

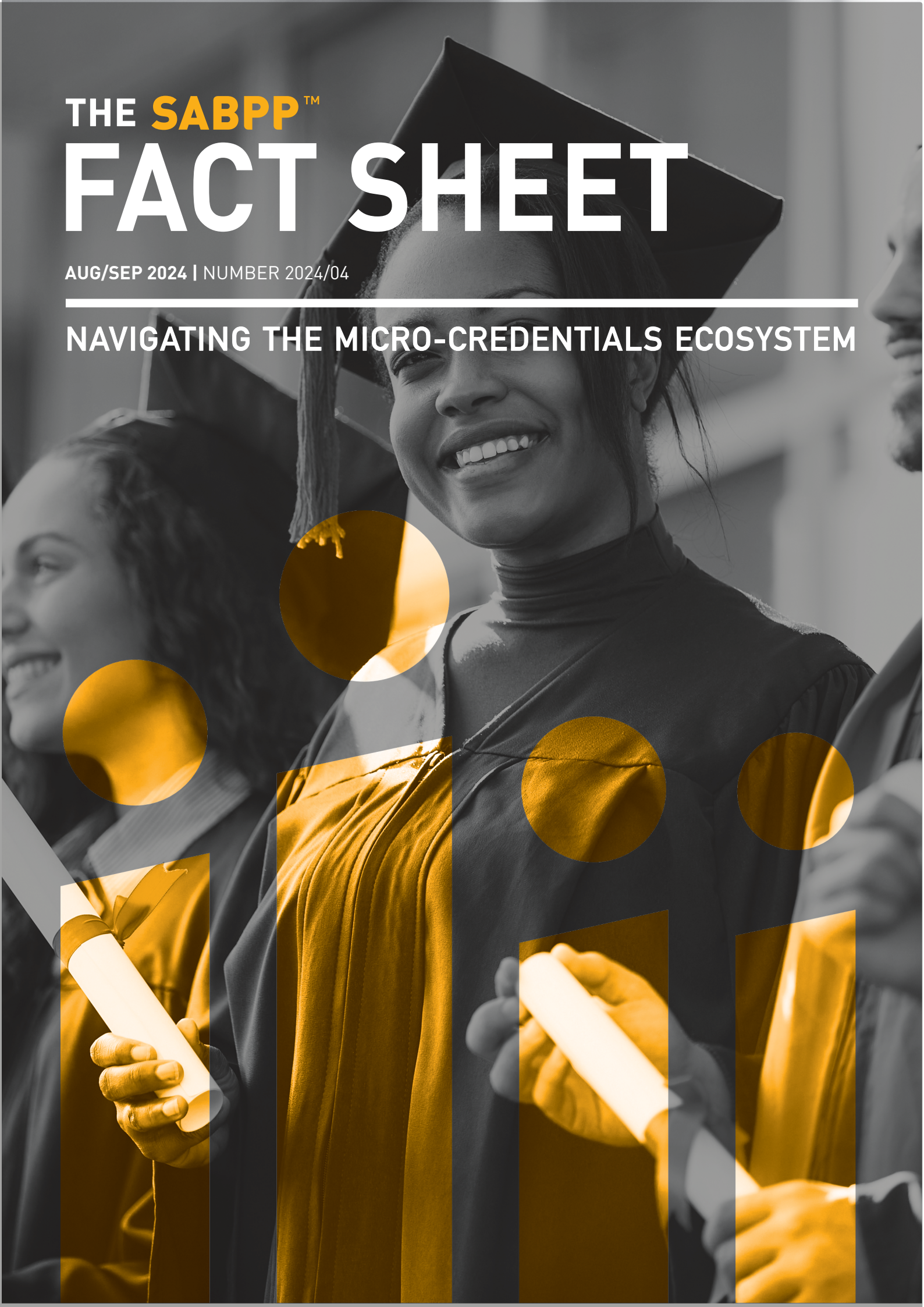
THE **SABPP**™

# FACT SHEET

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NAVIGATING THE MICRO-CREDENTIALS ECOSYSTEM



# Introduction

There is much discussion and confusion on micro-credentials within the world of work, particularly in the space of learning management and experience platforms, and in various educational, quality assurance and other institutional and policy contexts<sup>1</sup>. Within the world of work, micro-credentials are linked with ideas of just-in-time skills, a future-fit and agile workforce ecosystem, and the future skills-based organisations. Another example is the link with the suggestions for an internal talent marketplace, where technology platforms are seen as the enabler for matching (1) the supply of skills and time available in or to the organisation with (2) the organisational demand in terms of work and projects that need to be achieved.

Micro-credentials are seen as part of the solution for the skilling – whether up, multi, or re-skilling – that is required for the future-fit and agile organisation. However, we find that there are many approaches to micro-credentials, which are informed by different implicit and/or explicit assumptions. This could be assumptions around learning, the different forms thereof, and how these relate to each other and how these can be credentialed, organised, and managed. We also find that online platforms, such as the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and other commercial platforms (whether Coursera, EdX, Degreed or LinkedIn Learning for example), provide stand-alone courses as well as long form learning programmes. These platforms offer a hybrid of short courses, learning programmes, and qualifications linked to higher education institutions.

In this Fact Sheet we explore how we may define a micro-credential, and how it relates to different forms of learning and learning spaces. We note the discussion on different quality assurance frameworks in relation to the different forms of learning and learning spaces. And we consider how as HR practitioners we can leverage these forms of learning and learning spaces as well as ensure good practice. To orient ourselves the below figure identifies aspects of micro-credentials. The figure that follows later lays out the relations to forms of learning, learning spaces, and quality assurance frameworks.

The key question for HR practitioners is how we locate and position micro-credentials in the education, training, and the world of work ecosystems to meet the learning and development strategy and needs of our organisations. We need to explore micro-credentials as an ecosystem itself and in relation to the other ecosystems. This means understanding micro-credentials in all its forms and creating a differentiated as well as integrated approach to the different forms of learning.

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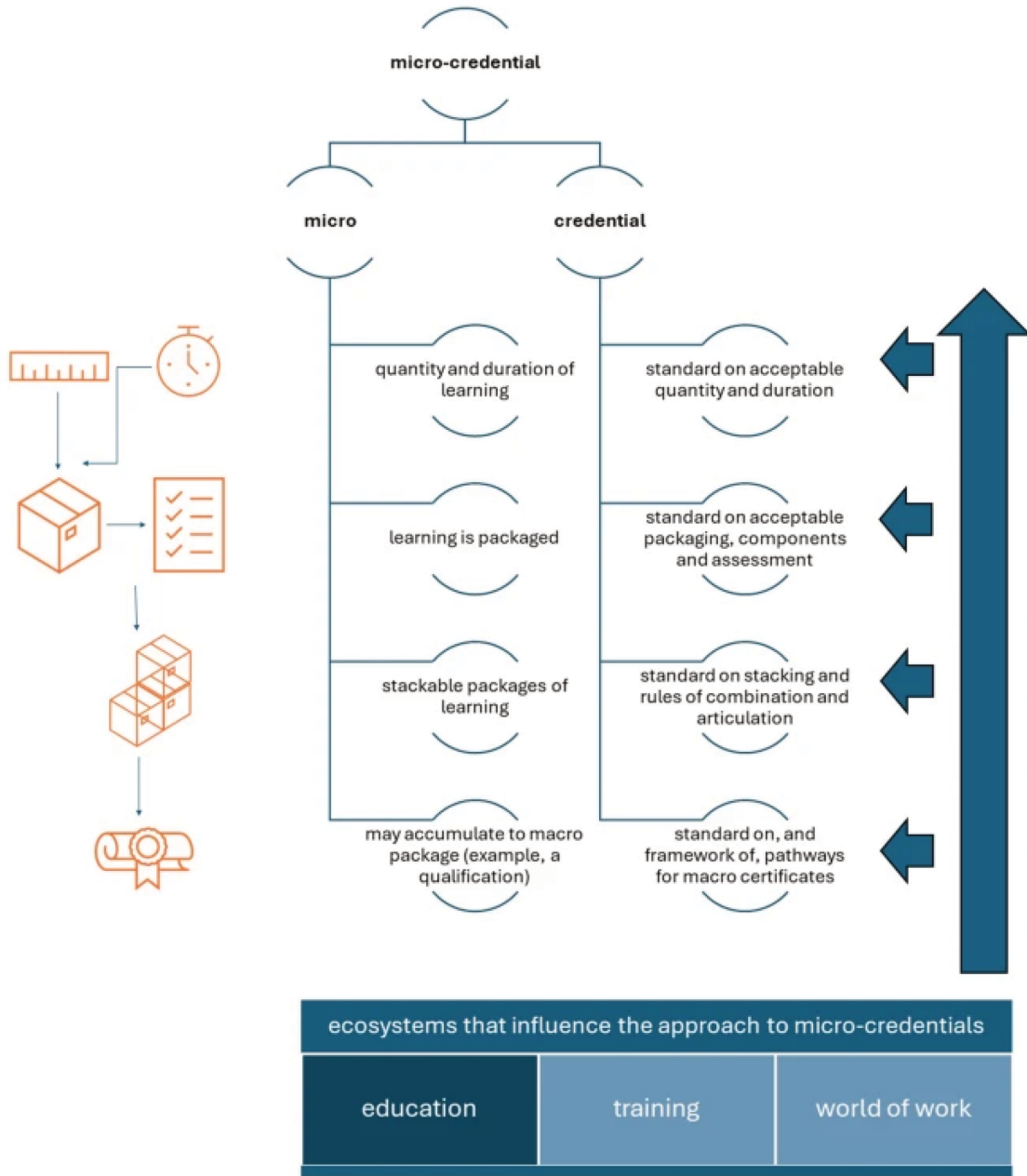
THE 'MICRO' IN SA OCCUPATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

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CONCLUSION

1. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/03/microcredentials-confuse-employers-colleges-and-learners>





Source: Vantage Lab (2024) <sup>2</sup>

2. <https://vantage-lab.com/blog/>

## Defining micro-credentials

There is no single or universally agreed upon definition of micro-credentials. The micro-credential landscape itself is “messy and poorly defined, with many competing viewpoints and disconnected initiatives” (Brown, Mhichil, Beirne, & Mac Lochlainn, 2021, p228)<sup>3</sup>. To add this, there is interchangeable use of the following terms with micro-credential: digital badges, digital certificates, digital portfolios, alternative credentials, Udacity’s nano degrees, and EdX’s MicroMasters. Thus, we find micro-credentials being used as a catch-all phrase for “all manner of shorter forms of learning experiences – irrespective of type, size or delivery mode” (p229), including how it is packaged, quality assured, and linked with other learning. This makes it difficult to establish good learning and development practices in relation to micro-credentials.

Keivy (2022)<sup>4</sup> points out some of the international efforts to create a common definition of micro-credentials such as through the International Labour Organization (ILO), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He cites the 2021 UNESCO definition which states that a micro-credential:

“(1) is a **record** of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do;

(2) includes **assessment** based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider;

(3) has **stand-alone value** and may also **contribute** to or **complement** other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning;

and (4) meets the **standards** required by relevant quality assurance”.

Another definition is the following from the African and European collaboration on micro-credentials, named as the Potential of Microcredentials in Southern Africa (PoMiSA)<sup>5</sup>:

“Micro-credentials are *bite-sized* qualifications that recognize *learning achievements* and *skills gained* through both *formal* and *informal* avenues. From *industry-relevant certifications* to *specialized skill sets*, micro-credentials offer *flexible pathways* for learners to enhance their employability and personal growth” (italics added).

PoMiSA’s specific objective is to develop “micro-credential principles and guidelines for *good practice* to support the *systemic introduction* of micro-credentials in *national systems* in Southern African countries” (italics added). In the world of work though the systematic introduction and *integration* into national systems may not be a critical priority – and some would suggest that micro-credentials are meant to disrupt and unbundle the entire system of education and training, including the quality assurance thereof, with others suggesting degrees or qualifications are no longer required.<sup>6</sup>



“It has been the desire of many entrepreneurs, foundations and policy leaders that micro-credentials will become the substitute for expensive degrees”<sup>7</sup>

“despite limited evidence tracking *longer-term impact*, micro-credentials are being taunted as potentially cheaper and more flexible opportunities for people to gain traditional macro-credentials” (italics added, p236)<sup>8</sup>

3. Brown, M., Mhichil, M. N. G., Beirne, E., & Mac Lochlainn, C. (2021). The global micro-credential landscape: Charting a new credential ecology for lifelong learning. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 8(2), 228-254.
4. <https://acqf.africa/news/micro-credentials-the-lure-of-micro-credentials-implications-for-the-african-continental-qualifications-framework-by-james-keivy>
5. <https://pomisa.hec.mu/>
6. <https://www.businessinsider.com/google-ibm-accenture-dell-companies-no-longer-require-college-degrees-2023-3#ibm-1>
7. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/03/microcredentials-confuse-employers-colleges-and-learners>
8. Brown, M., Mhichil, M. N. G., Beirne, E., & Mac Lochlainn, C. (2021). The global micro-credential landscape: Charting a new credential ecology for lifelong learning. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 8(2), 228-254.



However, we could argue that there are implicit assumptions and informal standards that inform management and employees' evaluation of the micro-credential and where and how it was achieved. And, further, there are implicit assumptions and informal standards on the relation between these micro-credentials and macro credentials such as qualifications, and how they weigh against each other for specific occupations and/or qualifications. For example, there may be an implicit assumption that a course and the achievement of a digital badge for completing it on LinkedIn Learning or other MOOCs have been curated and quality assured in some way.

Given this assumption, organisations will accept the learning and digital credential on these platforms and trust it as a valid, reliable, and valuable source of learning and learning quality assurance. Some organisations already incorporate these platforms into their mix of learning content and experience that they made available to their employees. Thus, there is an endorsement by the organisation of the platform, the learning therein, and the credentials or digital badges achieved thereafter. Relatedly, here is an example of the marketing of EdX's MicroMasters: "Gain valuable, standalone skills - The MicroMasters program is a valuable career transformation tool on its own, *recognized by industry leaders for real career relevancy*"<sup>9</sup> (italics added)



"Although a majority of surveyed employers [in a US-based survey of 510 employers] say they value alternative credentials, many also harbor (sic) concerns over assessing the quality of education and understanding the skills and competencies they represent"<sup>10</sup>

Surfacing and critically examining the implicit assumptions and informal standards that inform organisational and other stakeholders will help in the journey to develop **good practices**.

The Council of Higher Education (CHE) noted in their 2023 communique that while micro-credentials "are increasingly available, the full extent of provision is unknown, along with their quality, relevance, usefulness, stackability and potential articulation and alignment with each other and with formal qualifications."<sup>11</sup>



"Micro-credentials are a field where success stories are highly visible, but the failures are largely hidden"<sup>12</sup>

9. <https://support.edx.org/hc/en-us/articles/360010346853-Does-a-MicroMasters-certificate-count-towards-the-online-Master-s-degree#:~:text=Gain%20valuable%2C%20standalone%20skills%20%2D%20The,leaders%20for%20real%20career%20relevancy.>
10. <https://www.hrdive.com/news/employers-microcredentials-alternative-credentials-quality/643458/>
11. <https://www.che.ac.za/news-and-announcements/communiqu-2-2023-offering-microcredentials-higher-education-institutions>
12. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/03/microcredentials-confuse-employers-colleges-and-learners>

PoMiSA suggests that there needs to be explicit and shared principles and guidelines for good practice. As HR practitioners, we recognise this need for explicit and shared good practices, given the previous HR community collaborative effort with developing the HRM Standards and then the revision thereof and the subsequent launch of the People Practices and Governance Standards in 2023. PoMiSA aims, through its “collaborative efforts and strategic initiatives”, to “establish a robust *framework* for the recognition, quality assurance, and regulation of micro-credentials, ultimately fostering innovation, mobility, and economic growth in the region” (*italics added*). This leads then to the next section on locating and positioning micro-credentials.

CHE highlights the following questions as they engage stakeholders on developing a policy on institutions of higher education offering micro-credentials:

- What is a suitable definition for micro-credentials in the Southern African context?
- Should micro-credentials be registered on national qualifications frameworks or other types of registers?
- Should micro-credentials be credit-bearing?
- How can recognition of micro-credentials be enabled, including in workplaces?
- What is the relationship between micro-credentials and full qualifications?
- Should micro-credentials be recognised in formal qualifications?
- Should the stacking of micro-credentials towards the achievement of a qualification be permitted?
- What criteria are needed if this is to be permitted?
- How should the quality assurance of micro-credentials and their offering be undertaken and by whom?
- Should a repository for micro-credentials be set up?
- Who should take responsibility for this?
- How do we ensure that access to, and achievement of micro-credentials, advances social justice imperatives, especially in developing contexts?<sup>13</sup>

A key question is whether micro-credentials should be credit-bearing and whether these can be bundled. Perhaps we should not frame the question as either credit-bearing or not. We may need consider the micro-credential ecosystem in all its forms and create a differentiated as well as integrated approach to these different forms of learning.

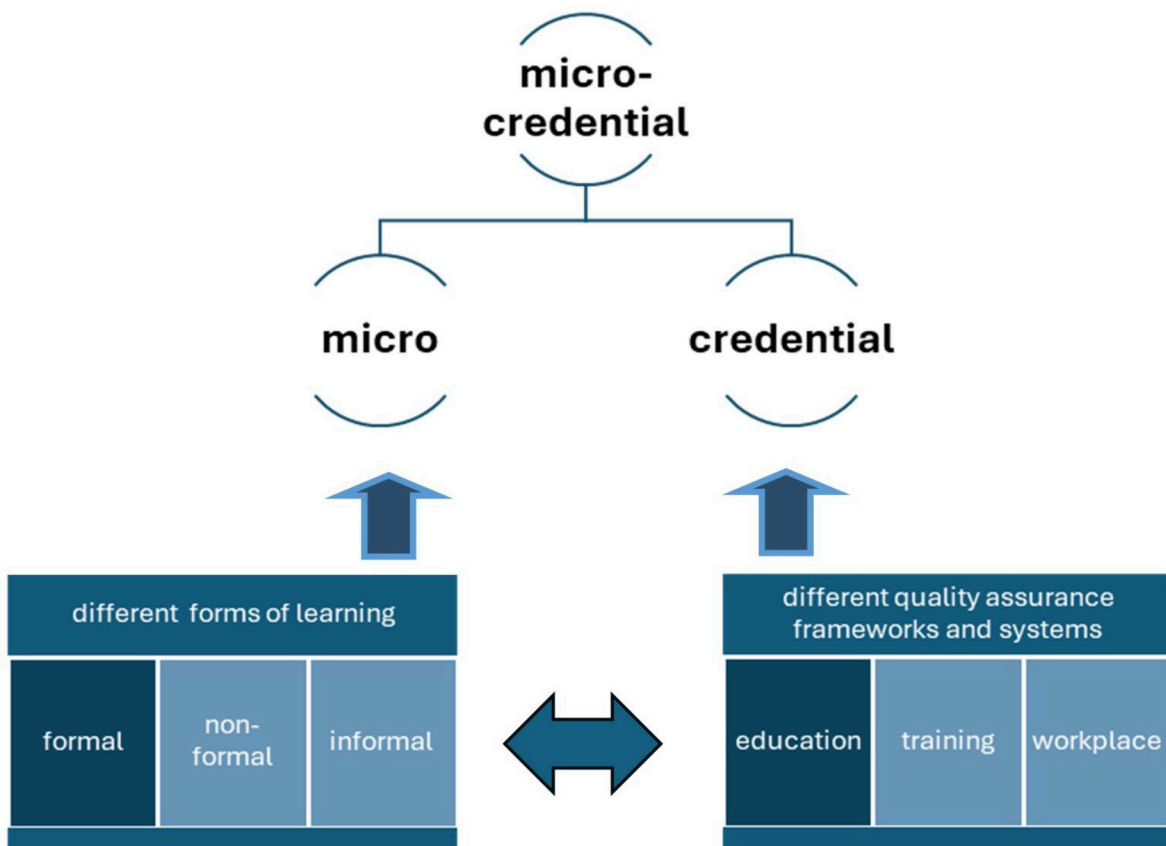
As can be noted with the last question in the above textbox, micro-credentials are considered in relation to their currency as well as in relation to macro socio-economic issues such as social justice, equity, inclusion, and the digital divide. Brown et al (2021) note that critiques of micro-credentials caution that it may lead to the commodification and privatisation of higher education; while others warn that it could undermine critical pedagogy within higher education and the learners’ development of critical reasoning and reflection capabilities. As we consider the above questions, we need to also ask what the different generations of learners expect, without getting caught in cliches and stereotypes about generations. We need to consider what the needs of the different segments of learners are, and how they would like to learn and navigate the education, training, and workplace ecosystems as well as formal, non-formal, and informal forms of learning. The below figure illustrates what the HR practitioner needs to consider in terms of the micro and credential aspects of micro-credentials, and the relation to the different forms of learning, learning spaces, and learning quality assurance systems.



Gen Z and millennials are used to taking smaller, bite-size pieces [...] The 120-credit degree is such a big bite [for them]”<sup>14</sup>

13. <https://www.che.ac.za/news-and-announcements/communiqu-2-2023-offering-microcredentials-higher-education-institutions>

14. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/03/microcredentials-confuse-employers-colleges-and-learners>



Source: Vantage Lab (2024) <sup>15</sup>

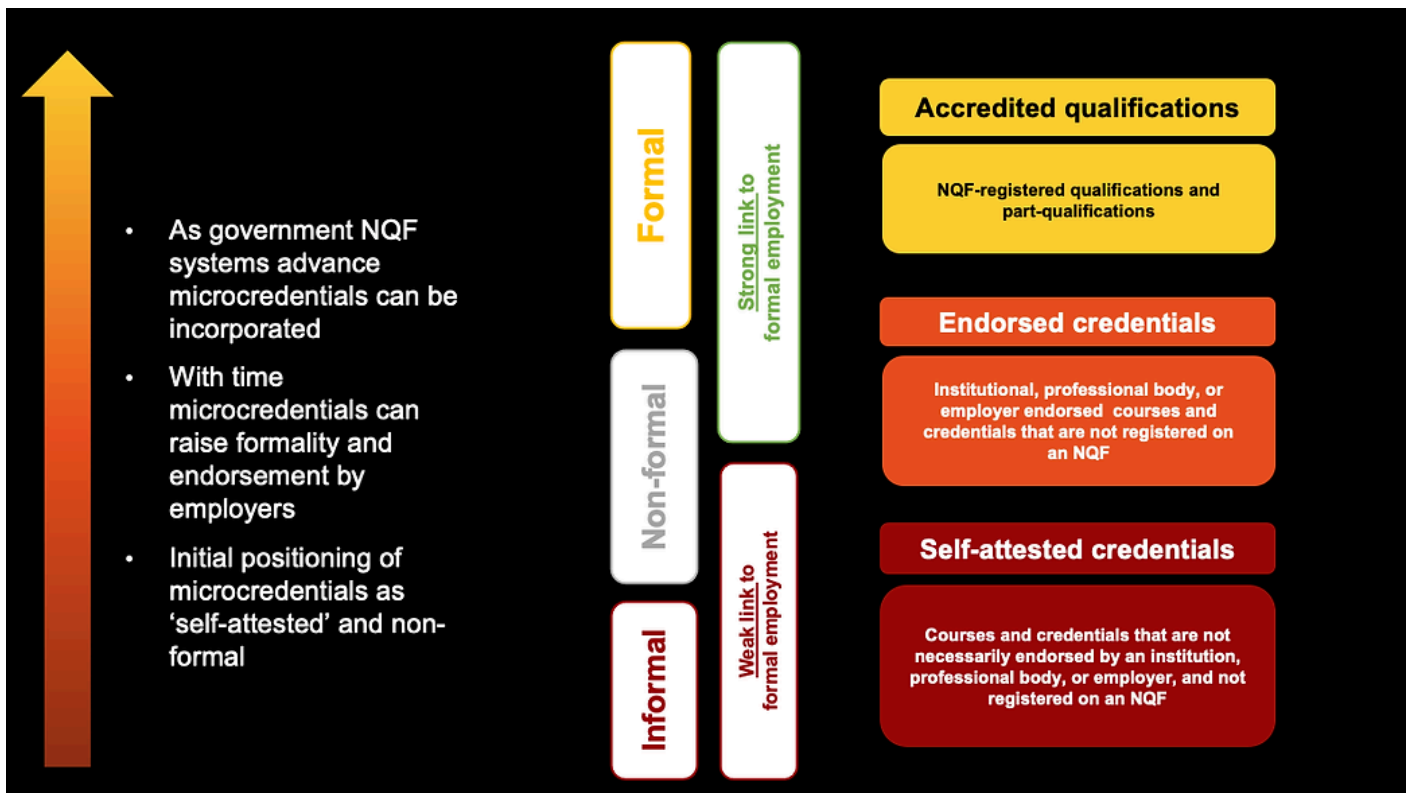
15. <https://vantage-lab.com/blog/>



## Locating and positioning micro-credentials

Relooking the above UNESCO definition, we can think of the record and the form of assessments and the quality assurance for credentialing in various ways. Keevy (2024) suggests we think of these in terms of the reduction in explicit boundaries between formal, non-formal, and informal learning as illustrated in the figure below. He argues that the various forms of credentialing take all these different forms of learning, from accredited qualifications to endorsed and self-attested credentials, into account. Statutory bodies regulate and quality assure accredited qualifications. Endorsed credentials are regulated and quality assured by various bodies such as professional bodies, or are employer authorised ones such as those available on the employer's or other accepted learning platforms. Self-attested credentials are those that are confirmed by individuals themselves in their CV, portfolio, or digital profile on a shared platform. For example, the listing of skills on an individual's LinkedIn profile.

In the below figure, Keevy suggests an evolution of micro-credentials from self-attested and non-formal learning to endorsement, and later incorporation into national qualification frameworks (NQFs) and formal learning.



Source: Keevy, J. (2024) <sup>16</sup>

16. Keevy, J. (2024). Beyond the micro in microcredentials: Implications for learning and development in South Africa. Presentation at SABPP L&D conference. Retrieved 23 June 2024, from <https://jamesakeevy.wixsite.com/jets>

Keey suggests that we could go further than the incorporation of micro-credentials into the NQF. He proposes that we can - based on the above mapping of the different forms of learning, learning spaces, and learning credentialing - work towards the alignment of the supply of education and training and the demand for skills and occupations through a more encompassing approach. That is, we should align the packing of learning (supply side) with the packaging of work and opportunities in the form of job descriptions, performance expectations, and the required skills and capabilities (demand side). This is illustrated in the below table adapted from the presentation by Keey at the SABPP 2024 Annual L&D Conference.

Supply-side	Demand-side
Packaging of learning as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• courses</li> <li>• curriculum</li> <li>• micro credentials</li> <li>• macro credentials (such as qualifications)</li> </ul>	Packaging of work and opportunities as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• jobs and related job descriptions (including knowledge, skills, and abilities)</li> <li>• performance agreements (and key performance areas)</li> <li>• projects</li> </ul>

Adapted from: Keey, J. (2024)<sup>17</sup>

Keey argues that the use of learning outcomes on both the supply and demand sides provide a common currency that is understood on both sides. For example, micro-credentials can be defined in terms of learning outcomes, so too NQF registered qualifications in South Africa that have exit-level and learning outcomes defined. Similarly, Keey contends, a job description and skills in demand could be framed in terms of learning outcomes.



17. Keey, J. (2024). Beyond the micro in microcredentials: Implications for learning and development in South Africa. Presentation at SABPP L&D conference. Retrieved 23 June 2024, from <https://jamesakeey.wixsite.com/jets>

# The 'micro' in SA occupational qualifications

Occupational qualifications are regulated by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). These qualifications are registered against the NQF. The qualifications comprise of knowledge, practical skill, and work experience modules. Part qualifications and skills programmes can be registered against the registered occupation qualifications. The part qualification and skills programme accumulate credits towards the occupational qualification. These can be seen then as building blocks and a form of micro-credentialing for formal learning. The below figure illustrates these building blocks towards the qualification, as per the guideline of the currently available QCTO policy on the development and review of occupational qualifications, part qualifications and skills programmes.

## Occupational Qualification

Part qualification  
(minimum 30 credits)

Skills programmes  
(minimum 8 credits  
and two weeks)





# The role of HR in organisations and broader ecosystem

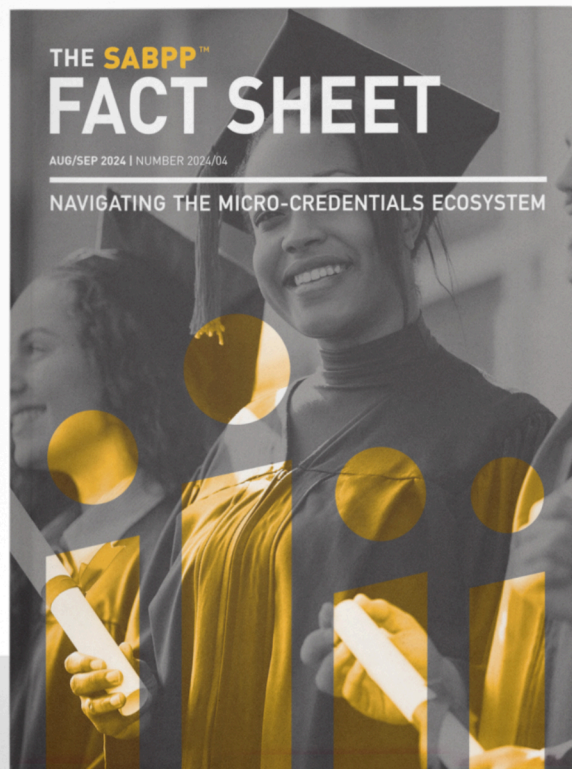
We identified some of the key questions that HR practitioners need to engage with as they navigate the micro-credential ecosystem and consider how to leverage micro-credentials and ensure sound and good practices. HR practitioners need to consider their context and the business and people strategy as a first step. Second, they need to translate these into integrated talent as well as learning, training, and development strategies for the organisation. This is to address the various talent as well as learning, training, and development needs in the organisation. Third, they can then identify their required learning, training, and development ecosystem and the systems of design, development and delivery, and map how the micro-credential ecosystem fits therein. Here, they need to consider the different forms of learning, learning spaces, and learning quality assurance and how these can be leveraged to address the organisational and individual employee needs. To ensure good practice, the HR practitioner can utilise the SABPP People Practices System Model and the People Practices and Governance Standards to systematically work through and identify how the organisation can leverage the various forms of learning, learning spaces, and learning quality assurance in an integrated manner to meet the business and people strategy objectives.

In relation to the broader micro-credential ecosystem, HR practitioners can participate in SABPP national committees, such as the HR Research Initiative and IT Governance committees, to develop a community of practice and foster collaboration on micro-credentials.



## Conclusion

As HR practitioners we need to grapple with the micro-credential ecosystem and how it is evolving. There is much confusion as micro-credential is used as a catch-all phrase, leading to the lack of definitional clarity and consensus on what it means. The key question for HR practitioners is how we locate and position micro-credentials in the education, training, and the world of work ecosystems to meet the learning and development strategy and needs of our organisations. HR practitioners need to explore micro-credentials as an ecosystem itself and in relation to these other ecosystems. This requires us to understand micro-credentials in all its forms and create a differentiated as well as integrated approach to the different forms of learning as well as the different learning spaces and learning quality assurance systems.



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# Previous Editions of The Fact Sheet

## 2023



## 2024

