



RUTGERS EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH CENTER

NON-DEGREE CREDENTIAL QUALITY:
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE MEASUREMENT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MICHELLE VAN NOY
HEATHER MCKAY
SUZANNE MICHAEL

JULY 2019

RUTGERS
School of Management
and Labor Relations

Janice H. Levin Building
94 Rockefeller Road
Piscataway, New Jersey 08854
smlr.rutgers.edu/eerc

PREPARED FOR LUMINA FOUNDATION

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO GUIDE MEASUREMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Making sense of the increasingly crowded market of non-degree credentials can be a challenge. These credentials include a wide range of awards, including noncredit and credit certificates, industry certifications, occupational licensure, and apprenticeships, as well as badges and other newly emerging microcredentials. These awards are offered by educational institutions, private training providers, industry associations, unions, and others. Over one quarter of US adults have some type of non-degree credential according to a recent survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics. In the increasingly crowded credential marketplace, there is little to guide how individuals, policymakers, employers, and educational institutions evaluate the quality of non-degree credentials. A system is needed to measure quality and ensure these credentials do not offer false promises, particularly to individuals from marginalized groups who may be particularly drawn to non-degree credentials for their potential to lead to employment and rewarding career pathways. This paper outlines a broad framework to guide the development of standards and processes to evaluate the quality of non-degree credentials. It is intentionally broad to allow stakeholders to identify those elements that are most essential for their purposes, while keeping a few key guidelines in mind.

Based on the existing research literature, we offer a broad definition of non-degree credential quality. This definition includes four key elements: credential design, demonstrated competencies, market processes, and outcomes of value.

Credential design encompasses the attributes that define the credential in terms of its content, how it is attained, and how it can be used – factors usually decided by the credential grantor. These attributes can be measured from the credential itself and include the relevance of its competencies; instructional processes and/or assessment processes; stackability and portability; transparency; and accessibility and affordability.

Demonstrated competencies are the skills and knowledge that the individual credential holder possesses after attaining the credentials. This element refers to the measurement of the actual competencies the individual credential holder possesses.

Market processes are the ways that a credential comes to be recognized and have currency in the world, based on the competencies it marks. This includes transparency initiatives; awareness of the credential and its grantor; endorsements and validations; state regulations; employer hiring policies and practices; and educational institutions' recognition of learning. These market processes are often overlooked but are essential to the review, assurance, and promotion of quality credentials.

Outcomes of value are the tangible benefits to possessing the credential for individuals and society. For individuals, these include educational, employment, and social outcomes; for society, these include employer outcomes and broader societal outcomes.

Figure 1 provides a model that illustrates these elements of quality for non-degree credentials. Although data on non-degree credentials are currently limited, ongoing efforts to develop systems to measure quality would do well to consider these broad elements. They can offer a guide to help conceptualize more comprehensive data collection efforts on non-degree credential quality.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF NON-DEGREE CREDENTIAL QUALITY

CREDENTIAL DESIGN

- Content relevance
- Instructional process
- Assessment process
- Stackability and portability
- Transparency
- Accessibility and affordability

COMPETENCIES

- Demonstrated competencies including general knowledge, specialized skills, personal skills and social skills

MARKET PROCESSES

- Awareness of credential and/or credential granter
- Endorsements and validations
- Organizational policies and practices
- State regulations
- Employer hiring policies and practices
- Educational institutions' recognition of learning

OUTCOMES

INDIVIDUAL

EMPLOYMENT

- Job attainment
- Wage gains
- Promotion
- Retention

EDUCATIONAL

- Stacking of additional credentials
- Completion of academic degree(s)

SOCIAL

- Improved health and well-being
- Greater civic involvement
- Intergenerational benefits

SOCIETAL

EMPLOYER

- Employee pipeline
- Better retention
- Higher skills and productivity
- Increased diversity

SOCIETY

- Better public safety
- Increased efficiency
- Reduced inequality
- More civic engagement

We provide a few suggestions for how the framework can help in the development of quality measures for non-degree credentials. The quality elements and potential indicators (see full report) provide a guide for the development of measurement systems. Additionally, the quality elements can be used as diagnostic tools to identify weaknesses in credentials and to figure out ways to improve them. Further, it is important to keep in mind that the quality of a non-degree credential exists in relationship to its goals, e.g., whether the credential aims to provide specific skills or occupational entry. Likewise, credentials exist in a context that includes the influence of industry and occupational practices as well as geographic regions. Most importantly, throughout all of these considerations, it is essential to consider the implications for equity.

We offer a few recommendations for policy and practice to improve the measurement of non-degree credential quality. These include the following:

- **Create an awareness of non-degree credential quality and how to measure it.** Stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, and policymakers alike, should engage in conversations about non-degree credentials to better understand the competencies they represent and how they can be better used to ensure equity.
- **Collect better information on non-degree credential quality and outcomes.** Data on non-degree credentials have been limited but are increasing with recent national survey efforts and state data tracking systems. While these data sources are still emergent, they offer the possibility of better data.
- **Develop and promote systems to assess non-degree credential quality.** Few established systems are in place to assess non-degree credential quality, but some new efforts are emerging. These include assessments by educational institutions to evaluate credit equivalency and quality assessment efforts by national organizations that seek to assess competencies and generally oversee quality. Further, some states have begun to report data on non-degree credential outcomes.
- **Promote and understand the use of data on non-degree credential quality.** Most important is that stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, and policymakers, use the available data to guide decisions about non-degree credentials, understand how to improve their use, and ensure equity throughout the process.