



Landscape Scan of National Influences on NDC Quality

Michelle Van Noy, Monica Reid Kerrigan, Genevive Bjorn

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Convene stakeholders to establish consistent definitions in language and categories of credentials.
 - » Strengthen standards of outcomes transparency to students and employers.
 - » Engage with efforts already underway to build data systems and connect them with policymaking around high-quality NDC experiences.
 - » Support and study public funding models and quality frameworks, and consider ways to extend current NDC quality measurement efforts to include providers outside the public 2-year and 4-year institutional sector.
 - » Tailor quality definitions and approaches to stakeholder needs.
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Executive Summary

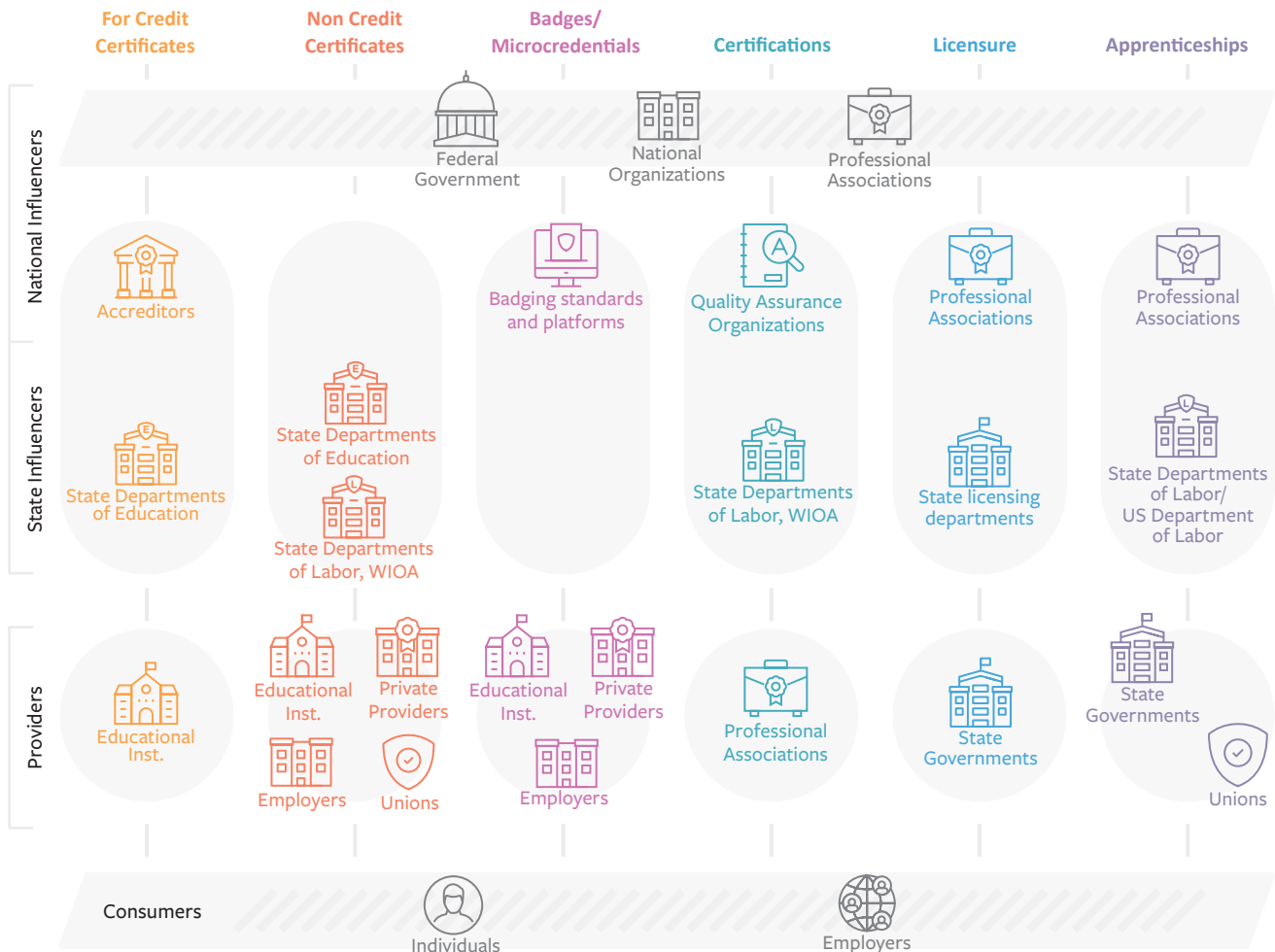
Despite increasing demand for non-degree credentials (NDCs) among students and employers, there remains no widely accepted system for measuring NDC quality. Many organizations are working toward building a shared system of quality. Rutgers' Education and Employment Research Center (EERC) conducted a landscape scan to document the efforts of these organizations and identify opportunities to foster the development of the non-degree credential quality ecosystem.

Our examination focused on organizations that work at the national level, including those promoting transparency, quality-assurance bodies, professional associations, accreditors, state government actors, and others. We anticipate this research will provide the field with a more comprehensive understanding of NDC quality efforts. Once stakeholders understand how variations in quality measurement serve particular goals, we can better understand how all our efforts may complement each other to build a more robust and effective system to promote quality.

Definitions and the Quality Ecosystem

Each type of NDC is associated with its own unique emergent quality ecosystem. **Certificates** are awarded by institutions. Quality influencers include state departments of education and labor, as well as national groups like the American National Standards Institute’s National Accreditation Board (ANAB) and the Institute for Credentialing Excellence’s (ICE) 1100 Standards. **Certifications** are determined and awarded by industry for the demonstration of a specified set of skills. Key influencers included ANAB, the ICE, the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, and state departments of education and labor. **Licenses** are awarded for the demonstration of skills in a specific occupation by a governmental agency. Employers influence the content of licenses, as do professional associations and occupational groups. **Apprenticeships** are awarded after completion of a structured educational program and work-based learning experience. Key influencers include Department government agencies, industry and occupational groups, unions, and professional associations. **Badges and microcredentials** are awarded for completion of a short program of study or demonstration of a targeted set of skills; typically include digital component. This is an emerging category, with standards and policies still in development. Key quality influencers include badging platforms and state departments of education and labor. Figure 1 illustrates the way these broad emergent ecosystems across NDC types, as well as influences that apply across these.

FIGURE 1. NDC Quality Ecosystem by NDC Type



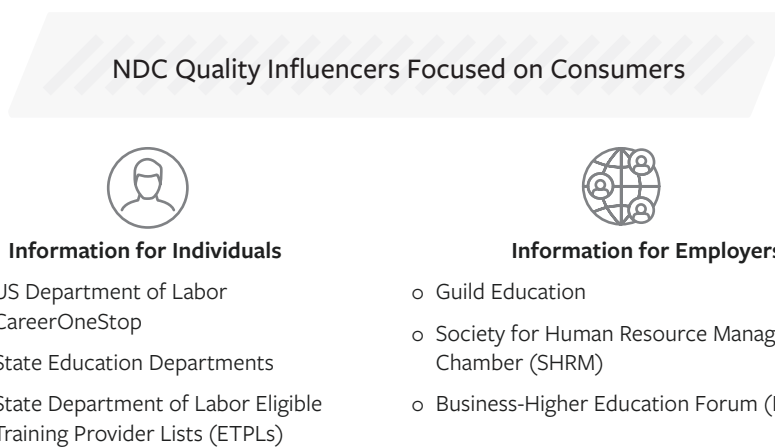
National-level influencers

In this section we report on our analysis of national organizations influencing the NDC quality ecosystem, organized by the three groups of NDC quality stakeholders they set out to engage: consumers, providers and states. Figures 2–4 below provide a more detailed summary of these various influencers by their stakeholder group.

Organizations seek to influence NDC consumers

The two main groups of consumers are individuals (credential seekers and holders) and employers. Quality influencers are most likely to support consumers by providing information about NDCs through disclosure-based transparency efforts aimed at informing consumers' choices.

FIGURE 2. NDC Quality Influencers Targeted at Consumers



Organizations seek to influence NDC providers



Educational institutions represent the largest sector of NDC providers. Key quality influencers of institutions employ three primary approaches: general reforms to practice focused on labor market alignment, real-world relevance, and outcomes; reforms to include competency-based education and credit for prior learning so that learners' credentials are aligned with skills and competencies valued by employers; and strengthening quality assurance and evaluation in program accreditation and standards.



Private providers assist students in preparing for NDCS but are not fully categorized as educational institutions, e.g., bootcamps, proprietary training schools, some online providers, and emergent corporate actors. Key quality influencers emphasize norm setting through the development of quality-assurance frameworks and rubrics for credential design.



Professional associations award certifications. Influencer organizations in this sector work primarily by norm setting and capacity building. Their approach emphasizes industry best practices, and adherence to standards. Notably, some of these organizations set international standards, not just national ones.

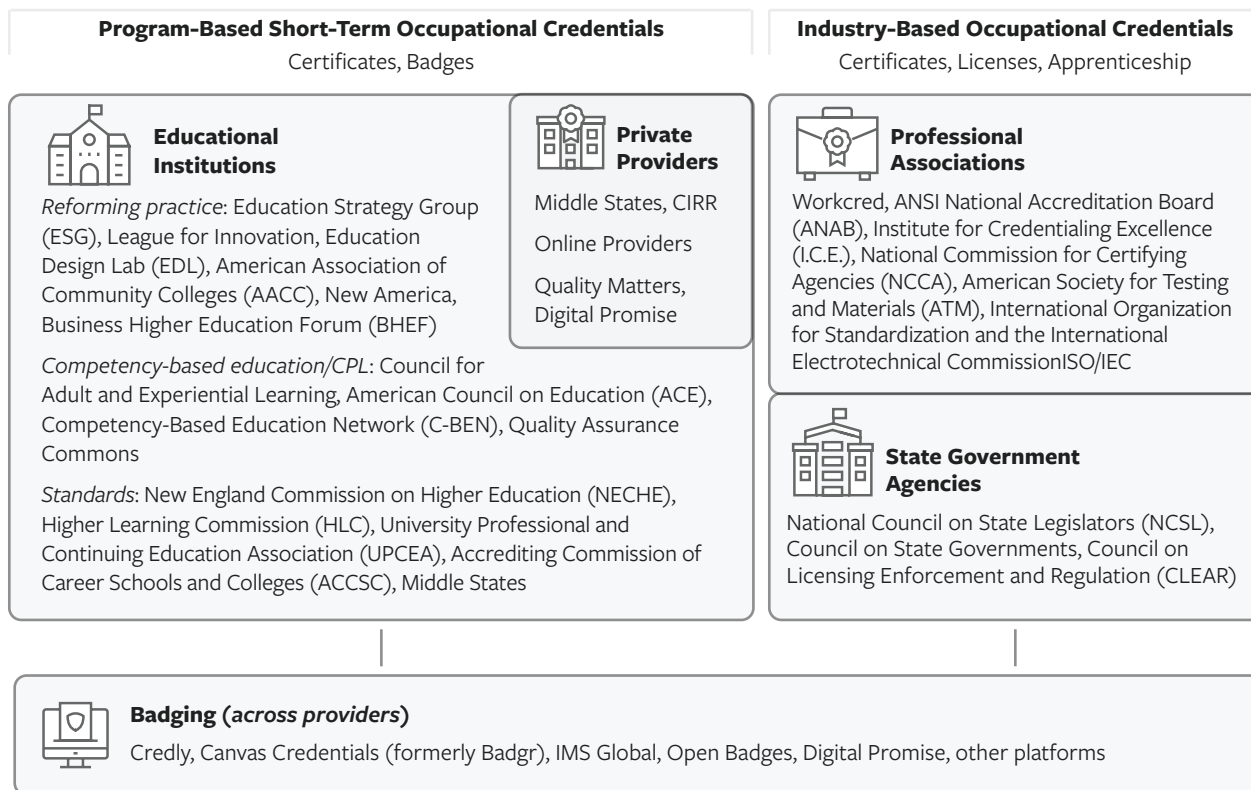


State government agencies issue licenses. One leading quality influencer organizations in this space is the National Conference of State Legislatures, Occupational Licensing Consortium, which sets new norms by helping stages improve their understanding and practices regarding licensure.



Badges exist across providers and have a unique set of dedicated organizations seeking to influence their quality. Badging platforms establish ways to capture and reflect new standards through their digital credentialing platform and by pursuing transparency to both learners and employers.

FIGURE 3. NDC Quality Influencers Targeted at Providers



Organizations seek to influence states

State governments have the latent potential to provide structure to guide NDC quality efforts across a broad range of providers. Recognizing this, many national organizations have centered efforts on working with states to develop and refine NDC quality systems. These undertakings help states develop transparency efforts, norm-setting processes, and policies concerning NDCs. However, state-level funding constraints may limit the role of NDC quality influencers to narrow programs or certain institutions.

FIGURE 4. NDC Quality Influencers Targeted at States



Standards: National Skills Coalition (NSC), New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE), Quality Assurance Commons (QAC), Digital Promise (DP), Education Strategy Group (ESG)

Reforming Practice: Advance CTE, C-BEN, NGA, SHEEO

Perspectives of national influencers

We gathered perspectives of leaders from national organizations on the NDC ecosystem to identify opportunities and gaps in existing knowledge about NDCs and NDC quality, and grouped their responses thematically.

- » Respondents see the need for increased coordination and collaboration among NDC quality influencers and their activities. Priority should be placed on figuring out ways for various actors to collaborate productively as well as coordinating such collaborations.
- » States are viewed as a locus of activity and coordination. Respondents proposed regional convenings across states. Since NDCs are not systematically covered by federal oversight, attention falls to the state to ensure quality and protect consumers.
- » Respondents see the need for uniformity in the language, categories, and meaning of credentials. The language of NDCs is inconsistent and needs to be formalized to support the clear discussion and usage of NDCs. In addition, the taxonomy of NDCs must be clarified such that the diverse range of credentials can be efficiently organized.
- » Lack of data is prevalent and the need for better data systems is urgent. The extent to which data systems are informed by quality standards is limited and requires examination. It's essential to build out data systems at the state level and across states such that state-level data systems can connect and work together.
- » Respondents identified challenges in setting quality standards and thresholds. Most notably, what constitutes quality remains under dispute.
- » Stakeholders should promote equity rather than inhibiting access. It is essential to ensure that NDC quality metrics do not further marginalize historically disadvantaged groups.
- » Provider-level technical assistance is required to build on existing activity. NDC providers need to share real models and expertise, making technical assistance available when necessary to enable institutions to adopt quality NDC programming.
- » Funding for NDCs is imperative for development of sustainable funding models, with broad stakeholder engagement and possibly performance-based components.

Recommendations

- » Philanthropic organizations should support convenings and networks, including convening key representatives by function, promoting cross-group engagement opportunities, and emboldening stakeholders to collaborate form foundational definitions in language and categories of credentials.
- » Accreditors and states should support and reinforce standards of transparency to consumers, and promote employer engagement by convening employers and educational institutions through existing advisory boards.
- » Funders and policymakers should engage with existing efforts to build data systems and connect them with quality discussions; and support cross-cutting values in the establishment of quality standards that promote equity.

- » States should support and study funding models and quality frameworks; and consider ways to extend current NDC quality efforts to include more providers, including those not currently included in public governance.
- » Researchers should focus on understanding how information is used by NDC consumers and how providers can communicate their key data points.
- » National organizations should share examples of NDC use that demonstrate how NDCs are used among employers; and support technical assistance to states and providers.

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