

Micro-Credentials and the Future of Higher Education

Report on the CHEC Webinar

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Background and purpose

On 12 June 2026, the Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) hosted the webinar Micro-Credentials and the Future of Higher Education as the first follow-up conversation emerging from the HE on TRIAL initiative. The webinar was positioned as a timely exploration of how micro-credentials can support flexible learning pathways, skills development and the broader transformation of higher education. It brought together higher education leaders, academics, policymakers, quality assurance practitioners, industry stakeholders, students and lifelong learners.

The webinar responded to a growing challenge facing higher education: traditional qualifications remain fundamental, but on their own cannot always respond quickly enough to rapidly changing technologies, emerging occupations, skills mismatches and the increasing need for lifelong learning. The event therefore explored a central question: How can higher education create shorter, flexible and responsive learning opportunities without compromising academic quality, recognition and trust?

The discussion drew together the emerging South African policy direction, practical implementation experience from Mauritius and a broader international and regional perspective. The webinar was therefore not simply about the introduction of a new type of certificate, but about the potential role of micro-credentials in reshaping the relationship between universities, learners, industry and society.

Defining Micro-Credentials

The webinar used a broadly shared definition of a micro-credential (MC) as:

A record of focused learning achievement, based on a smaller volume of learning than a full qualification, which verifies what a learner knows, understands or can do. The learning is assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards and is quality assured. Micro-credentials provide specific knowledge, skills and competences in response to societal, personal, cultural or labour-market needs.

In the South African context, the definition was made more specific: a micro-credential is credit-bearing, located at a specific NQF level, awarded by a recognised higher education institution, quality assured, and capable of having standalone value or contributing to further learning through CAT, RPL and stackability.

The Mauritius presentation used a closely aligned definition, emphasising a smaller volume of learning, clearly defined learning outcomes, transparent assessment criteria, specific skills and competences, and agreed quality assurance standards.

A concise definition for the webinar report could therefore be:

Micro-credentials are short, focused, assessed and quality-assured learning achievements that certify specific knowledge, skills or competences and can provide standalone value or form part of flexible, stackable lifelong learning pathways.

Contributions to the webinar

The webinar featured Dr Whitfield Green, CEO of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa, and Professor Romeela Mohee, Commissioner of the Higher Education Commission of Mauritius. The discussion was moderated by Ms Elizabeth Colucci of OBREAL, who situated the two national experiences within broader international developments in flexible learning, recognition and higher education transformation.

Dr Green focused on the emerging South African approach to creating a quality-assured micro-credential ecosystem. His presentation highlighted the need for micro-credentials to become credible, assessed and recognised learning opportunities that complement the existing higher education qualifications system. The emerging South African approach envisages micro-credentials as credit-bearing learning at a specified NQF level, with clearly defined learning outcomes, valid assessment and the possibility of contributing to formal qualifications through Credit Accumulation and Transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning.

A central feature of the proposed South African model is the balance between credibility and agility. Institutions would carry substantial responsibility for internal quality assurance and academic approval, while external quality assurance would use a simplified accreditation process. This recognises that micro-credentials need to respond more rapidly than traditional qualification development processes while still retaining the trust of learners, employers and higher education institutions.

Professor Mohee presented the Mauritius experience as an example of moving deliberately from concept to framework, from framework to pilot, and from pilot to implementation. Mauritius followed a staged process involving baseline research, national and institutional consultation, development of a national framework and implementation blueprint, development of standards, academia–industry co-design and the piloting of six micro-credentials.

The Mauritius pilots were developed across areas including sustainable finance and ESG, food and beverage skills, AI automation for banking professionals, nursing, talent acquisition and cybersecurity. This practical experimentation demonstrated the importance of employer involvement, authentic

assessment, flexible delivery, quality assurance, learner support and clear mechanisms for recognition and stackability.

Ms Colucci connected these perspectives to the wider international movement towards modular, portable and flexible learning. Her contribution reinforced the need to avoid a false choice between regulation and innovation. The challenge is rather to design systems in which quality assurance enables innovation and in which collaboration across institutions, sectors and countries creates new educational opportunities.

Themes and outcomes

The webinar demonstrated a growing consensus that higher education needs to move from thinking only in terms of individual qualifications towards the creation of a broader learning and credential ecosystem. Such an ecosystem would allow learners to enter, leave and return to education at different points in their lives, accumulate recognised learning and combine formal education, workplace learning and prior experience in more flexible ways.

Several important outcomes emerged¹:

- Micro-credentials should complement, not replace, formal qualifications. Their value lies in creating additional pathways into, through and alongside higher education.
- Quality assurance and recognition are essential. Without credible assessment, transparent standards and recognised certification, micro-credentials risk becoming little more than disconnected short courses.
- Stackability is a critical design principle. Wherever appropriate, micro-credentials should connect to other micro-credentials, professional development pathways and larger qualifications.
- Industry and societal engagement must begin at the design stage. Micro-credentials should respond to demonstrable needs rather than simply repackaging existing university content.
- Authentic assessment matters. Assessment should demonstrate the learner's ability to apply knowledge and skills in meaningful professional or societal contexts.
- Access and social justice must remain central. Flexible learning should expand opportunity for working adults, unemployed youth and learners who cannot participate in conventional full-time programmes.
- Collaboration presents a major opportunity. Micro-credentials could enable more rapid university–industry, inter-university, regional and international collaboration than is often possible through the development of full joint qualifications.

What should higher education institutions do now?

The webinar suggested that institutions should not wait for micro-credentials to become a fully mature system before beginning institutional preparation. Universities should begin by reviewing their existing short-course portfolios and distinguishing between non-credit-bearing professional development activities and offerings that could potentially be developed into formal, assessed and credit-bearing micro-credentials.

Institutions should also identify priority areas where rapid skills development is required and establish co-design mechanisms with industry, professional bodies, government and communities. Rather than

¹ See Annexure

beginning with the question, “*What short courses can we offer?*”, institutions should ask: “What capabilities are needed, by whom, and what is the most appropriate learning pathway to develop them?”

Universities will also need institutional frameworks covering governance, academic approval, NQF alignment, credit value, assessment, moderation, certification, RPL, CAT, stackability, learner support, digital certification and periodic review. The webinar made clear that micro-credentials cannot simply be placed at the margins of institutional continuing education activity; where they are credit-bearing and formally recognised, they become part of the academic project.

Regional significance

The discussion has relevance for the Southern African higher education region. Micro-credentials could provide an important mechanism for responding collaboratively to shared regional priorities, including digital transformation, artificial intelligence, climate change, renewable energy, entrepreneurship, health systems, food security and other emerging skills needs.

Their relatively focused scope could also create opportunities for universities across the SADC region to co-design learning, share expertise, jointly develop content and explore mechanisms for cross-border recognition. In this respect, micro-credentials may offer a practical route towards stronger regional higher education collaboration and greater mobility of learning.

Conclusion

The webinar concluded that micro-credentials should be understood as part of the broader transformation of higher education rather than as a passing educational trend. Their potential lies in connecting quality with agility, learning with work, universities with society, and individual learning experiences with lifelong educational pathways.

Four principles emerged as particularly important for future development: *quality and credibility; flexibility and innovation; collaboration and co-creation; and access and social inclusion.*



The key message from the webinar was clear: the question is no longer whether micro-credentials will form part of the future higher education landscape, but how institutions and systems will design them in ways that are credible, connected, inclusive and genuinely responsive to the needs of learners and society.

Annexure. Micro-credential outcomes

The webinar highlighted a growing international consensus that micro-credentials are becoming a critical mechanism for transforming higher education, enabling more flexible, responsive, inclusive and lifelong learning pathways. Three overarching outcomes emerged from the presentations and discussions.

1. Shift from qualification systems to learning and credential ecosystems

Traditional qualification-based systems alone are no longer sufficient to meet the demands of rapidly changing societies and economies. Micro-credentials provide an opportunity to create more flexible learning pathways that complement formal qualifications through:

- Lifelong learning opportunities;
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL);
- Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT);
- Flexible entry and exit points;
- Continuous upskilling and reskilling.

The future of higher education lies in building integrated credential ecosystems that connect formal, non-formal and workplace learning.

2. Quality Assurance and recognition are essential

A central outcome was that micro-credentials must be credible, recognised and quality assured if they are to gain the trust of learners, employers and institutions.

There was broad agreement that micro-credentials should:

- Be credit-bearing;
- Include valid assessment;
- Align with National Qualifications Frameworks;
- Be quality assured through appropriate internal and external mechanisms;
- Support stackability into larger qualifications.

At the same time, quality assurance systems should remain sufficiently agile to enable innovation and rapid responsiveness to emerging needs.

3. Stackability creates new learning pathways

One of the strongest themes was the importance of stackable learning. Micro-credentials should not exist as isolated learning experiences but should contribute towards:

- Certificates;
- Diplomas;
- Degrees;

- Professional development pathways;
- TVET-to-higher-education articulation routes.

This creates more learner-centred educational journeys and supports lifelong learning across different stages of a person's career.

4. Industry engagement and co-creation are critical

The webinar reinforced that micro-credentials are most effective when developed in partnership with employers and industry. Successful micro-credentials should:

- Address real workforce needs;
- Respond to emerging skills shortages;
- Be co-designed with industry partners;
- Include workplace-based learning and authentic assessment;
- Improve graduate employability and workforce readiness.

The Mauritius experience demonstrated the value of university-industry partnerships in developing relevant and responsive micro-credentials.

5. Micro-credentials can advance access, inclusion and social justice

A particularly important outcome from the South African perspective was the role of micro-credentials in broadening educational opportunity. Micro-credentials can:

- Expand access to learning;
- Support unemployed youth;
- Provide alternative pathways into higher education;
- Enable participation by working adults;
- Reduce barriers to lifelong learning.

Participants emphasised that affordability and accessibility should remain central design principles.

6. Collaboration is the next frontier

The discussion highlighted significant opportunities for collaboration through micro-credentials, including:

- University–industry partnerships;
- University–university collaboration;
- Regional collaboration across SADC;
- International and cross-border recognition arrangements.

Because micro-credentials are smaller and more flexible than full qualifications, they may offer a practical mechanism for accelerating curriculum co-creation and regional harmonisation.

7. Micro-credentials support Higher Education transformation

The webinar positioned micro-credentials not simply as a new form of certification but as part of a broader transformation agenda in higher education. They have the potential to:

- Strengthen responsiveness to labour market needs;
- Support digital and AI-driven economies;
- Enhance workforce development;
- Promote lifelong learning;
- Foster innovation and collaboration;
- Reposition universities as active partners in societal and economic development.

The webinar concluded that micro-credentials represent a strategic opportunity to reimagine higher education for the future. Their successful implementation will depend on balancing four key principles:

1. Quality and credibility
2. Flexibility and innovation
3. Collaboration and co-creation
4. Access and social inclusion

The discussions demonstrated that micro-credentials are evolving from a niche innovation into an important component of future higher education systems, capable of connecting universities, industry, governments and learners through flexible, recognised and lifelong learning pathways.