currency (economic value) and transferability (educational credit value)

✓ Allows increased mobility of workers and access to an “ecosystem” of work and educational opportunities, to potentially improve their lives.
Microcredentials can contribute to social justice primarily through:

- removing barriers of access to HE
- learner-centred recognition (diverse learning)
- creating lifelong learning opportunities and pathways
- construction of learning programmes in the expectation that learners can succeed
- more employable citizens
For HEIs

✓ Pilot / experiment with digital badging

✓ Develop institutional policies for microcredentials, digital badges

✓ Explore intra-institutional microcredentials
For National authorities

✓ Assist quality assuring microcredentials for articulation between HE and WoW

✓ New generation qualifications framework that integrates microcredentials and facilitates national / international credit transfer

✓ Ensure alignment of HE policies for recognition of microcredentials - including student funding
In summary

- We need an integrated, national HE policy environment
- explicitly framed by social justice concerns
- to guide the process of developing and implementing a system for recognising microcredentials
- that have value in the world of work
- and that opens up higher education for more inclusive access, lifelong learning opportunities and accredited learning pathways
Council for Higher Education (CHE) (2016). *Policies on the Recognition of Prior Learning, Credit Accumulation and Transfer, and Assessment in Higher Education*


Keevy, J., Hazell, E. & Matlala, L. (2020). Towards an Agile Credentialing Schema in South Africa: Recommendations. [https://www.academia.edu/43449293/Towards_an_Agile_Credentialing_Schema_in_South_Africa](https://www.academia.edu/43449293/Towards_an_Agile_Credentialing_Schema_in_South_Africa)