

The Mobilities of Micro-credentials

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

This paper presents an exploration of the emerging UK policy discourses on micro-credentials. Drawing on the ‘mobilities turn’ in education research (Waters, 2017), I argue that the learner mobility suggested in policy texts on micro-credentials is used to justify an intensification of the instrumentalisation of education and a critique of the rigidities of current higher education systems. I also argue that the imaginary mobilities of the micro-credentialed student depend on dense network assemblages of credit and qualification frameworks, immutable mobile digital records of individual learning achievements, and inter-institutional and international recognition schemes coordinated through digital platforms. The freedoms and flexibilities promised in the mobilities of micro-credentials are both realised through and constrained by the robust moorings of educational infrastructures.

Full paper

This paper presents an exploration of the emerging UK policy discourses on micro-credentials. Drawing on the ‘mobilities turn’ in education research (Waters, 2017), I argue that the learner mobility suggested in policy texts on micro-credentials is used to justify an intensification of the instrumentalisation of education and a critique of the rigidities of current higher education systems. I go on to argue that the imaginary mobilities of the micro-credentialed student depend on dense network assemblages of credit and qualification frameworks, immutable mobile digital records of individual learning

achievements, and inter-institutional and international recognition schemes coordinated through digital platforms.

Micro-credentials demonstrate achievement in a programme of learning that is smaller than a traditional higher qualification (European Commission, 2020). The significance of micro-credentials lies in their flexibility and emphasis on work-related competence. This instrumental focus is a basis for much of the critical scholarship on micro-credentials to date (Ralston, 2021; Wheelahan and Moodie, 2021, 2022; Pollard and Vincent, 2022). As micro-credentials cannot provide the benefits of acculturation to subject disciplines and occupational norms that traditional degree qualifications do, their value lies in rapid returns in the workplace in employment, promotion or greater job satisfaction (Ositelu, McCann and Laitinen, 2021). Micro-credentials re-shape student mobilities from a state of 'becoming' (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021) within institutional, disciplinary or occupational boundaries, to enacting individualised 'choice' and personal responsibility. An ideal student experience was outlined in Camilleri (2019) as an imaginary case of a laboratory technician seeking to become a sustainable energy investor. To do this, the student identifies, completes and stacks together micro-credentials on investing, wind power engineering, circular economy, solar power and climate modelling from different universities and countries, creating an educational and skills profile to fit a very specific entrepreneurial niche.

The promotion of learner mobilities mediated through micro-credentials is justified by contrasting with the immobilities and structural barriers of the traditional three or four-year degree. As the Higher and Further Education Minister for England (Donelan, 2022) states, micro-credentials are part of a wider programme to change: "education from a narrow, set destination into to an accessible, flexible journey. It is a journey that can stop and start when you like."

Hence education is intensively individualised as students engage in “unfettered spatial movement” (Waters, 2017, p.280) to make their own connections across institutions, sites, people, tools, resources, practices and networks in their personal learning (Carvalho and Goodyear, 2018). As such, the fluid student takes on the risks and responsibilities of their decisions for their own education (Rawolle, Rowlands and Blackmore, 2015) as Cottom’s (2015, p.8) “roaming autodidact”. Micro-credentials are productive forces of student mobilities within a flexible higher education while also being products of those same forces.

Micro-credentials act as ‘network spaces’ (Law and Mol, 2001) drawing together mobilities and the fixed places or ‘moorings’ that make such mobility possible (Sheller and Urry, 2006). For micro-credentials, these moorings involve interacting infrastructures such as national credit and qualification frameworks and credit recognition schemes, quality standards and mechanisms of assurance, and educational coherence (QAA, 2021). These infrastructures maintain the entangled relations of education (Bayne, Gallagher and Lamb, 2014) as micro-credential students shift between programme structures, disciplinary boundaries, and educational institutions and systems. Digital platforms that hold together the heterogeneous networks of credential mobilities are emerging. For example, the European Commission’s Credentify platform (<https://credentify.eu/>) enables the verification and transfer of credits between higher education institutions. Credentify seeks to decentre and replace individual higher education institutions as the trusted ‘provider’ of the verification of learning by placing credits rather than qualifications at the centre of a transnational and flexible education system. The Australian Credentialate platform (<https://www.edalex.com/credentialate>) matches higher education module learning outcomes with occupational skills and competence profiles. It describes itself as a ‘skills first’ approach with the ability to identify skills and competence development in informal, non-formal and formal learning contexts mapped against the demands of specific professional roles. Platforms like Credentialate are productive of an increasingly instrumentalised higher education. The infrastructures of credit recognition, accumulation and transfer

emerging around micro-credentials represent an educational version of Sheller and Urry's (2006, p. 214) hybrid systems made of "... 'materialities and mobilities' that combine objects, technologies, and socialities". These hybrid systems act as "21st Century machines enabling 'people' to be more individually mobile through space, forming new world connections 'on the go'." The freedoms and flexibilities promised in the mobilities of micro-credentials are both realised through and constrained by the robust moorings of educational infrastructures.

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