Focus group with LSI NS Community of Practice

Rapid Skills Marketplace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Microcredentials and rapid skills training are crucial for addressing the fast-evolving demands of today's economy. The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC), consulted with the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills, and Immigration (LSI) Community of Practice, which is advancing this field through various initiatives, including:

- **Program development**: Ongoing efforts include refining procedures for developing and delivering programs and planning additional rounds based on employer feedback.
- **Sector-specific microcredentials**: Initiatives target industry-specific skills, aiming to enhance the skilled workforce pipeline.
- **Industry collaboration**: Emphasizes the role of sectoral organizations in building bridges between post-secondary education, governments, and industry.
- **Transferrable learning:** Aligning curricula with job functions rather than specific industries, acknowledging roles like project management that are relevant across various sectors.
- **Learning formats**: Synchronous learning remains relevant, especially for technical skills, and addressing concerns about higher attrition rates in asynchronous formats.

Challenges identified include sustained industry engagement, resource capacity, and balancing academic and industry timelines. Opportunities involve leveraging existing industry partnerships and post-secondary resources to enhance credibility and reach. Incorporating transferrable skills from the humanities can also bridge traditional academic disciplines with industry needs.

Emerging best practices for effective microcredential partnerships can include a role for government in facilitating partnerships, leveraging existing frameworks, and providing incentives or funding to support workforce development. These initiatives may also benefit from iterative, ongoing industry validation, and maintaining flexibility to adapt to evolving demands. Sustainability requires financial and operational planning, supported by government funding.

In sum, microcredentials offer flexible, alternative pathways to traditional degrees, enhancing employability and aligning learning with industry needs. Government involvement is vital for improving coordination, adaptability, sustainability, and program credibility, fostering an educational framework that benefits both learners and industry.

INTRODUCTION

Microcredentials and rapid skills training have become essential in meeting the fast-evolving demands of today's economy. To inform policy decisions on rapid skills training, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and the Excellence in Manufacturing Consortium (EMC) consulted with the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, Skills, and Immigration (LSI) Community of Practice, which is focused on driving innovation in microcredentials.

NOVA SCOTIA MICROCREDENTIAL LANDSCAPE

Collectively, the members of the community of practice have made significant progress in the development and implementation of microcredentials and rapid skills training:

Program development and pilot initiatives: several members have launched pilot programs, with clear procedures from proposal to delivery. Some partners are preparing to deliver additional rounds of programming, incorporating employer feedback and aligning with the industry needs.

Sector specific microcredentials: members are developing industry-specific microcredentials, such as AI-focused streams and advanced programs in leadership for nursing practitioners hoping to get into leadership positions. These efforts are aimed at addressing the specific needs of industries and improving the pipeline of skills graduates entering the industry workforce.

Industry collaboration and curriculum alignment: there is a strong focus on aligning credentials with job functions rather than specific industries, recognizing that roles such as project management are applicable across multiple sectors. The intent is to create more transversal and adaptable credentials.

Synchronous learning for technical skills: the importance of synchronous learning, especially for technical skills has been highlighted due to the higher attrition rates associated with asynchronous learning. Ensuring that learning methods align with the needs of the industry is seen as crucial for program success.

Collectively, these efforts reflect a commitment to meeting industry needs in innovative ways through targeted microcredential programs and fast-track skills training. However, along with these advancements, several challenges and opportunities have emerged.

Challenges in Microcredential Development

Challenges in industry engagement and collaboration: Significant progress has been made in aligning credentials with job functions across industries. However, ensuring consistent and timely industry engagement remains a challenge. As one partner noted,

> "...making sure that we have industry at the table, because those conversations like [name] just described, can be a little bit more challenging on the front end. [...] just getting that industry attention, I would say, is probably the biggest challenge we've seen."

This suggests the need for more streamlined processes to bring industry stakeholders to the table to include their input and collaboration throughout the development of skills training programs.

Difficulties in gaining recognition in specialty areas: Some members face challenges in gaining recognition for their microcredential programs, particularly in specialized fields such as healthcare. For example, a member developing advanced programs for nurse leaders said, "Getting recognized as a university offering a healthcare program was our biggest challenge. Because we don't have a nursing program. We don't have a medical school. We don't have a physical therapy school. We don't have an optometry school. We don't have a pharmacy school. These are all things you think of when you think of health care".

Lack of resources to coordinate large groups: A key challenge for smaller organizations involves the significant resources required to coordinate the work of large, diverse groups. During the pilot phase of microcredential development, this became particularly apparent, as one member pointed out,

> "There were a lot of structural challenges that came up in the pilot. The meeting room involved a lot of high-level leadership at the university from a number of different departments. So, to have all of those people to support that launch takes a lot of resources, especially for a smaller organization."

This underscores the difficulties smaller institutions face in bringing together leaders and experts from different departments. Coordinating such a wide range of stakeholders is resource-intensive and can stretch the capacity of smaller organizations, making it a challenge to maintain momentum and manage these initiatives effectively.

Difficulties navigating bureaucracy and aligning mindsets: A significant challenge reported by one member is balancing academic procedures with the need for faster course development. This member emphasized that while universities provide valuable resources, it's critical for both industry and academia to work more closely together to accelerate course creation and ensure

that they are aligned with industry needs. They pointed out that it's not enough to rely on a single professor or expert, as the research-driven approach of academia is often at odds with the more practical, task-oriented mindset of industry. This underscores the importance of bridging these different perspectives to create effective and relevant programs.

Opportunities with Microcredential development

Strengthen industry partnerships: Existing partnerships, such as those with international training institutions or industry associations, provide a strong foundation on which to build. These relationships can be leveraged to increase the credibility and reach of micro credential programs by drawing on established expertise and resources. members have recognized the value of not "reinventing the wheel" and instead licensing training materials from proven sources. In addition, one of the significant benefits of being in a post-secondary environment is access to subject matter experts who, while not all directly from industry, bring decades of industry experience as adjunct faculty. As one partner noted,

> "One of the real advantages of being in a post-secondary environment is that not all of our subject matter experts have to come from industry. We have a lot of people we can go to who are part-time faculty, people who have been in industry for decades. And so having that resource available is one of the really nice things about being in a post-secondary space is that we can get immediate industry input, while also having dedicated folks who have a little more time and space to devote to development."

This dual access to timely industry input and experienced faculty enhances the ability to develop and deliver relevant and effective microcredential programs.

Reintroducing the value of the humanities to industry: One member reported on a project that integrates humanities skills with micro-credentials, providing a unique opportunity to reintroduce the value of the humanities to industry. As this member noted, this not only bridges the gap between traditional academic disciplines and modern industry needs, but also creates a pipeline of graduates who are well-rounded and industry ready.

A FOUNDATION FOR COLLABORATION: KEY CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP

The success of microcredentials relies on effective collaboration between government, industry, employers, training providers and post-secondary institutions. By working

together, partners can leverage each other's strengths to create innovative programs that align with real-world industry needs.

Benefits

Increased return on investment (ROI): Enhanced collaboration allows for greater efficiency with resource use, especially when funding is limited. Collaboration allows programs to be available and utilized by multiple stakeholders and jurisdictions, which maximizes the reach of every dollar that is spent. As noted by a partner, Nova Scotia can demonstrate exemplary effectiveness in upskilling and training programs by leveraging these collaborative frameworks,

> "I think the thing that comes to mind right away is just ROI, the ability to be more effective with extremely limited funding. There is a large federal mandate for this kind of work, but a very small percentage unfortunately gets to Nova Scotians, (but they) are doing a far better job than the rest of the country in this space. It does mean that provincially, working across institutions, across sectors, across jurisdictions means a better return on dollars, because you can do something once and have it available for multiple stakeholders and multiple jurisdictions".

Return on investment is maximized by improved efficiency of programs through collaboration. For instance, one organization reported that partnership allowed them to offset the cost of an office space and allowed for access to a wider range of resources between partners. This allows savings from shared resources to be reinvested in other efforts to reach more learners.

Relationship building on a high level: Collaboration not only allows for the development of a community of practice, but it also strengthens relationships and access to broader areas across different sectors. One participant highlighted the importance of this knowledge sharing, stating that "leaders need to be speaking to the leaders when it comes to innovation, and knowing who those people are is really key". Elements such as having various partner logos on training programs builds credibility and attracts more potential participants.

Improved access and relevance: Collaboration allows industry partners to have access to immediate and up-to-date information, ensuring that programs remain relevant and responsive to current market needs. For example, one partner shared how collaboration allowed their organization to better coordinate dates for leadership training for frontline healthcare workers. Program partners had provided critical insights about potential conflicts due to a blackout period during the December holiday season, due to high demand for staffing. This allowed them to select dates that were better suited to learners, demonstrating how access to direct feedback from industry experts can be instrumental in effective program implementation. By utilizing

these connections, industry partners can obtain a deeper understanding of community and learner needs, which simplifies the implementation of new initiatives.

Challenges

Partners identified several challenges that impact the effectiveness and sustainability of collaboration as well.

Coordination and scheduling: Partners found that as the number of industry stakeholders involved on a program increased, schedule coordination also became more difficult. One partner stated,

> "I would say the biggest challenge is, partnering takes more time [...]. I've already noted that it's hard just to get our industry people at the table. The more people you try to bring to the table, the harder it is to coordinate schedules".

Not only does coordination and diverse partner needs impact agility, but it can sometimes lead to increased costs and time invested as well. One partner noted, "one of the biggest challenges really is making sure that we know who to go to for specific authorizations within our own organizations and beyond, like, what is the pathway for getting approvals for specific items. And that can be a significant challenge. It is such a challenge to figure out sometimes who is responsible for a specific thing, or who do we need to go to make sure that we're not stepping on any toes". Partners expressed the significance of clearly defining roles and responsibilities of organizations to minimize these conflicts.

Criteria for Successful Collaboration

To effectively develop and deliver rapid skills training and micro credentials, partners expressed the need to build a strong relationship between industry and post-secondary institutions. Not only will this unity speed up the process of creating courses and ensure alignment with market needs, but it also confirms that diverse perspectives are accounted for with both research and practical mindsets. Given that a single professor or subject matter expert cannot cover all the expertise required, industry and post-secondary institutions should recognize each other's perspectives and come together to innovate. Bridging organizations can be useful with facilitating these initial connections between industry and academia.

Establishing a well-defined procedural structure was also deemed as crucial to the success of collaborative initiatives. This could include setting clear guidelines of the roles and responsibilities of each organization involved, determining content ownership and course

delivery methods, and implementing sustainability systems that address the needs of stakeholders at various levels, including the government.

SUCCESS STORIES FROM MEMBERS

Members of the focus group shared their success stories with microcredential and upskilling initiatives in their organizations.

Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC)

NSCC's national project with Colleges and Institutes Canada (CiCan) demonstrates the significance of collaborative partnerships in developing microcredential training. The project involved three different post-secondary institutions uniting to form a consortium, and the development of an industry advisory council with five senior level members from various organizations. This strategic collaboration leveraged expertise and validation from subject matter experts. By involving industry representatives early in the development process rather than at the end, NSCC was able to rethink traditional curriculum development. NSCC's success was further demonstrated by its rapid 6-month delivery period, which promoted adaptive and innovative approaches to program development. The organization also emphasized the need to consider equity seeking groups and finding ways to offset the costs of training for participants where possible. The project also included evaluating ongoing industry needs to assess if programs should be continued post-project to respond to skill demands in the market.

Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU)

Another microcredential success story comes from MSVU's pilot programs. The first pilot they offered was targeted case management in health and human services. Learners were already in professional case management roles, but many did not have formal education in the field. This course successfully introduced more tools for them to use and increased their confidence in their roles. The second pilot MSVU offered focused on navigating the continuing care system in Nova Scotia. This community-facing program catered to both professionals and community members such as family and caregivers. Feedback from this program indicated that it successfully enriched participant's understanding of available supports such as home care, thus enhancing their ability to access necessary services. These pilots serve as excellent examples of success in addressing community and professional needs through microcredentials.

Digital Nova Scotia

Digital Nova Scotia's "Skills for Hire" program is a success story that demonstrates how microcredentials can be aligned with both individual learner and market demands. This program involved training 1500 cyber security specialist analysts using a comprehensive approach to learning with access to wraparound supports. Development of the program prioritized maintaining a high level of integrity in the courses and highlighted the importance of offering accommodations to meet learners where they were at. A key factor of the program is its alignment with employer needs. In early stages of development, employers were engaged to understand the current skill gaps in the cybersecurity field. Not only did this ensure that the program was tailored to actual demands in the job market, but it also ensured that learners would be connected to find employment at the program through apprenticeships. Skills for Hire integrated essential employability elements such as resume building, coaching and mentorship into the program to provide a fulsome range of supports and skills to learners. The opportunities for development of key skills paired with support from the government and employers to create a sustainable model where learners were led to immediate entry into the workforce.

BUILDING LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY FOR CURRENT INITIATIVES AND TRAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Sustainability is a critical concern for the ongoing success and impact of microcredential initiatives and training partnerships in Nova Scotia. To ensure these programs continue to thrive, several key factors and strategies have been identified by members of the community of practice.

Develop a sustainability plan: A sustainability plan is essential to guide the long-term viability of microcredential programs. Members emphasized the importance of industry engagement from the outset. As one member pointed out, "We want to have as much industry engagement as possible because it's important and we're not going to move forward if we don't have industry input." This underscores the need for ongoing collaboration with industry partners to ensure that microcredentials are relevant and meet labor market needs. However, coordinating industry participation can be challenging, especially in a smaller market like Nova Scotia where resources are limited. "It would be a little more time efficient for us if it was easier to get industry to the table to get started," the member noted.

Leverage existing frameworks and partnerships: Some members indicated that they benefit from existing frameworks and partnerships that can be leveraged to support the sustainability of microcredentials. For example, leveraging the recognition of prior learning within existing apprenticeship programs is an important asset. These established relationships and resources

provide a strong foundation on which to build, allowing for the efficient development and scaling of microcredential programs.

Ensure industry credibility and relevance: Many members indicated that one of the most critical factors for sustainability is ensuring that microcredential programs have "street credibility" within the industry. This credibility is built on the relevance and outcomes of the programs. As one member noted, "If the people who are participating in these microcredential initiatives see results, then they'll develop street credibility and word will get out." It was suggested that in small communities like those in Nova Scotia, positive word-of-mouth can have a significant impact on the success and sustainability of these programs. To maintain this credibility, it's important to involve industry in the early stages of program development. This includes validating the concept with industry partners before content is created and keeping them involved throughout the process. "We need to validate the concept a little more formally by doing surveys at the beginning rather than at the end," said one member, emphasizing the importance of early and ongoing validation to ensure that programs meet industry needs.

Address financial sustainability: Financial sustainability was a major concern, especially for smaller organizations. There is a need to develop cost recovery models for instructor-led training while keeping costs as low as possible. In addition, securing financial support is critical, especially when working with equity-seeking groups that may not have the financial means to afford traditional tuition. As one member noted, "Access to funding is so important so that we can continue to serve these equity-seeking groups". Another challenge related to financial sustainability is the inability to guarantee promotions or immediate financial benefits for individuals who complete a microcredential. To address this, some members are exploring ways to incorporate earning opportunities while learning, which could make these programs more attractive and sustainable in the long run.

Adapt to changing needs and sustain innovation: For microcredential programs to remain sustainable, they must be adaptable to changing industry and labor market needs. This includes responding to generational shifts, technological advances, and the evolving needs of different sectors. As one member mentioned, "We need to develop the ability to learn, change, and adapt based on the changing needs of the industry". The member noted that the focus should be on sustaining the relationships and partnerships that support these programs, rather than focusing on the sustainability of individual microcredentials. This approach allows for continuous innovation and adaptation, ensuring that programs remain relevant and effective over time.

Build trust and extend reach: Trust is a fundamental element in sustaining microcredential initiatives. Members recognized that building trust with industry partners, learners, and the broader community is essential to the success of these programs. "Trust is important to bring all the pieces together," noted one member. This trust is built through consistent, transparent communication and by demonstrating the tangible benefits of microcredentials. Looking ahead,

there is also strong interest in expanding the reach of microcredential programs beyond Nova Scotia. "Making sure we're able to roll out any microcredential to a broader community is something we're focused on," said one member. By scaling successful programs and sharing best practices, members hoped to position themselves as leaders in the microcredential space.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

In our discussions with participants, several key themes emerged about the role and impact of microcredentials. The insights shared provided a deeper understanding of how these initiatives are shaping new educational pathways, empowering individuals, and highlighting the critical role of government-industry collaboration. Below are key takeaways from these conversations.

Microcredentials as new pathways

Members emphasized that microcredentials are more than just a form of education; they offer new ways for individuals to navigate the educational system and provide alternative pathways that complement traditional degrees. One mentioned, "We're really just getting started, but we're excited to be taking this leap as a post-secondary institution that has historically focused on liberal arts, humanities, and journalism." They explained that the project aims to help liberal arts graduates transition into industry-level jobs by combining their liberal arts skills with targeted microcredentials. This approach, the member noted, not only increases employability, but also challenges the social narrative about the value of a liberal arts education.

Several other members noted the importance of designing microcredentials that focus on job functions rather than specific industries. One participant emphasized that "a project manager can be in any industry," suggesting that targeting job functions allows for broader applicability of the skills taught, making microcredentials more versatile and relevant across sectors.

In addition, it was noted that the regulatory framework within the postsecondary sector is evolving, with microcredentials and rapid skills training becoming essential complements to traditional diplomas and degrees. Participants suggested that this shift recognizes the growing need for flexible, non-credit education options that can respond quickly to labor market demands.

Microcredentials as a stepping-stone to individual empowerment

Members discussed how microcredentials play a critical role in empowering individuals by providing flexible learning and career pathways that minimize the barriers inherent in traditional education systems. They emphasized that microcredentials meet learners where they

are, providing opportunities to consolidate existing skills or acquire new ones that are directly aligned with industry needs. As one participant noted, "This is especially beneficial for those with prior experience or skills, as well as those without formal education or work experience, allowing them to enter the workforce or advance in their careers."

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market was also highlighted, with members indicating that microcredentials have become essential tools for individuals to adapt to these changes. One participant shared that microcredentials enable individuals to take control of their career paths. Another participant emphasized the importance of removing barriers to employment, particularly through apprenticeships linked to microcredential programs: "These programs have allowed many individuals to gain employment and move on to higher levels of training that wouldn't have been possible without these opportunities."

Support was often cited as a critical factor in the success of microcredentials. Participants noted that even small amounts of support can make a significant difference in helping individuals overcome barriers to education and employment, ensuring that microcredentials are accessible to a wider range of learners, and helping them build the confidence to achieve their career goals.

The role of government in supporting microcredentials and PSE-industry partnerships

The discussions highlighted several areas where government intervention could significantly enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of microcredential programs and postsecondary education (PSE) partnerships with industry.

Improve coordination and collaboration: Participants emphasized the need for better coordination among the various stakeholders involved in microcredential initiatives. Government can play a critical role by bringing together key stakeholders - postsecondary educators, industry employers, and policymakers - to streamline efforts and avoid duplication. By facilitating a more organized approach, government can ensure that resources are used efficiently and that the collective impact of these initiatives is maximized. As one participant noted, "It's not just about collaboration; it's about coordination to make everything sustainable and keep the momentum going," underscoring the potential for government to foster a cohesive strategy across sectors.

Engage decision-makers early: Another area where government support is essential is the early engagement of senior decision-makers. Participants stressed that involving industry leaders and education authorities from the outset is critical to identifying industry needs and validating training proposals. Government can help by creating frameworks or incentives for early collaboration, which would accelerate the development of microcredential programs and

increase their credibility. As one participant explained, "Early engagement ensures that programs are aligned with industry needs and reduces the risk of missing the mark." Government-sponsored initiatives could standardize this approach to ensure consistent and effective early engagement across projects.

Build trust and support flexibility: Members highlighted the importance of trust in sustaining microcredentialing initiatives. Government can help build this trust by establishing quality assurance mechanisms that validate the effectiveness and relevance of microcredentials. In addition, by funding or incentivizing flexible, adaptive learning models, the government can support programs that are responsive to changing labor market conditions and employer needs. Participants described this adaptability as a "wheel of innovation" that is critical to keeping microcredential programs relevant and effective over time.

Ensure credibility and impact: Finally, government plays a critical role in ensuring the credibility or "street cred" of microcredentials. By setting standards for competencies and outcomes and promoting the value of microcredentials within industries, government can help these programs gain wider acceptance. The members suggested that government endorsement and promotion of microcredentials could significantly increase their perceived value to both learners and employers, ensuring long-term sustainability and impact.

In summary, government involvement in coordinating efforts, engaging decision-makers early, building trust, and ensuring the credibility of microcredentials is critical to the success and sustainability of these initiatives. By stepping in to address these key areas, government can help create a more robust and effective microcredential landscape that meets the needs of both learners and industry.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Insights and themes shared during the focus group provided a deeper understanding of how these initiatives are shaping new educational pathways, empowering individuals, and highlighting the critical role of government in facilitating post-secondary and industry collaboration. Below are key takeaways from these conversations:

Governments can play a critical role in supporting partnerships between PSE and industry by improving coordination and collaboration. Governments can significantly enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of microcredential programs by:

- Bringing together key parties to build trust, streamline efforts, and avoid duplication.

- Creating frameworks or incentives for early collaboration to ensure programs align with industry needs.
- Supporting flexibility and funding adaptive learning models while also establishing quality assurance mechanisms.
- Ensuring credibility and impact by monitoring outcomes and promoting the value of microcredentials.

In summary, government involvement in coordinating efforts, engaging decision-makers early, building trust, and ensuring the credibility of microcredentials is critical to the success and sustainability of these initiatives. By stepping in to address these key areas, government can help create a more robust and effective microcredential landscape that meets the needs of both learners and industry.

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