

Overview

PURPOSE

Many concepts and terms in the learn-and-work ecosystem are confusing. Some terms and concepts are new to the field and have no established definitions. Many are trending terms or concepts, not well understood. Others are used in different ways, depending on stakeholder perspectives and contexts. There are so many terms and concepts used that at times it is nearly impossible to know if we mean the same thing. For example, do we mean the same thing when we say competencies, skills, or learning outcomes? Or microcredentials, micro-pathways, and stackable credentials? And why does this matter?

The purpose of this document is to collect key definitions and use of terms and concepts in incremental credentialing to inform [Credential As You Go](#) as we seek greater clarity in the ways we describe and share our work to many stakeholder groups. These groups include:

- Learners
- Higher education institutions (credential providers)
- Employers and industry associations
- Workforce boards
- Policymakers
- Researchers and think tanks
- Journalists
- Accountability entities like accreditors and standards bodies.

USE OF THIS RESOURCE

This document is a first effort to portray the breadth, nuances, and depth of the state of the “language” of incremental credentialing. This is not an exhaustive list of the definitions and terms related to incremental credentialing. There are likely missing terms; missing definitions among the terms listed; and questions around our judgment to include variations of these entries. We will be working to improve this resource over time, knowing that it will always be a “working document.”

An analysis of the entries reveals that nine organizations account for nearly 45 percent of all entries (see page 3). These organizations, therefore, appear to play an influential voice in defining the landscape of incremental credentialing. They also appear to be offering expertise as “definers” and “translators” of the terms and concepts being used in the field.

Moving forward, this document will be housed at the Credential As You Go website. It will also be available with many other resources at the digital [Learn & Work Ecosystem Library](#) in development to support both Credential As You Go and other efforts working to improve the learn-and-work ecosystem. The Library will be working to capture the many other definitions, terms, and concepts in the learn-and-work ecosystem, of course, not only those related to incremental credentialing.

LANGUAGE “SUMMITS”

Credential As You Go will be sponsoring “language summits” to share multiple perspectives on the key concept and terminology areas, as well as issues and tensions that arise from a different context and uses of these concepts and terms. The first three considered at the [Summit](#) on March 16, 2022, were:

- **Credentials and pathways:** What are the different credential and pathway terms and how are they being used? Many terms—badges, microcredentials, micro-pathways, short-term credentials, incremental credentials, education certificates vs. certificates, licenses, certifications, degrees, noncredit-to-credit bridges—are confusing and used in different ways. We will examine the different meanings, who defines them, and where and how they are being used.
- **Equity, Inclusion, Fairness:** What do we mean by these terms and how can they guide our work? We all want equitable credentials that have on- and off-ramps that include everyone, creating a system that is fairer to everyone, but what does that mean? What does it look like? We will explore the implications of these terms in credentialing and key factors that make credentials more equitable and inclusive.
- **Competencies, Skills, Learning Outcomes:** What do these terms mean and how do we use them? Increasingly, some of these terms are used interchangeably. That causes confusion across different stakeholders, especially students, employers, credential providers, accreditors, policymakers, and educational researchers. We will explore the nuances behind these terms and their contextual implications. For example, employers may be using competencies and skills as synonymous terms, while higher education uses them as distinct terms.

METHOD AND ANALYSIS

All definitions, use of terms, and concepts come from Internet searches—from websites, blogs, reports, and definitional documents. This method was selected based on the rationale that the “language” of incremental credentialing is and should be available in the open communications ecosystem.

Judgment calls were used to select entries for the document, using as a guide the following criteria to collect and select:

- Diverse and nuanced voices (e.g., from employers, research reports from think tanks, media articles, dictionaries and glossaries, college and university websites)
- Main definitions in use, especially those longer standing in the vernacular (like those at Wikipedia)
- Ways in which terms are used in reports, at websites, and in blogs and articles communicating to both niche and public audiences
- International definitions to enable comparisons with US definitions and the use of terms.

The following stats describe the number of terms, number of entries, number of voices, and the most influential voices in the incremental credentialing definitional arena, based on an analysis of the entries in this document:



- **Number of Terms:** 74 terms identified (many are permutations of terms) within 43 term areas
- **Number of Entries:** 169 entries (definitions, use of terms, concepts)
- **Number of Voices:** 62 organizations and individuals represented in entries
- **Top Nine.** Nine organizations account for 44.8 percent of the entries

Most Cited Organizations	# of Entries
Western Governors University	13
Credential As You Go	11
Wikipedia	9
Credential Engine	8
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	7
Connecting Credentials	7
Joint Reports of Workcred; the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce; and the Program on Credentials, Skills & Workforce Policy, George Washington University	5
State University System of New York (SUNY)	5
Non-degree Credentials Research Network (NCRN)	5
Rutgers University's Education and Employment Research Center (EERC)	4
Total	74

NEXT STEPS

We welcome feedback to let us know how this resource may be helpful in your work. If you would like to suggest adding missing terms and concepts and/or suggest revisions, contact:

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