

WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY GRADUATE STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

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# MICROCREDENTIALS AT LAURIER

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**TO:** Anthony (Tony) Vannelli, Provost and Vice-President: Academic  
Mary Wilson, Vice-Provost, Teaching and Learning

**FROM:** WLU Graduate Students' Association

The logo for the Graduate Students' Association (gsa) at Wilfrid Laurier University. It features the lowercase letters 'gsa' in a white, serif font. The letters are positioned between two horizontal white lines, one above and one below, which are slightly wider than the text.

## PURPOSE

As the post-secondary environment and workforce continue to adapt based on innovations, changing policy, and in response to employer demands, Wilfrid Laurier University is in a unique place to respond to these needs. As microcredentials and their implementation is in the process of being conceptualized at Laurier, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) would like to highlight their feedback and recommendations to ensure the perspective of graduate students is incorporated in future discussion and implementation of microcredentials.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the Government of Ontario announced a \$59.5 million investment over three years to support micro-credentials. The origins of the term date back to as early as 2011 with the development of skills-based digital badges in the US with Mozilla Foundation's Open Badges Infrastructure. These rely on a common technical standard to be transferable across settings.

One of the challenges of conceptualizing microcredentials is the term being used inconsistently without an agreed upon definition across the post-secondary sector. [eCampusOntario](#) which represents 48 of Ontario's publicly assisted postsecondary institutions including Wilfrid Laurier University released a research report, [Micro-certifications: Policy and Regulatory Context in Ontario](#) in February 2020. The report bases their definition of microcredentials from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Australia as:

***“Micro-credentials certify an individual's achievements in specific skills and differ from traditional education credentials, such as degrees and diplomas, in that they are shorter, can be personalized and provide distinctive value and relevance in the changing world of work.”***

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), an agency of the Government of Ontario issued a report in May 2021, [Making Sense of Microcredentials](#) further simplifying the term as:

***“A microcredential is a representation of learning, awarded for completion of a short program that is focused on a discrete set of competencies (i.e., skills, knowledge, attributes), and is sometimes related to other credentials.”***

The Graduate Students' Association (GSA) supports the research in defining microcredentials as defined above with a focus on student success, self-improvement, and transition to employment opportunities. The report on the Credential Innovation Framework which was approved at the university Senate meeting on May 19, 2021 highlights the [research](#) indicating soft skills as desirable by prospective employers. These include communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, complex thinking, and sales/client services. As the university develops its microcredential framework with a focus on these skills, the GSA would like to highlight that we continue to offer programming and experiential learning opportunities for graduate students to further develop these skills. These opportunities should be a consideration for earning non-credit credentials relevant to a student's field of study. Examples of these include:

- Interdisciplinary Research Events/Conferences and Showcases allowing graduate students to share their research projects, thesis, case competitions and more
- Professional Development Workshops in collaboration with Laurier partner departments through ASPIRE programming and other collaborations in the areas of wellness, equity, diversity and inclusion.

### SCOPE

The [Ontario Microcredentials Challenge Fund](#) provides \$15 million to accelerate the development of micro-credentials and expand program offerings. As microcredentials continue to be developed and evolve at Laurier and within the broader post-secondary sector, the GSA would like to ensure it meets standards relevant to needs of graduate students. These include principles established by eCampus Ontario:

- **Relevance:** to be issued for competencies relevant to the labour market
- **Verifiability:** ensuring all issued micro-credentials are verifiable across the sector
- **Ownership:** once issued, are the property of the earner i.e., students
- **Extensibility:** designed to facilitate continuation pathways of lifelong learning

Furthermore, as outlined by the research report by HEQCO, the GSA believes that Laurier should prioritize designing of innovative, and focused content targeted towards current and new students and avoid deconstruction of current curriculum, prioritize competency-based education rather than to replace traditional programs which exist at Laurier. This has been recognized in Laurier's Credential Innovation Framework as the intended goal is to "advance the development of professionally focused training and learning opportunities that complement, rather than replicate the university's core programmatic offerings."

## CONCERNS

In alignment with GSA's Strategic Plan 2021-2023, we continue to seek opportunities in University conversations relating to the graduate student experience including prioritizing funding concerns faced by graduate students. This includes helping remove financial barriers for students as they pursue their education. As microcredentials continue to be finalized, it is imperative that the University take an evidence-based approach in structuring the funding components considering the policy and regulatory context for microcredentials as mentioned in the [report](#) commissioned for eCampus Ontario as guidance for universities.

For newly developed microcredentials which may be part of a current ministry-funded program which the student is registered in, the student's tuition fee for the program would cover the microcredential as they should not be charged additional tuition or see an increase to their tuition fees (beyond what is allowed as per the Tuition Fee Framework and Ancillary Fee Guidelines). This is reflected in the [report](#) analyzing the current regulatory framework in Ontario based on policy and directives approved by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities. In addition, the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) which is Crown Agency under the New Zealand government supporting tertiary education (universities and colleges) has implemented a maximum cost cap of \$60 (taxes included) for microcredentials which are funded by the TEC. Although not directly comparable to the Ontario tuition framework, this provides additional guidance in minimizing costs offset to students interested in pursuing microcredentials.

As the Ministry's ancillary fee policy is not specific to microcredentials, any fee additions in relation to microcredentials need to comply with the Non-Tuition Fee Protocol (NFTP) as agreed upon by the university and the student associations. This has been recognized as one of the next steps in the Senate report, the GSA would like to be part of the discussions regarding any fee changes in relation to microcredentials through the NFTP committee.

The report presented to the Senate references that the credential innovation for credit programs will incorporate flexible program delivery models including accelerated Master's degrees. As there is limited information provided on this, the GSA would like to ensure the finalized framework is provided in a clear, and concise manner which is accessible to all current and prospective graduate students.

## OPPORTUNITIES

As institutions have the option of adopting various business models in relation to issuing microcredentials in the form of badges and certificates; the GSA believes it is imperative to follow a digitized model based on centralized accessibility for students. The BC Council on Admissions & Transfer released a research report in November 2020, [Micro-Credentials: Trends in Credit Transfer and Credentialing](#) calling for a centralized model,

***“A broadly recognized and trusted registry may reinforce a variety of quality assurance processes, and credential definitions. The approved registry offered on the NZQA’s [website](#), the European Beta version of a [Credential Clearinghouse](#), and the [Credential Engine](#) in the US represent interesting system approaches to cut through the nomenclature confusion and support quality assurance.”***

From a Canadian context, Ontario has [announced](#) one-time funding of \$2 million in 2021-22 for the development of a virtual skills passport that tracks learners’ credentials. eCampus Ontario has developed their own [Passport](#) in collaboration with [CanCred.ca](#) to provide a centralized dashboard on a cloud-based platform to recognize microcredentials badges earned by students.

At the national level, The Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada (ARUCC), of which Laurier is a member, launched a credential wallet to send documents, badges, transcripts, and microcredentials. The platform, MyCreds™/MesCertif™ was made in collaboration with Canadian post-secondary institutions, and provincial application centres to provide a national framework. The project has been endorsed by various post-secondary institutions, and organizations including:

- Canadian Federation of Students representing 500,000 members at 64 students’ unions across Canada including the Wilfrid Laurier University Graduate Students’ Association;
- Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance representing 150,000 professional and undergraduate students at eight student associations across Ontario including the Wilfrid Laurier University Students’ Union;
- University of Waterloo, a regional post-secondary institution with cross-institutional offerings at Laurier;

The initiative by ARUCC to provide a digital platform to share badges and microcredentials across post-secondary institutions in Ontario has been acknowledged in the Credential Innovation Framework as approved by the Senate Academic Planning Committee (SAPC) and Senate. As Laurier has not yet endorsed the ARUCC framework, this presents an opportunity to do so and be involved in a consistent process, which is a gap identified by the Credential Innovation Framework report.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As Laurier continues the development of microcredentials with a focus on current and new student needs, the GSA proposes the following recommendations for consideration:

- Explore the viability of ARUCC's national framework for facilitating microcredentials and adopt this model for further providing centralized student access to accessing badges and completion of microcredentials;
- Prioritize creation of innovative new programs based on labour market needs and employment skill sets rather than deconstruction of current curriculum for both credit and non-credit microcredential programs
- Adopt the regulatory framework for tuition fees for any credit bearing microcredentials part of currently funded ministry programs and avoid duplication of fees;
- Engage with the Non-Tuition Fee Protocol Committee and student associations to finalize the ancillary fee elements of Laurier's credential offerings;
- Facilitate consultations with the graduate students, GSA, and FGPS in development of non-credit microcredentials earned through workshops, speaker series, short-courses, contract-training, full courses leading to qualifications such as badges, and other microcredentials in addition to the sub-committee on Non-Credit Programming



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