

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND MICRO-CREDENTIALS

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PEQAB is charged with the responsibility of responding to a need to strengthen quality assurance for micro-credentials offered by Ontario public colleges and universities. Its draft approach, released for consultation, is a substantial document that addresses some of the concerns within the sector, both from employers and from those who have paid for and taken micro-credentials from an Ontario institution.

The report is timely. Depending on the source being consulted, there are between 1,503 and 1,895 micro-credentials, and more when one counts those described as micro-credentials on each public post-secondary website. Consistent reporting of the actual number of accessible micro-credentials seems to be a challenge. The landscape in Ontario is quite diverse if one considers that some of the 555 private career colleges in the province also offer micro-credentials. Some of these credentials are eligible for OSAP support. However, private career colleges don't operate under the umbrella of a provincially recognized External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA). This is also true of industry associations, employers (Microsoft, Siemens, and Amazon Web Services, for example, all have their own competency-based certification programs), professional associations, LinkedIn, and MOOC providers as well as non-profit organizations seeking to offer short forms of learning.

There is a clear need for consistency in offerings from both the public and private sectors.

What are the Quality Challenges with Micro-Credentials?

The growing literature and analysis of emerging micro-credentials worldwide suggest 10 major quality challenges that must be addressed:

1. **Transparency:** Ensure that information about micro-credentials, including quality assurance processes and assessment methods, is transparent and accessible to learners and stakeholders. Create a clear set of guidelines and ensure adherence.
2. **Collaboration with peers and industry:** Encourage collaboration among learners, educators, and industry partners to ensure micro-credentials are relevant and valuable.
3. **Competency measurement:** Ensure micro-credentials measure competency rather than time spent learning or more formal academic assessments. There is a need to strengthen the direct assessment of competencies and capabilities when the micro-credential is focused on work-related skills.
4. **Inclusiveness:** Ensure micro-credentials are appropriate for a range of learners with different socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

5. **Time requirements:** Ensure there is consistency between micro-credentials in the same price range regarding their duration. Some take just a few hours to complete, and some take 100 hours or more.
6. **Consistency in quality assurance processes:** Ensure micro-credentials are subject to the same internal and external processes as other programs and qualifications, modified as appropriate.
7. **Employer and learner clarity:** Address the confusion among employers, institutions and learners regarding the value and recognition of micro-credentials. Not everyone understands the place of micro-credentials in the growing and complex adult learning ecosystem — or their value when it comes to hiring.
8. **Stakeholder alignment:** Align the expectations and needs of various stakeholders, including learners, education institutions, employers, and government bodies. Micro-credentials, by their nature, must meet competing stakeholder expectations. The process for reconciling these expectations must be clear.
9. **Integration with traditional education systems:** Address questions about the applicability, quality assurance and inclusion of micro-credentials in formal education settings. This is especially important for modular micro-credentials that automatically transfer into diploma or degree programs, including graduate degrees.
10. **Agility in education offerings:** Ensure micro-credentials can adapt to meet changing market demands and expand access to learners beyond traditional on-campus settings.

How Well Does PEQAB Address these Challenges?

The proposal from PEQAB addresses each of these concerns directly, as the table below shows.

This analysis is based on the key proposal that to gain control of a complex, messy marketplace, public colleges and universities should seek to gain an official trademark of quality and reliability known as the Ontario Micro-Credential (OMC), which would be based on the guidelines established in this document and summarized in the table.

The OMC would only be available to public colleges and universities — all others offering micro-credentials and seeking OMC status would need to partner with an institution to make this possible.

However, if private career colleges or a professional body were able to demonstrate suitable quality assurance processes similar to those used by the institutions and PEQAB, they would then be able to apply directly for OMC status.

It must be made clear that having a micro-credential OMC-designated is an option, not a requirement. This means there will, in fact, be two distinct tracks for micro-credentials: an “open for all” track and an OMC track.

This paper focuses on the OMC track.

Quality Concern	PEQAB's Response
Transparency	The assumption is that the quality assurance frameworks used by institutions and PEQAB are public resources and that if the approval of new programs (including micro-credentials) goes to the college board or university senate (or equivalent), then there is a strong degree of transparency.
Collaboration with industry	Given the Government of Ontario's intention in funding micro-credentials was to provide a fast-track route for reskilling,

	upskilling and skill development, industry collaboration — especially in assessment — is key. The report is largely silent on the mechanisms and rubrics by which OMC will seek to ensure that this is the case.
Competency Measurement	The report states: “Institutions already have expertise in content, learning outcome articulation, curriculum and assessment design in the disciplines and qualifications they provide. Applying this knowledge to a shorter program should be feasible. Further, institutions have decades of expertise in mapping of achieved competencies to an academic level as reflected on the OQF. Similarly, they will exercise their already existing judgment to how many instructional hours are needed to achieve a specific competency.”
Time Requirement	Currently, micro-credentials vary in duration and time on task. An OMC micro-credential would normally consist of 12–40 hours of teaching and learning.
Consistency	To ensure consistency, the proposal is that a micro-credential should be aligned with one of six distinct OMC qualifications that can be awarded within the scope of the framework, each aligning with one primary category of qualification within a certificate, apprenticeship, diploma, post-diploma certificate (i.e., Ontario College graduate certificate), bachelor’s degree and master’s degree.
Market confusion	The proposal is to reduce market confusion by creating a protected trademark: the OMC. Only courses that have been through the quality assurance programs within the college or university will be able to carry this mark. Nothing in the PEQAB proposal seeks to rationalize, cull or otherwise modify existing offerings.
Stakeholder Alignment	Stakeholder alignment would be undertaken by each institution offering a micro-credential under the OMC banner. Given that public colleges and universities would be the only providers (at least initially), the bringing together of stakeholders would be their concern.
Integration	There are two kinds of integration proposed here. The first is the integration of quality assurance processes. The proposal is that institutional quality assurance processes can be modified and simplified for micro-credentials compared to that for traditional programming. The external quality assurance agencies will also have streamlined processes to verify that micro-credentials are effectively quality assured by an IQAP. The second is a process for recognition of a micro-credential as part of a long-form credential such as a diploma or degree. Institutions have established processes to determine academic credit for prior learning obtained within or outside of the classroom. They will be able to assess OMCs on the same basis as other types of credit.
Agility	Because quality assurance will largely be an internal matter and the OMC designation will be protected through both trademarks and protocols, there is nothing stopping an institution fast-tracking a new micro-credential or adapting an existing one for compliance to OMC and to meet changing market needs.

FIVE OBSERVATIONS:

1. Will the long-term impact of the OMC be to create a two-tier market that is even more complex?

PEQAB seems to have taken the view that the existing 1,503 to 1,859 micro-credentials are “out in the market” and more are likely to follow. Institutions, professional bodies, employers, private career colleges and others offer “products” of varying length, relevance, and quality in this space.

What PEQAB seeks to do with the OMC is to define quality-assured credentials and narrow who can offer them. This makes sense from a quality assurance point of view — [the existing micro-credentials are so varied in terms of length, quality, competencies, and employer support](#) that it would be impossible to impose a quality assurance framework on them.

It may also be necessary, given the rapid evolution of the micro-credential market, to link the OMC designation to when it was granted — for example, OMC 2023 makes explicit that the quality assurance was appropriate for that time. In fields like IT, where advances are occurring rapidly, it may be helpful for employers to know when the last rigorous review was undertaken.

However, from a market point of view it introduces another layer of complexity and sends another signal to potential students and employers. Will the long-term impact of the OMC be to create a two-tier, even more complex market?

2. Will the creation of the OMC dampen the design, development, and deployment of micro-credentials that exactly meet employer and market needs?

The suggestion in the paper is that public colleges and universities should be the brokers for all others wishing to offer micro-credentials because they have internal quality assurance processes and, for some activities, are also subject to external quality assurance processes.

All others that seek to offer an OMC approved micro-credential — including private colleges, professional associations such as the Chartered Accountants of Ontario and private corporates such as Amazon Web Services — must partner with a public college or university to do so. No doubt the institutions will seek financial compensation for quality assessment and seek the right to monitor implementation and performance, creating additional costs and processes.

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3. More is required on how competencies should be more directly assessed and how students’ performance can be captured.

The report has good suggestions with respect to a key issue: portability. In reality, this issue focuses on both the nature of competency assessment and the ways in which a student’s performance is captured and shared. Many Ontario institutions are now using MyCreds™ as an e-portfolio to capture student performance. But there is a need to take this further. As many [employers](#), including the [US Federal Government](#) and [several US states](#), focus more on what a person can do and less on credentials and qualifications, hiring decisions increasingly hinge

on audio, video and other evidence of competency. Attention must be paid to how competencies need to be more directly assessed and how students' performance can be captured. New technologies are available to support this work, such as [Valid-8](#) and [COMAEA](#).

4. There is little or no focus on some of the major providers of micro-credentials in Ontario such as out-of-province institutions and MOOC providers.

It is clear that some of the major providers of micro-credentials in Ontario — out-of-province institutions, MOOC providers and online program managers — would not be permitted to offer OMC-certified micro-credentials unless they did so through an Ontario public college or university. Given that MOOC providers and LinkedIn between them currently offer more than 2,000 micro-credentials or equivalent to Ontario residents, they will continue to offer them through the open market channel. We can expect this channel to grow faster than the OMC channel.

5. The real challenge will be to increase the demonstrated value of OMCs to employers.

Seeking to impose a quality assurance regime on an existing range of micro-credentials is a non-starter. The idea of a protected trademark — OMC — that can only be awarded to micro-credentials through the appropriate internal and external quality assurance processes is one of the few things that could be done. No doubt, many institutions will seek to apply the OMC to existing micro-credentials. The real challenge will be to increase their demonstrated value to employers.