CRICOS No. 00233E

Micro-credentialing in Australasian HE

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What a great way to wind-down after a

Micro-credentialing as a sustainable way forward for universities in Australia: Perceptions of the landscape

White paper for ACODE 80, Wellington, New Zealand

Dr Ratna Selvaratnam, Edith Cowan University
&
Prof Michael Sankey, Griffith University

Abstract

A rapidly evolving higher education landscape is an opportunity for Australian universities to reconsider how it offers education. In a time where knowledge and skills need to be updated constantly, a three- or four-year degree may not suit the currency required in many jobs and other work. A student's employability and entrepreneurship abilities need to be contemporary and flexible. However, recognising them in a way that is translatable across academia and work providers is limited. This paper surveys how some universities approach micro-credentialing to maintain the currency of their offerings and how the Australian higher education landscape is evolving to meet this need. Also discussed is the perception of the universities' presence in this space as informed by the survey.

Background

The Australian higher education sector is at the cusp of recognising what has long been the body of work in the micro-credentialing space. More broadly, it is seen that the sector is still in the seminal stages, and that there is much to learn about common good practices (Dyjur & Lindstrom, 2017), thus it is important that this topic be broadly debated and benchmarked. Three important documents frame the thinking around micro-credentialing in this paper.

Firstly, A review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Noonan 2019) was recently conducted and found it needed to be more responsive to contemporary needs in the industry. Prominent among these more recent developments is the widespread trend towards micro-credentials, flexible delivery options and mechanisms to assist learners to construct their own programs, sometimes across sectors, to meet individual learning needs. The final report on Review of the AQF was released in October 2019. The much anticipated Review, led by Professor Peter Noonan, makes the case for reform of the AQF to make it more future ready. On page 9, the recommendation is:

> *The AQF Pathways Policy is revised to broaden guidelines for credit recognition across AQF qualifications and to define and provide for recognition of shorter form credentials, including micro-credentials, towards AQF qualifications.*

This follows the implementation of a similar approach in the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) in 2019. Establishing guidelines for shorter form credentials within the AQF will assure quality.

Secondly, Emeritus Professor Beverly Oliver, Deakin University, updates the discussion on micro-credentials in the report *Making micro-credentials work for learners, employers and providers* (2019). Preceding the AQF Review report by 2 months, she foreshadows having the opportunity to have formal qualifications systems recognise different forms of credentials. She defines micro-credentials as a form of short form credential, clarifying (i):

> *a micro-credential is a certification of assessed learning that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a formal component of a formal qualification.*

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Survey of micro-credentialing practice in Australasian universities 2020

An ACODE Whitepaper – 25 August 2020
Dr Ratna Selvaratnam. Edith Cowan University
Prof Michael Sankey. Griffith University

Background

This project, supported by the Australasian Council on Open Distance and eLearning (ACODE), aims to inform and benchmark universities in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji on current practices in the area of micro-credentialing. It is anticipated that institutions may be able to use this data to help them design, implement or seek a community of practice in the new area of micro-credentialing. The authors also presented an ACODE White Paper on the state of play of Micro-credentialing in late 2019 at ACODE 80 in Wellington. This previous paper was based on data that had been collected in mid 2019. This former paper can be found at: https://www.acode.edu.au/mod/resource/view.php?id=3049

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated efforts in this area and so it was timely to capture and learn what this has meant for our member institutions. Not the least, with the focus by the Australian Federal Government has placed on the rapid development of short course[1] to help support the higher education (HE) sector, we were keen to understand how this may be reflected in activities undertaken in our institutions. While the recent Australian Qualifications Review (AQF) in 2019 also acknowledges the importance of micro- credentialing, universities may be unsure how to proceed with an effective framework and implementation. These factors have prompted the follow-up survey we conducted with ACODE member institutions in July 2020.

Introduction

A rapidly evolving higher education landscape is an opportunity for Australasian universities to reconsider how it offers education. In a time where knowledge and skills need to be updated constantly, a three- or four-year degree may not suit the currency required in many jobs and other work. A student's employability and entrepreneurship abilities need to be contemporary and flexible. The way to gain these continually updated skills and knowledge is immense. However, recognising them in a way that is translatable across academia and work providers is limited. This research surveys how Australasian universities approach micro-credentialing to maintain the currency of its offerings and how the sector's higher education landscape is evolving to meet this need.

As there has been no comprehensive benchmarking of micro-credentialing in Australasian higher education thus far, the importance of this work will be to initially benchmark these initiatives and to help progress work in this new field of endeavour.

The method employed in this survey was to approach Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVC) Education or equivalent in ACODE member universities, via email. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics. With participants permission, the responses are collated and shared with ACODE members as per usual practice of knowledge sharing and wider dissemination via presentations and publications. Australian, New Zealand and Fijian universities are well-represented in ACODE with relevant staff who can direct the survey to PVCs on micro-credentialing. 47 member institutions were sent the survey with 34 institutions[2] responding (72%). Participants were asked a series of 17 questions to ascertain the level of micro-credentialing work being done.

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Background

University participation demographic

	2019	2020
Total	37	34
University	35	33
Non-University (Private)	2	1
Australian	29	28
NZ	7	5
Fiji	1	1

Status of adoption

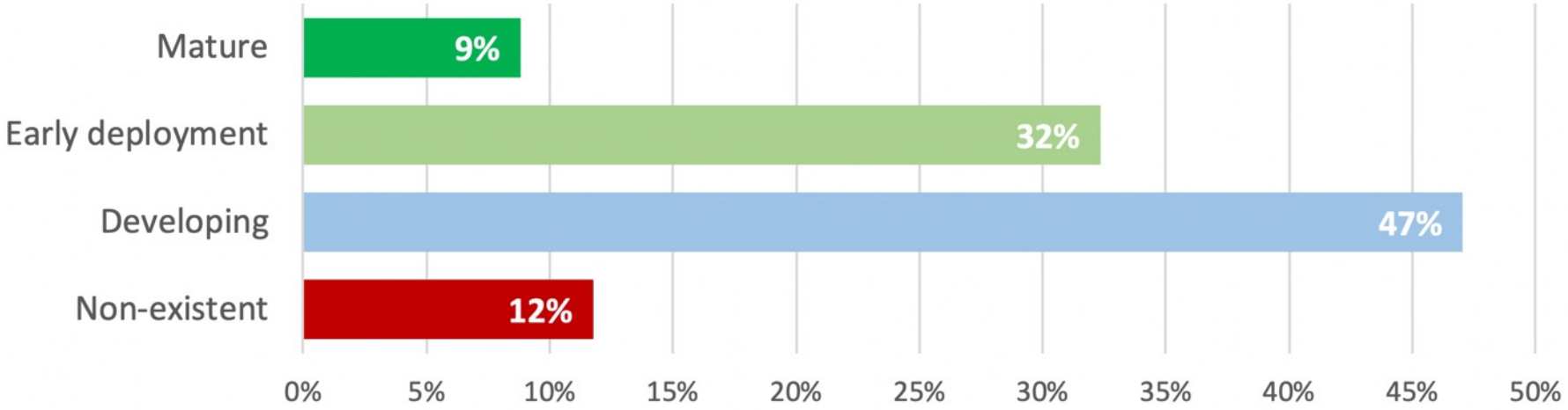

Figure 4 Status of adoption of micro-credentialing at member institutions

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Status of adoption

- Mature- 3 universities have well-established policies for 3-5 years
- 88% are in various states of adoption
- Early deployment - 10 respondents make a brief description of their early activities in the MC space
- Developing – 15 institutions make a statement about work that's being done to progress the policy

Micro-credentialing policy

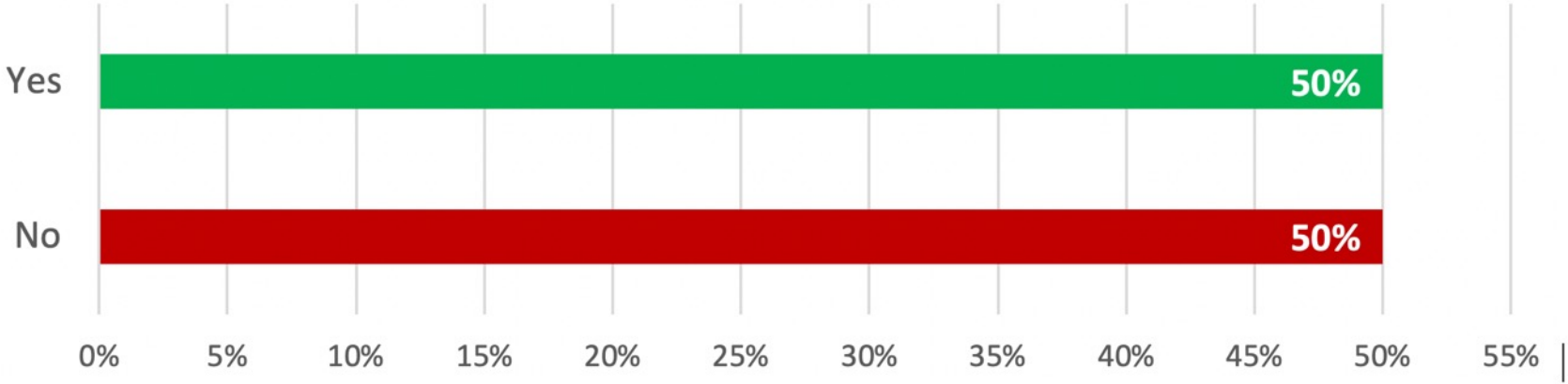

Figure 1 Institutions with a micro-credentialing policy

- 20% increase in institutions responding they have a micro-credentialing policy compared to 2019
- 9 institutions likely to have a policy by mid-2021

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Approved matrix mapped to Qualifications Framework

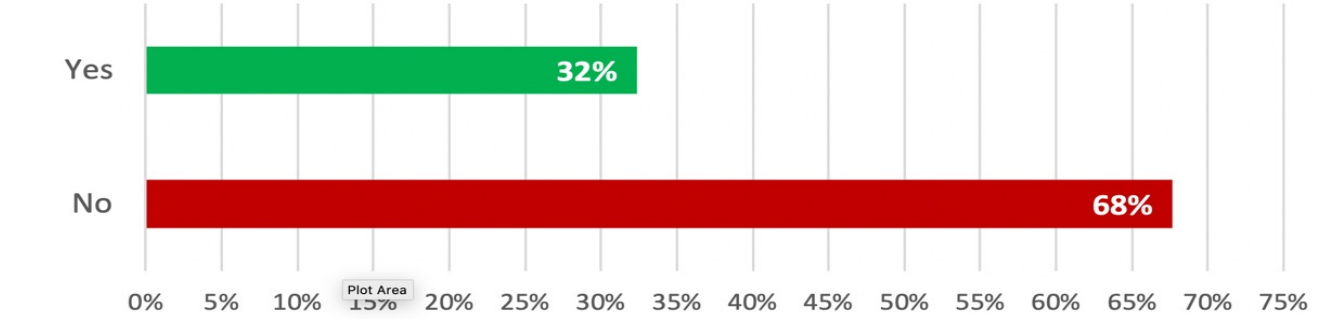

Figure 2 Institutions with an approved matrix linking credentialing and qualifications frameworks

- 32% of respondents (11) have an approved matrix This is a significant 19% increase from the 2019 survey
- 10 respondents are developing their approach

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What is micro-credentialed

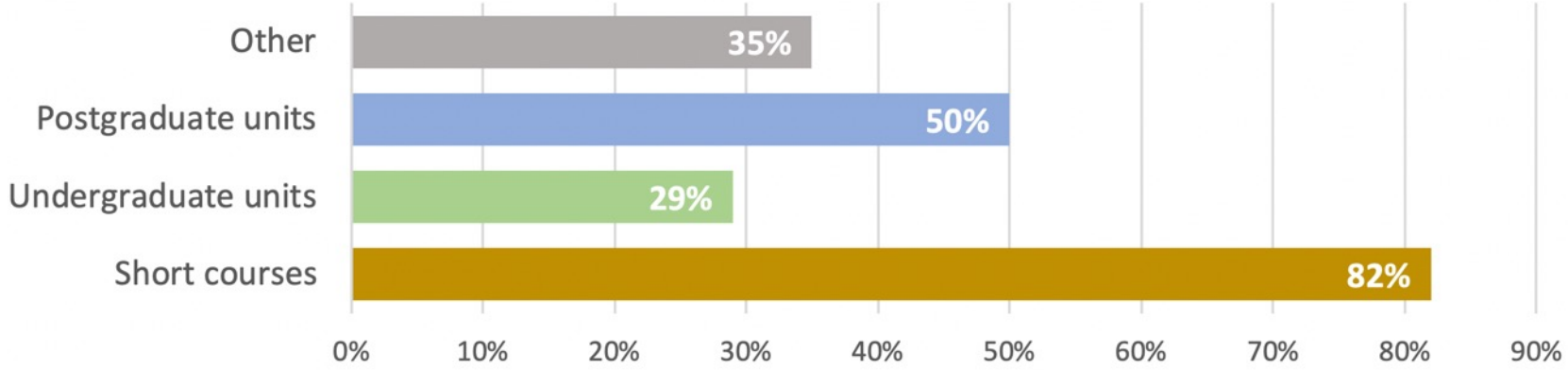

Figure 5 What institutions currently micro-credential or plan to in the future

- A clear increase in the number who are already, or plan to micro-credential undergraduate units. This is likely due to the undergraduate certificates and short courses the government has asked universities to offer to mitigate unemployment due to COVID-19 induced job losses

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Professional Development

PD courses include **learning and teaching** related training, technology, business, compliance and professional skills. 23 (68%) of respondents suggested their existing professional development courses could be micro-credentialled, these include potential teaching and professional skills courses.

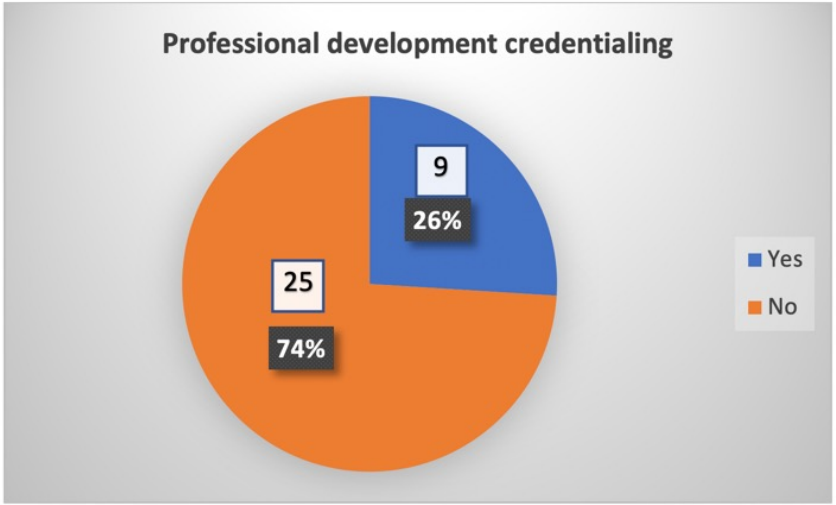

Figure 7 Percentage of institutions that credential professional development

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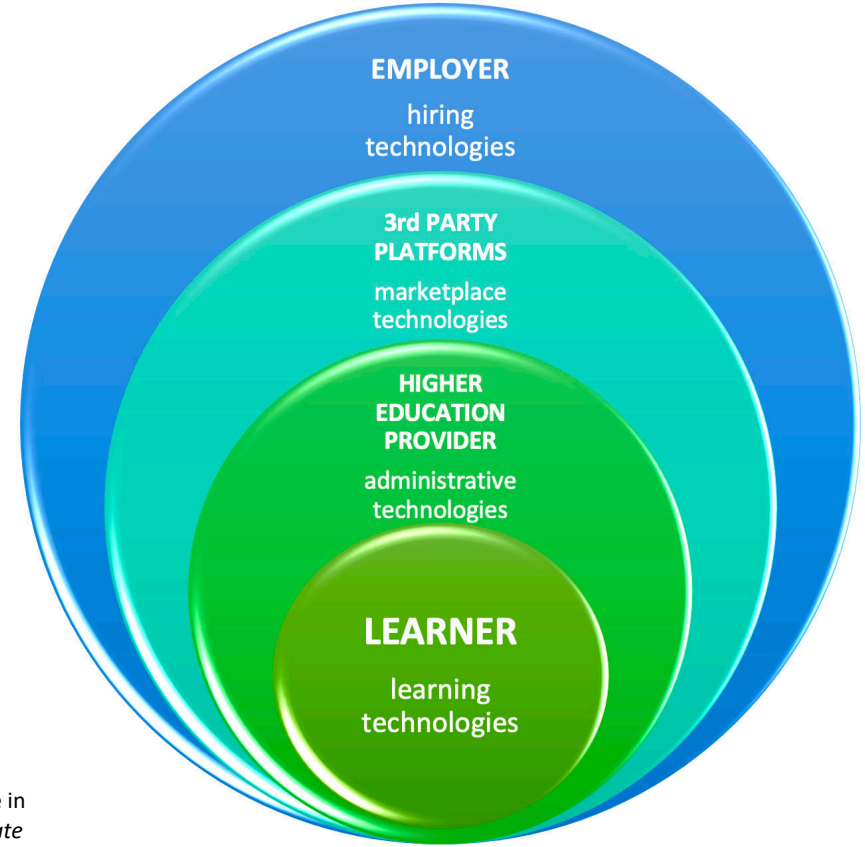
Survey findings summary

- Effort towards micro-credentialing has increased across most criteria since 2019
- If not already well-underway, institutions are developing or seriously considering micro-credentialing strategies
- Several universities are working on ways to integrate existing non-award courses with award systems focused on undergraduate students
- Offer micro-credentials to businesses and government in a commercial capacity
- Professional practice degrees are a new space tapping into industry partnerships
- Co-delivery with providers in VET

Proposed model

Micro-credentials and stakeholder engagement with relevant technologies



PRS

- Systems that allow for the representation of select credentials for professional consumption

CMS

- Systems where public facing credentials are stored, shared & validated by a accredited bodies

SMS

- Institutional systems where student's identity is assured and where qualifications are mediated

VLE

- Systems where learning occurs and where assessment is validated

Selvaratnam, R. M., & Sankey, M. (2021). An integrative literature review of the implementation of micro-credentials in higher education: Implications for practice in Australasia. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, *12*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2021vol12no1art942

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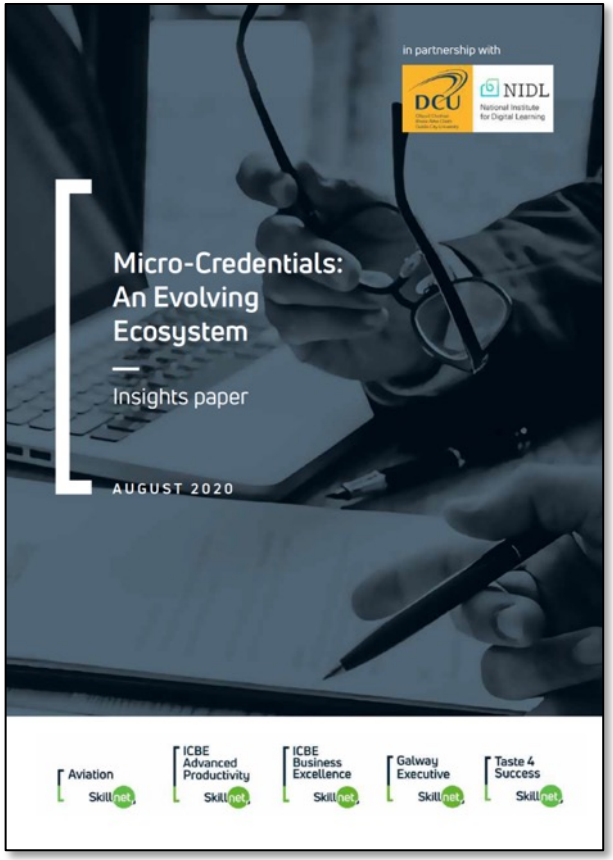
ACODE's next Steps

- HE needs to rethink their operating structures to best service the offering of micro-credentials in its various permutations
- ACODE will continue to monitor this important space over the next few years
- Key updates in the sector 2020/21



- The field is still nascent, internationally, but work being done by the European Commission will advance a new structure.
- Emerging from this work is that assessment is the key principle required to ensure trust, recognition and quality assurance.
- Clearer differentiation between micro-credentials that are formal and non-formal is required.
- Need to consider stakeholder perspectives, but not many studies looking at industries and employees yet.
- They suggest, engaging with a micro-credential survey can be a good awareness raising exercise.
- The micro-credential landscape is diverse with many actors working independently of each other.
- A common and unified micro-credential ecosystem is necessary to address issues of portability, currency, consistency and coherency.

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- MICROBOL – Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna process
- Micro-credentials perceived differently by different actors:
  - Policymakers: A way to address the short-term needs identified in society/labour market.
  - HE: A way to provide more targeted and specialised training.
  - Learners: An entry mechanism to a degree, or as a way to acquire interdisciplinary knowledge and skills.
  - Employers: Generally not consider alternative credentials as substitutes for conventional qual's, rather as complementary.
- There is a lack of a clear definition (standards) regarding; mode of delivery, duration, assessment process, validation, stackability and alignment with larger forms of credentials, causing confusion.
- The existing EHEA (European Higher Education Area) tools can be used (or adapted) to accommodate micro-credentials without stifling the capacity to promote innovation and flexibility.

September 2020

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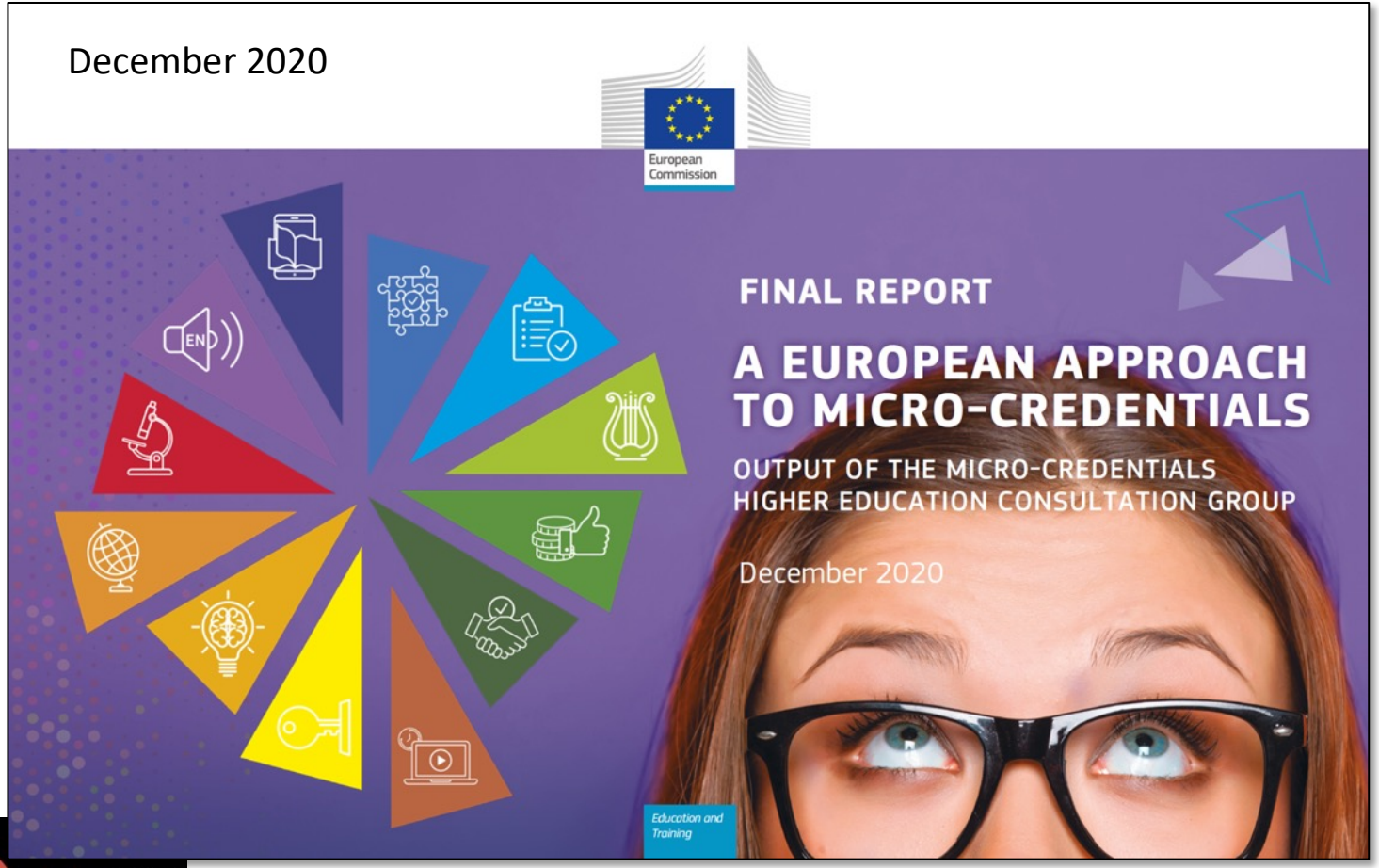

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BUILDING BLOCKS	TIMELINES and DELIVERABLES					
	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	
A common and transparent **DEFINITION** and a **EU STANDARD** for micro-credentials	**Common definition** and **EU standard** in this report as a starting point for further consultations.	Wide **consultations** among the education and training community and labour market actors, involving all Member States and EHEA countries.	Commission proposal for a **Council Recommendation** on **micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.**	Adoption by the Council of Ministers of the Council Recommendation on **micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability**, incl. **common definition and EU standard.**	Establish the appropriate follow-up structure for micro-credentials within the Bologna Process working structures.	Definition and key features / standards for micro-credentials to be adopted within the **EHEA**, together with the **2024 Communiqué of the Bologna Process Ministerial Conference.**
Alignment to the national and European **QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORKS**	Explore the feasibility of **integrating micro-credentials in national qualifications frameworks**, which could be referenced to the European Qualifications Framework. Regular dialogue and consultation with the European Qualification Framework Advisory Group, advisory Committee for Vocational Education and Training (VET), the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and among the education and training community and labour market actors, including social partners, youth organisations and civil society, and involving both Member States and EHEA countries.			Progressive adaptation of **national qualifications frameworks**, where needed.		

Direction of travel: Employers and universities are working together to provide universal access to experiential learning for students through projects and internships that are clearly linked to course work and are, in many cases, credit-bearing. One example of this is the apprenticeship model, with a growing number of these degrees delivered by universities. This approach has significant political support, and a strong incentive for employers to fund places, but faces the same scalability challenges as the traditional models of EUC. Another example is emerging technology companies such as Riipen, which aggregate micro-internships at scale and enable university instructors to integrate these into existing courses as credit-bearing activities.

November 2020

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June 2020

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Joint Media Release | 22 June 2020

Marketplace for online microcredentials

- The Government will provide $4.3 million to build and run a one-stop-shop for micro-credentials to help students identify educational opportunities.
- The ‘Marketplace’ builds on the success of the Government’s micro-credential initiative announced as part of its Higher Education Relief Package at Easter.
- Since the announcement, 54 providers have created 344 short online courses in areas of skills shortage.

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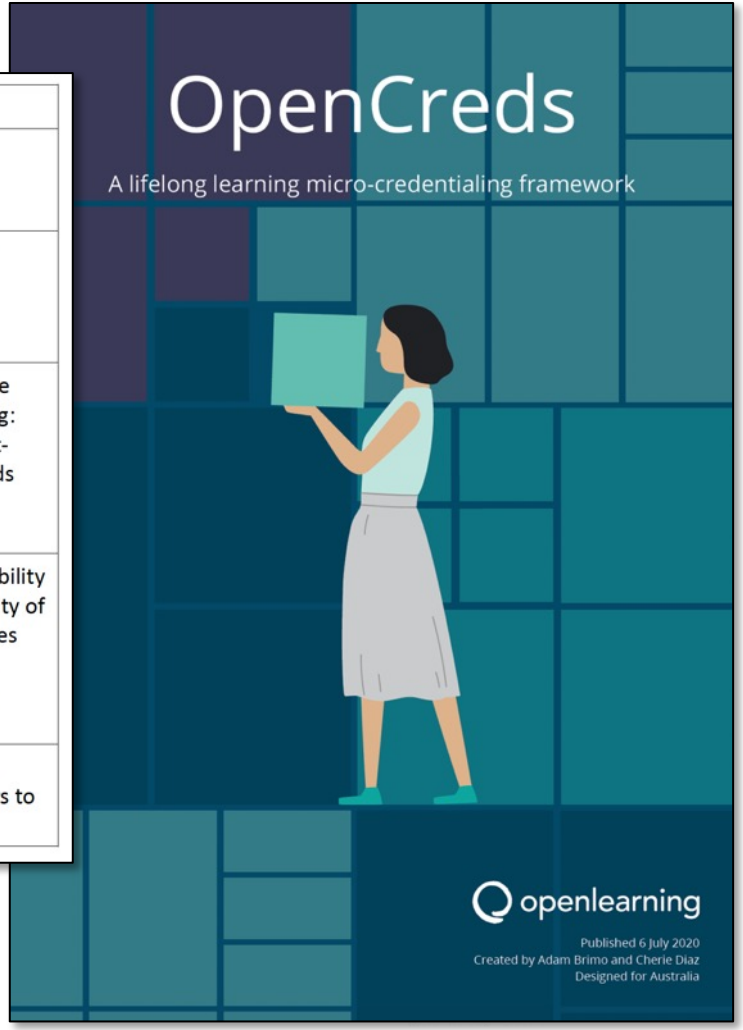
Platform	Coursera	edX	FutureLearn	OpenLearning
Micro-Credential Name	Coursera Specializations	edX MicroMasters	European Micro-credential Framework	OpenCreds
Level	Masters	Masters	Levels 6-7 in the European Qualification Framework	Levels 1-10 in the Australian Qualification Framework
Relationship with a formal qualification	Seven specialisations comprise an Australian Masters	25% of an Australian Masters	Approximately one unit in an Australia higher education qualification	Determined by the provider, including: Pathway or Credit-bearing OpenCreds lead towards qualifications
Partnership arrangements				Encouraged. Flexibility and interoperability of OpenCreds reduces barriers for partnerships and collaboration.
Indicative Hours of Learning per Unit	20 hours to 100 hours (no set standard)	150 hours	100 hours or more	Specified sizes between 2.5 hours to 150 hours



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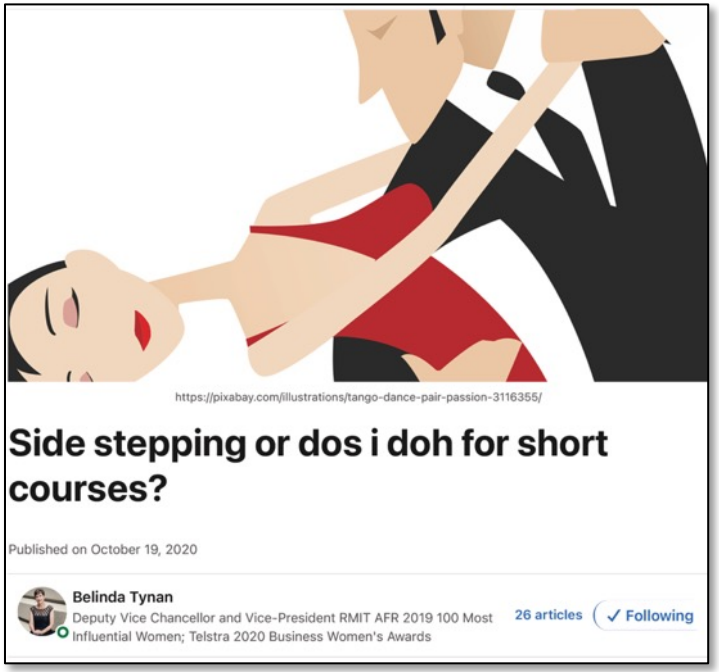

https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/side-stepping-dos-i-doh-short-courses-belinda-tynan/

October 2020

- Many RMIT micro-credentials have been AQF aligned, to be ‘modularised/stacked’ into credentials.
- Innovation resides in their alignment with industry, being either sponsored or co-curated.
- Industry provide mentors who interact with learners and often find their new employees through these programs.
- This is what the people want to see.
- There is a rub: Micro-credentials do not count as a short course as they do not have formal credit. Though a bunch of them can equal a ‘short course’ certificate.
- As credit pathways and academic assurance mature, user expectations concerning these will also.
- There are still questions about academic integrity, the relationships of Academic Boards, TEQSA and industry.
- Not to mention coherence

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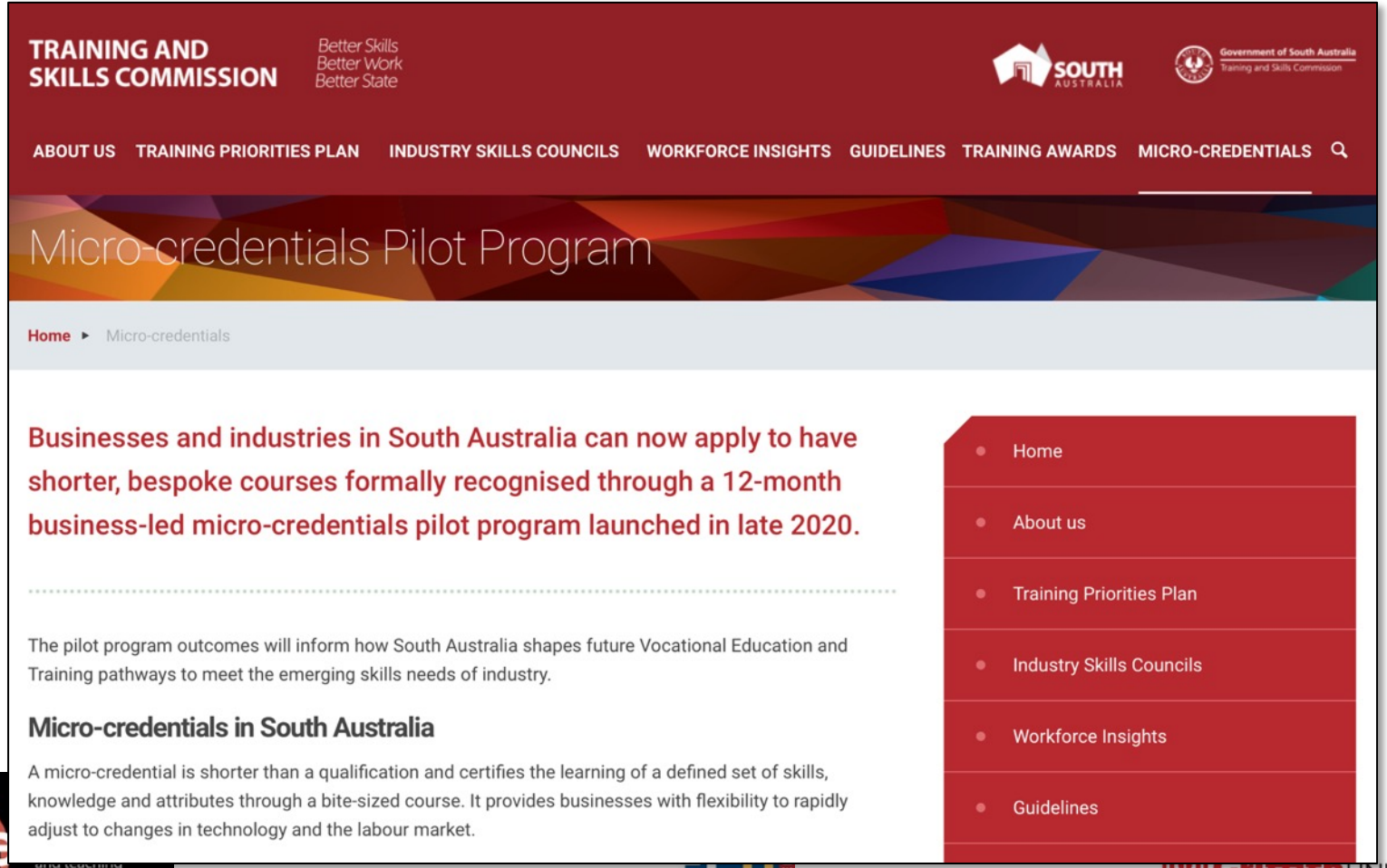

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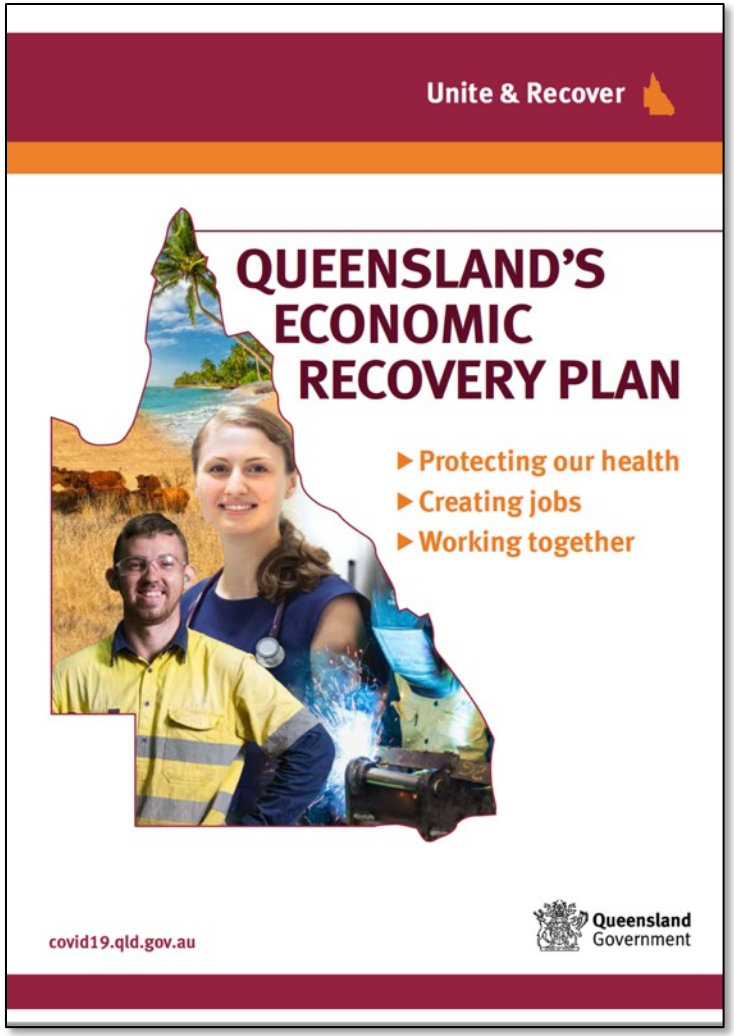

- The Queensland Government has also helped businesses build their capability through a range of skills and training programs, most notably, by providing free online micro-credentials in areas including digital literacy, as well as free online skill sets in priority industry areas
- The Queensland Government has supported Community Services industry with free skill sets, micro credentials and targeted business assistance. These measures will support jobs growth in our industry through the recovery and beyond.

August 2020

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society into a technology-rich future. The curriculum allows students to pursue their individual interests with a wide range of micro-credentials to support the deep technical skills they learn.

industry to deliver sustainable solutions to real-world problems. This program is designed to create technology leaders who are creative and adaptable and able to guide business, government and society into a technology-rich future. The curriculum allows students to pursue their individual interests with a wide range of micro-credentials to support the deep technical skills they learn. Creativity and entrepreneurship are key attributes that this program develops from first year with studio-based teaching and practice.

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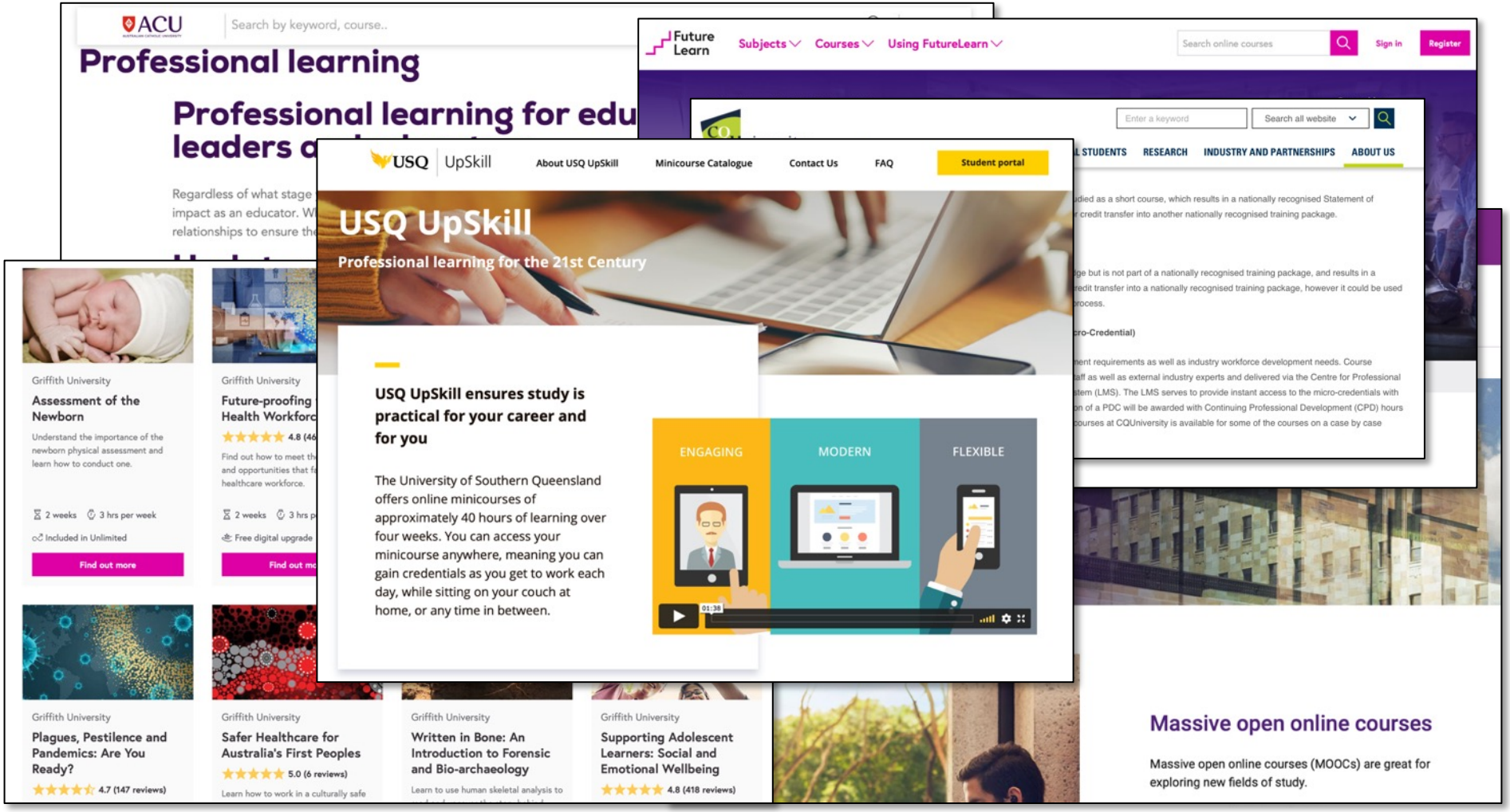
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Next Steps

- A coherent framework, and
- Somebody to take the lead on this

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Questions and Discussion

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