



Reconnecting lifelong learners through short courses and microcredentials designed with industry partners

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This poster shares insights about how we can reconnect, reskill, and upskill lifelong learners and employees through short courses for specific purpose in higher education. These insights emerged from a larger research project undertaken over the last year at three well-known Australian universities, where the authors are based. The wider research considers perceptions of partnerships with higher education, industry / employer understanding of microcredentials and how short courses will impact on learners of tomorrow from the perspective of brokers of higher education. The original research proposal was explored with ASCILITE attendees last year (Fitzgerald & Huijser, 2021) and this poster is an opportunity to share initial findings that complement the conference theme of reconnection.

In this research, we interviewed several university brokers of higher education. Brokers, in this instance, are the intermediaries that market and develop short courses with commercial and non-commercial partners, for example, to deliver executive education, commercial professional development and partnered programs. Their unique perspective of employer requirements for upskilling and reskilling and their understanding of the role higher education can play in the future of lifelong learning, can inform future university policy and practice. Although Caballero (2022) rightly suggests that the broader adoption of microcredentials depends on developing “greater employer awareness and experience”, we share the general confusion that emerges in understanding the concept of a microcredentials and the differences between microcredentials and short courses (Fitzgerald & Huijser, in press).

Our outcomes demonstrate how important it is for brokers to be more knowledgeable of the differences between short courses and microcredentials, as they are already delivering and developing versions of what they and their industry partners consider to be microcredentials. Yet, the courses that are on offer do not fit with the recent national microcredentials framework or common definitions (DESE, 2021; Oliver, 2019). We unpack how assumptions are being made about how short courses sit “a little bit in the award world and a little bit in the non-award world”. Additionally, we share the difficulties brokers have with the concept of creating ‘stackability’ for short courses, especially without a formal framework, and explore how important stackability is viewed by both brokers and industry, especially when formally recognized qualifications are not seen as a strong pull for these courses

Finally, we acknowledge the importance of brand, alumni and quality to industry for professional short courses and discuss how strong partnerships are fueling innovation, particularly around reskilling and upskilling programs for employees. We recognize the importance of personalized content, and how one size does not fit all and how brokers are addressing this by embedding models of partnered co-design for programs while trying to meet what employers consider the gap between what universities produce, in terms of career-ready or work-ready graduates and what is needed in the workplace.

Keywords: Microcredentials, Lifelong Learning, Upskilling, Reskilling, Industry Partnership

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<p>Fitzgerald, R., Huijser, H., Umarova, A. & Adachi, C. (2022, December 4-7). <i>Reconnecting lifelong learners through short courses and microcredentials designed with industry partners</i> [Poster presentation]. 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022, Sydney, NSW, Australia. https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2022.141</p>

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