

The Institutional Plateau In Microcredentialia Adoption: A Hybrid Review Of Peer-Reviewed Evidence And Practitioner Reports In Higher Education

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Support - Data analysis.

Review Stage at time of this submission - Data analysis.

Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 10 June 2026 and was last updated on 10 June 2026.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective Population: higher-education institutions and systems. Concept: the adoption, integration, and institutionalisation of micro-credentials and digital badges. Context: higher education worldwide. Objectives: (1) to characterise how micro-credential adoption in higher education is represented across the peer-reviewed and the practitioner/policy literature; (2) to determine the extent to which the evidence documents an institutional plateau or stalling in adoption; and (3) to compare the two evidence streams across six analytical dimensions (adoption & offering; purposes & motivations; integration mechanisms; enabling conditions; barriers & constraints; outcomes & evidence of value).

Background Micro-credentials and digital badges have expanded rapidly in higher education as instruments for flexible, skills-oriented, and lifelong learning. Policy bodies and providers have promoted them as a means of widening access

and aligning education with labour-market needs. Recent practitioner survey data, however, suggest that while individual engagement with credential innovation continues to rise, institutional adoption may have levelled off. The scholarly literature has grown quickly but unevenly, concentrating on purposes and enabling conditions while paying limited attention to measured adoption and outcomes. No prior synthesis has examined this apparent "institutional plateau" by reading the peer-reviewed and practitioner/policy evidence together.

Rationale There is a mismatch between where the adoption question is documented (practitioner and policy reports) and where scholarly attention is concentrated (purposes, motivations, barriers). This review maps both streams against a common six-dimension framework to locate what is known, what is asserted but unmeasured, and where the evidence on institutional adoption, and any plateau, is thin. Bringing the two literatures into a single comparative frame supports a clearer

research agenda and informs institutional decision-making.

METHODS

Strategy of data synthesis Electronic databases: Scopus, ERIC, Lens.org, and Web of Science, searched on [datum pretrage]. Search terms combined micro-credential terminology with higher-education terms, e.g. ("micro-credential*" OR "microcredential*" OR "digital badge*" OR "open badge*") AND ("higher education" OR universit* OR college*). [ubaci tačan string]. The practitioner/policy stream was identified through targeted searching of key organisations (UPCEA, OECD, EU, MICROBOL, Coursera, Australian Government). Synthesis is narrative and tabular: each source is coded Yes/Partial/No on six dimensions; frequencies are tabulated per dimension and per stream; studies are grouped into thematic clusters; and the two streams are compared directly, alongside a geographic distribution.

Eligibility criteria Participants/sources: peer-reviewed empirical (qualitative, quantitative, mixed), conceptual, and case-study articles, plus practitioner and policy reports. Concept: adoption, integration, purposes, enabling conditions, barriers, and outcomes of micro-credentials/digital badges. Context: higher education. Inclusion: English-language; [period]; substantive focus on micro-credentials in HE. Exclusion: ineligible publication types (dissertations, conference papers, book chapters); non-higher-education contexts; sources where micro-credentials are not a substantive focus; digital badges examined only in a non-credentialing capacity; duplicate/overlapping datasets.

Source of evidence screening and selection Records were exported and deduplicated, then screened in two stages following PRISMA 2020: (1) title/abstract screening against the eligibility criteria, and (2) full-text assessment of retained records. Screening and coding were performed by the full author team, divided into three groups of three; each source was read independently within its group. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, with unresolved cases escalated to the wider team. The flow of records is reported in a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Data management Search results were exported to a reference manager and to a master spreadsheet, where duplicates were removed. A structured extraction table captured, for each

source, bibliographic details, study/report type, context, the six dimension codings (Yes/Partial/No), and three summary flags (plateau signal, evidence strength, relevance). The agreed values were entered into the master extraction table, which served as the single source of truth for synthesis.

Reporting results / Analysis of the evidence

Each source was coded against the six-dimension framework. Frequencies and percentages of Yes/Partial/No codings were computed per dimension and separately for the peer-reviewed and practitioner/policy streams. Sources were grouped into thematic clusters, and evidence strength was rated (Strong/Moderate/Weak/Assertion-only). Analysis foregrounds two cross-cutting comparisons: between the two streams, and across geographic distribution.

Presentation of the results

Results will be presented as: a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram; two coding matrices (peer-reviewed corpus; practitioner/policy corpus) with +/-/- coding; a geographic-distribution table; a dimension-frequency table (Yes/Partial/No per dimension); and a narrative synthesis organised by thematic cluster and by the two-stream comparison.

Language restriction Yes - only English-language sources were included.

Country(ies) involved Serbia - all authors.

Other relevant information Dual-stream (hybrid) design combining peer-reviewed literature with practitioner/policy reports; reported per PRISMA 2020 and the PRISMA-ScR extension.

Keywords micro-credentials; digital badges; higher education; institutional adoption; scoping review; PRISMA-ScR.

Dissemination plans Findings will be disseminated through publication in a peer-reviewed journal (MDPI Education Sciences) and may be shared via institutional repositories and academic conferences.

Contributions of each author

Author 1 - Jovana Vitošević - Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, investigation (coding), and writing of the original draft.

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