

## **Micro-Credentials: Competencies at the Core**

**Dr. Lena Patterson, Program Director of Micro-credentials and Business Development at the Chang School of Continuing Education at Toronto Metropolitan University – Keynote:**

**Transitions: A Competency Approach to Micro-Credentials,**

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**Host: Ross McKerlich**

**Presenter: Lena Patterson**

ROSS MCKERLICH:

Okay. So without further ado, I'm going to introduce Lena Patterson, Dr. Lena Patterson, and she'll be taking us through the why of competencies at the core today as I was mentioning Lena is program director of Micro-Credentials and Business Development at the Chang School of Continuing Education at Toronto Metropolitan University. So competencies is part of her everyday life. Prior to her position at TMU, Lena was a senior director of Programs and Stakeholder Relations for eCampusOntario. And she led the design and implementation of the eCampusOntario micro-credential principles and framework. So really they were an early adopter of micro-credentials in Canada. I've certainly learned a lot actually from Lena and I'm going to be continuing to learn a lot, which is great. And that's one of Lena's qualities is connecting people and developing communities of practice and she's involved internationally as well through the Microcredentials Sans Frontières. Hopefully I pronounced that correctly. And it is basically an international community practice of micro-credentials. And so she was a co-founder of this. That's exciting, but it's not all about micro-credentials. In this case, Lena is also president of the board at Open Education Global. And so there's very much the open work as well to Lena. And so we're really excited to hear from Lena. And in this case, the title of the presentation is Transitions, a Competency Approach to Micro-Credentials. And she's gonna be sharing it on slides, but they will be available as part of that package. So welcome, Lena.

LENA PATTERSON:

Thank you so much, Ross. Why don't I go ahead and share? Can everyone hear me okay? Sound okay. Okay. Thank you, Ross. Thank you, Chad. Appreciate the thumbs up. Ross, Amanda, Chad, Pauline, Michelle. Thank you so much for having me here today and for opening the day with such thoughtful recognitions of the community. This is such a generous space and I am just so pleased to be welcomed into it and to Pauline, especially for that beautiful opening. It is fantastic to see this many people here joining today for this event, learning and conversation. I'm going to start with a personal land acknowledgment. Many of you have already shared your beautiful land acknowledgments in the chat. And I recognize that everyone in this room has their own words. So if you haven't already shared, I invite you to please take this moment to reflect on your own connections, space, and place while I do the same. I was born where many of you live on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, the Squamish, and the Tsleil-Waututh people in the place now known as the City of Vancouver. My family came west in the 1920s as settlers of Scottish and German descent. And my memories growing up in Vancouver in that land, they're all softness. Think about the deep darkness of the woods and winter. The light dusting of snow on the mountains, the beds of moss that cover the rocks and

the gentle rain. If I close my eyes any time, I can still smell cedar. It's something that I keep with me. I want to thank the Indigenous peoples, the stewards of these lands and waters. I'm so grateful to have spent my formative years as an uninvited guest learning, playing, growing within the traditional territories of these nations. I'm joining you today as a settler on the treaty lands and the territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, where I now live and work. The house that I live in sits on land that was the subject of the 1787 Toronto purchase, which limited Indigenous access to places of hunting, harvesting, and fishing, among other harms. This is a photo of the beautiful Credit River, which is just west of me. And it provides spawning area for Chinook salmon and rainbow trout, which I think maybe some British Columbians might be surprised to hear. But we have, we have salmon runs here in Ontario. They're beautiful. I love to visit the river in the fall, the salmon jump, it's just absolutely breathtaking. The salmon remind me of the history of that river, of that treaty. They connect me back to the place I was born, the unceded territory. They remind me that I'm a visitor and to tread lightly and to reaffirm the rights of those Indigenous peoples, the caretakers and stewards of these lands and waters since time immemorial. And I endeavor to carry that gratitude within myself, this reminder to walk softly, to listen and to learn as I continue to work and live as an uninvited guest on this territory.

This is my first time giving a keynote. So I got to share that with you all. And going through this process made me realize something really important that this presents as a one-to-many polished communication created by me as an individual. That is not how it happens. The reality is not that way. There are so many people that I lean on, draw courage from, that push me to be better. And I just want to take a brief moment before I begin the content to acknowledge a couple of those people. I'm Mary Chacksiris, a friend and colleague who provided over two pages of single-spaced notes, suggestions, and showed some encouragement to me. Amanda, Ross, the whole BCcampus team. Everyone who put this event together for the invitation and for creating the space. David Porter, for always responding to my emails within milliseconds. You can't ask for a more caring guy to have in your corner. And finally to Jess Mitchell for pushing me outside of my comfort zone and always daring me to dig deeper. Jess is a true master in the art of productive critique. If you have someone in your life like that, recommend you hold them close. I've named this presentation Transitions: A Competency Approach to Micro-credentials as Ross said. My intention this morning is to ask some questions of our current system and approach and explore why we do what we do and offer some suggestions about where we might find alternatives.

So a little wayfinding for you, this is how we're going to move through this presentation. I'm going to start off by talking about transitions between education and workspaces and back again. I'm going to share a few stories. And I'm going to open the floor and ask you also to do the same. Then we're going to dig a little bit deeper into this question. Why might a competency be at the heart of micro-credential? Why is that important? And that conversation will lead to an exploration of those two topics in a little bit more depth. And then we'll finish by grounding ourselves in the here and now. Why does this conversation matter today? And Pauline's words about the future, about the future learners that are coming down behind us.

That is where I want us to end off today. So I'm so grateful to her for drawing, pulling that thread and giving it, giving expression because I was, I was thinking the same thing.

So this is a quick story about transitions between education and work. And this story takes place in Halifax in September 2010. I don't know if anyone's ever been to Halifax. It's a wonderful place. I was a recent grad of a master's program in English literature, and I had worked part-time through my degree. I was a marker, I was an editorial assistant. I was a manager of a cafe, but I was desperately seeking that first full-time gig. That one I could really dive into, be challenged by, make my own. I wanted to find my place in the world and make a contribution. Michael Enright came to town. I don't know if anyone recognizes this signature bow tie or this face. You might know Michael Enright if you heard his voice because he's the host, former host on CBC Radio, The Sunday Edition. A well-known personality to CBC radio listeners. And on this particular date in Halifax, he was hosting a live public forum called The Final Exam Question: Is a university degree worth the cost? Bit of a provocative title. And he had a panel of experts who widely agreed that a university degree, especially one in the liberal arts, was the ticket to any career you wanted to pursue. And I was sitting in the audience with my two liberal arts degrees and no job prospects. And I started to get red in the face. You know when that happens because I just felt so keenly aware that what they were saying was not matching up with my experience. And so against all my better instincts, I decided to ask a question. I stood up and this is live radio, so I was really nervous. I stood up and I said, What is my university doing to help me transition to this next phase in my life? Because you're telling me I have everything I need. I know I can make a strong contribution, but something has been lost in translation here because I'm getting nowhere. And when Amanda said universal language in her remarks, that's what I was feeling. I was missing the panel reply to my question with some reassurances, but nothing concrete. And frankly, I can't really remember what they said. I think I was blacking out because I was so nervous at having asked the question in the first place. But it got me thinking what actually happened in my degree. Did I just read some books? And what I know now is that I was actually practicing and perfecting a long list of competencies that I brought into every role in workplace I have ever had. Communication, persuasion, analytical thinking, navigating difference in diverse perspectives. The list goes on. We all, we all carry with us these competencies. And the ones that I was honing in my learning path I was doing. But no one told me that was happening. As I was standing there on live on public radio asking that question, I felt like the only evidence I had of my ability, which was my GPA, was not translating into that complex world of work and career that I was trying to find my place in.

So what do we make of this story? This is a story about how the education system fell short in that moment of transition for me between education and work. I felt as a learner that I needed a little bit more. This is also a story of privilege. This is five years of uninterrupted university learning supported by a scholarship built upon a foundation of white settler, non-neurodivergent, cisgender, upper middle-class linguistic and cultural privilege. So I'm fine, I worked it out. But the question I have is, what if I with all of my privilege, if I still had trouble in this transition, what's happening to those who did not have the advantages that I did? And transitions between education and work and back again are absolutely critical in our lives. And

if we don't think about them with intention, we abandon people to figure it out on their own, to network, to make connections. All of the things that we know contribute to deeper inequity. So why do we make this so hard on people? Why is this something we accept? I want to hear from you. I've told you my story. I want to hear from you. I'm going to open this poll. This is just an opportunity for you. It's completely anonymous and optional. But if you'd like to visit [PollEv.com/microcred](https://PollEv.com/microcred) or you can respond in text as well. I'd like us to create a word cloud. I want to hear from you what word comes to mind if you think back of a moment of transition out of the education system or into the education system or into work or out of work, whatever direction you want to go at any point in your life. What did it feel like? Thank you. I see some contributions coming in. I hope you can all see. Can you see the word cloud forming? Good? Okay, alone, uncertainty. Fumbling, wow, tight rope. Well that's an interesting one. Reality. Chaotic, unemployed, yeah, failing. Tentative, exciting. Yeah, there's some positive, there are some positive feelings in here as well for sure. Abandoned opportunities. Some people see it as an opportunity, but there are also some words here that suggests surprise. I love that. Misaligned, fear, passionate. Someone was feeling like they were really ready to take on the world. Slow. Okay, so maybe some, some gaps. It didn't go quite as quickly as you wanted. Fit. That's an interesting one, kind of trying to find your way in the world. Debt, broke. Uncertainty seems to be the biggest one. Unprepared. Yeah. Okay. Just one more minute. Anyone else who wants to get one last word in and then we'll move on. You're experts at this. I'm so amazed at how quickly you picked it up and I hope you didn't feel like participating. You're still enjoying seeing some of the ideas from your colleagues. Okay, We're going to move on. Thank you so much everyone. You can keep contributing if you want. So on the whole, maybe there's some gaps in the system in terms of helping us transition between school and work. And there are some bridges that are built that help us cross that gap. But they may be, not as numerous as we would want them to be and maybe they're not discoverable by everyone. I also want us to keep in mind the people who might start in education and not get all the way through. What do they have to show for the work that they've done? What about those for which the barriers, time, money, family obligations, you name it, were just too high to begin with. What are we doing to support those people?

One more quick story about resumes. A number of years ago I was a hiring manager for an entry-level job and I don't know if anyone else has ever been in this position, but I got a resume from an individual carefully listed all of the courses that they had completed. They listed all of the grades that they had achieved in each course. Really good grades, like very excellent, excellent work. And this young person was doing whatever they could to communicate to me as a hiring manager what they were capable of. But they were using a language, an evidence of the education system. And I knew as a hiring manager that that was not the evidence and language that was necessarily going to be the thing that's going to help me make a decision about whether I wanted this young person on the team. And again, Amanda's point about universal language. So another thing to keep in mind. So where am I headed with all of this? We've taken you on a bit of a journey. I really think as a higher education system, that we can do better. And I think we have some very interesting opportunities before us right now that can help. And micro-credentials, I believe for one.

Why micro-credentials? I think Amanda touched on this a little bit earlier. They're short, they're affordable, they're relevant, and they are not a silver bullet. We're going to come back to that. It's really important, but for now I think we can recognize that micro-credentials is a more approachable opportunity for recognition in areas that are relevant to the lives that we want to lead beyond higher education. No matter where someone might find themselves in their educational journey, a micro-credential is an option that speaks the language of the world of work, volunteerism, community contribution. Wherever they want to go next, the point is that it's universal language. The burden is not on the individual to have to translate in order to move through the world.

And if we take a competency approach to micro-credential design, development, and delivery, we have the foundation of a system that's even better because it's real and relevant, it's fair and transparent. And it might even be transformative for the people who are currently underserved by the existing system. So what I hope to convince you of today is that if we do these things well and we do them with intention, we'll be taking really important steps towards filling some of those transition gaps that we reflected on earlier.

So I'd like to explore this notion of competency in higher education through a quick thought experiment. Okay, so this is a thought experiment that is adapted from the work of Paul LeBlanc. I don't know if anyone knows Paul, but he is the president of Southern New Hampshire University in the U.S. In 2021, he wrote a book called *Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education*. Paul opens chapter two with this thought experiment, and I think it's worth repeating today because thought experiments allow us to think through and hypothetical terms, foundational principles, right? And in this case, the foundational principles we're going to think through are the ones that underpin the operation of our higher-education system.

So this is the thought experiment. Imagine we're forming a new society and that we're members of a team tasked with inventing the higher education system. Our goal is a system which prepares people to do the work they need to thrive, be thoughtful and contributing members of the community, and have intellectually rich lives. We might in another time rewrite that vision statement, but bear with me on this. If we're brainstorming three options for organizing this new system, we might come up with these options. We might want to build our system based on knowledge. We might focus on what students should know and assess them on that knowledge. We might consider competency, which is a focus on what students should be able to do and assess them on proficiency or option C, we might focus on time. What is the minimum amount of time needed to reach the goal? And the group of advocates in this thought experiment agree that all three options have value. Depth of knowledge is a must-have across all fields of study and forms the foundation for an individual success in whatever path they choose. The competency supporters agree that knowledge is really important, but they wonder about capturing learning through the application of what someone can do rather than just the knowledge that they obtain and retain. The members of the group advocating for time are

really focused on scale. They want to get maximum number of people educated as possible. And they want to unite the education system and move people through it efficiently. Standardize it.

So I'd like to end the thought experiment there and just explore these options of competency and time with you a little bit further.

In the world of micro-credentials, a time-based question looks something like this. How long is it? This is actually the question I get most when I'm talking to anyone from higher education about micro-credentials. And as far as organizing principles go, time is the one we fall back on the most often because it's deeply connected to the underlying economics of our system. The baseline unit, of course, 39 hours, credit hours, the basis on which we organize ourselves. But we need to ask ourselves, who do we serve with that question? How long is it micro-credential? Is it about our learners or is it about ourselves? When we ask a question about time, I would suggest we're usually thinking about our system, our need to make the new credential fit within the existing time-based structure that we have, which is understandable. It's practical and sometimes it's necessary. But if it's the first question we ask, will it lead us to the kind of change that we're hoping to achieve?

This is a competency question. What happens when we ask this question? The question is, what can we do with the knowledge and skills obtained? This is a question. It's a different question, right? This is a question that could drive a meaningful approach. It's a question about purpose, about action. And when you think about questions of doing, they rarely have any connection to time. Some people might be faster, some people might be slower. But the end result is that the performance of the competency and the change it can bring into the world is the same.

When we start thinking about what we can do. What we can do, how we can, how we can make change. Using the knowledge and skills we obtained and how we apply those knowledge and skills in context. We start thinking about bridging the worlds of work and education. And if we pull back to our conversation about transitions, was this the missing piece? And I think about my own transition, the one I shared with you. I think this could have been what was missing from my transition. Not only did I, was I was struggling with the evidence I had, my GPA, knowing that that wasn't translating, but I had no other words, no language to describe what I could do. And I know, I know now that there was lots that I could do. Right. But I didn't, it wasn't equipped with that language and the way that a competency question would have equipped me. I couldn't go into an interview and confidently say, I can do that. I could say, I know that, I know about that, but could I say I can do that? I think a competency-based micro-credential would have given me that.

When we say competency is at the core of a micro-credential, we really do mean every micro-credential is focused on, driven by competency approach. This question of what can you do? What can you do? This idea has been captured in the BC Micro-credential Framework, which defines a micro-credential as recognizing a standalone, short duration learning experience

that's competency-based. You've got the foundation set for the great work of BCcampus. So with the competencies at the heart of our micro-credential work, we really have to understand what they are and how they help us and that's why we're here today.

So I'm going to unpack this a little bit with an example. And I hope it's an example that's familiar to most of you. And if it's not an example that's familiar to you, I envy you because it's not an activity I like very much, but there it is. The example is driving. And when I think back to my own experience learning to drive in Vancouver, there were three steps. I was 17, 16. You have to pass the knowledge test, right? Yeah, you gotta get your L in Vancouver. In B.C. it's an L. Here in Ontario, it's G1 or something like that. But you have to go to prove you have some baseline knowledge, right? So you show up at the DMV and you take a test, you take a knowledge-based test. Do you know the difference between a red light and a green light? Do you know what the speed limit is in a school zone? That's foundational knowledge. Then you get your L, Right? And they say, okay, you've got the foundational knowledge. You can go ahead and practice, but you have to practice under the supervision of a licensed driver. We're not just sending you out there on your own in the world and you have to put this big L, big magnetic L in the back of your car. And if you're lucky, you might even have a parent or a sibling or a friend that's willing to endure this experience with you, learning how to drive. And as you practice, you're building up your skills. And for me, as a teenager in Vancouver, I was driving the family's standard Isuzu Trooper. Does anyone remember Isuzu Troopers? They're big standard vehicles and we named it Rupert. And the thing that always got me about Rupert is that I would always stall in the middle of Fourth Avenue. Driving West up Fourth Avenue is this slight incline. The light would turn green and I'd stall every single time that I was practicing my skills, trying to, trying to figure out how to operate that clutch. Finally, you perform a road test. You've got your foundational knowledge, you've practiced, you've built up your skills. You go in and you drive under the supervision of a trained and licensed ICBC driving examiner to prove you can safely operate your vehicle, which I personally failed to do on two separate occasions. Which is really good. I was not ready. I didn't practice enough. I was not confident using that clutch in that Isuzu Trooper. So that particular performance-based assessment was an accurate measurement of my competency at the time. But think about your own experience learning to drive, right? Those are the stages they take you to. Knowledge, skills, and then performing in context. That's what we're going to dig into a little bit.

We've got that example in hand. Let's unbundle that a little bit. So there's three parts to a competency. The first is knowledge. What do you need to know in order to achieve the competency? And in our driving example, that was rules of the road. Part two is skill. What do you need to be able to do to achieve the competency and our driving example, in my standard vehicle that was operating the clutch. Then finally, attributes. What attitudes or values are essential in the performance of this competency. So if I was in my driving test and I was yelling at cyclists, I don't think I would pass. So if we're still thinking about that driving example, this might be the ability to remain calm, to be respectful of other road users. In Vancouver cyclists, very common. You have to know what the cycling routes are and you have to give three metres of space. Competency then is an umbrella concept. It's the combination of the application of

knowledge, skills, and attributes and context. And again, in our driving example, we went through it. You know, the rules of the road. You can operate the clutch. You're gonna get so tired of this example. And then you're gonna be respectful of other road users. So we have this kind of foundational understanding of competency. Then it's got these three parts, knowledge, skills, and attributes.

There's another really important dimension of this conversation, which is the idea that competency is dynamic. It shifts. It changes depending on the context in which it's being performed. And it can evolve and change depending on the environment. So if you successfully pass your driving test in Vancouver and you move to England, where they drive on the other side of the road, are you still competent? You've still got the knowledge and the skills. But the context in which that knowledge and skills are applied has completely changed. You might need to practice a little bit more in order to get back up to speed. So competency is heavily influenced by environmental factors and therefore it evolves and expresses itself in different ways as the world in which it is performing changes. And that is one of the most interesting and exciting things I think about this work. If competency is dynamic, we need to think about how our competency micro-credentials become check-in opportunities for learning, unlearning, relearning. The simplest way to do that is to apply a renewal date to the digital record of the artifact that we're issuing. It expires in other words, you need to come back, you need to refresh. You need to renew. I like the word renewal personally, then expire, but you need to keep coming back and returning in order to apply those skills and knowledge, especially if the context has changed, right?

There's limitations to this that we have to recognize and keep in mind, of course. I get very excited about this, but there are some important, important elements that will frame up the conversations you have going forward. We all know drivers that have passed the driving test and still exhibit bad behaviour, right? We know people who text and drive or are not considerate and respectful of other road users. So we need to recognize that a competency-based micro-credential, once achieved, is only representative of the performance of that individual in that moment in time. Which again is why renewing, refreshing, coming back is so, so important. I want you to remember that not everything is meant to be a micro-credential. There are some topics, some areas of practice where a competency assessment is impractical, it might not be needed, might even be harmful in ways that we don't intend. So my caution when exploring these new ideas is to ask yourself, is an assessment necessary? Is a credential required? Because not every topic is well suited to this approach. This is just one tool that we have in an exciting, growing, and changing post-secondary education system.

I've thrown a lot at you since we last talked about transitions. And there's gonna be lots of opportunities throughout the day to explore this idea of competency in some practical ways. But for now, we can say that it, maybe this sums it up for us. Competency captures knowledge, skills, and attributes. It's performed in context, and it's dynamic and associated with frequent renewal. I want to pause again and just check in with you, see how you're doing with this concept of competency. I'm going to launch this next poll and just ask you, now that you've



heard a little bit about this, we've explored an example. What's one word to describe how you're feeling about this? Encouraged, That's great. Clear, okay, good. Hopeful. Renewed. I think that concept of renewal is so, it's so exciting, it really is. Excited, good. Important. Hopeful, Yeah. Encouraged, excited, thoughtful, relevant, curious, clear, good, empowered. That's great. I think it's very empowering as well. Not only for our learners, but for us as educators too. On the right track. Hopeful. Curious. Oh, I like that word. Sometimes when you understand a little tiny bit of something, it just makes you want to learn more. Wonderful. Understood. Oh, that's nice. I really am interested. I wish I could talk to the people who write these words and hear from them a bit more. Understood, I'm really interested in that. Excited. Good. Okay. Great. Okay. Let's move on. Let's move on. And you're all wonderful. Thank you so much for participating, makes me feel like I'm connected to you even though we're far away. And this is a virtual space. Okay.

We've explored this concept of competency in some detail. So let's talk about applying it to the world of micro-credentials. And before we get into that, I want to just take a minute to address the question of language and definitions. Because if you have dabbled in micro-credential conversations, you know that there's a lot of ink spilled over the fact that there's no universal definition. And if you're just getting started in this conversation, I'm hoping maybe I can save you some time. So it's true. It's true there's no universal definition for a micro-credential yet. And yet it's really important there. We have some great work. We have a UNESCO report in 2021 that offers one up. It's not confirmed, but it offers something and that's international, so that's very, very important. And you have an excellent one here in B.C., as do other provinces. So I would feel really, feel really grounded, feel really confident. There's one other element of confusion. Sometimes it creeps into these conversations and maybe this will help some of you and some of people will just think I have no idea what she's talking about. But there's often this mixing or conflation of how the term micro-credential is used. Some use it to describe the artifact as in the digital record that's being issued upon completion. And some use it to describe the offering as in the experience or the programming that leads to the awarding of the artifact. So next time you find yourself confused in a conversation about micro-credentials just take the time to stop and ask this question. Are you talking about artifact or the offering because or both? Because I think sometimes we even switch back and forth. I've been guilty of this myself. Sometimes when you're working in a new area, an emerging area, language is a little bit slippery and we need to just take that extra moment to check in with each other and make sure we're on the same page. But I'm here to reassure you it's gonna be okay. And across the provinces, even across countries, we are really well aligned. So while there is no big established standardized universal definition that everyone gets behind, we are really well aligned. And the reason I know this is because in my previous role at eCampusOntario, we worked on a project that did an analysis of all the micro-credential definitions from across Canada and the world. And we found five points of convergence that kept coming up over and over again. That is that a micro-credential is specific to a skill or competency, that it's awarded on the basis of an assessment. That it's employer employment relevant, and that it's standalone connected to other credentials. And that it's short. And you can go back and forth on what short means. But the point is, is that these areas of focus come up again and again. So there's no universally

accepted definition, but that shouldn't stop us because we have really, really strong consensus on what matters. And like I said, you have an excellent definition here in B.C. to work from. So go forward with confidence.

We're in a really good place. And beyond definitions, there's some practices, which I think are worth exploring and mentioning here that will affect design process. The first is that, you know, our micro-credentials have to be real. We can't make them up. We can't design them from scratch in a way that makes sense to us in the context of the institution. This is the real generation coming up, thinking about future learners, who are they? Authenticity is everything to them.

So we need to make our micro-credentials and associated competencies real and meaningful. How do we do that? Partnerships. Pauline talked about this a little bit. There's that collaboration, coordination principle in the B.C. Micro-credential Framework. Partner with your learners, your Indigenous communities, with your local representatives, your alumni, your volunteers, your seniors, your organizational leaders, everyone. If we're going to build micro-credentials that translate, we need to connect with the people that live and work in those spaces that we're bridging into. Invite them in as co-creators. Ask their opinion. Is this fair? Is this realistic? What does this competency? Why does this competency matter to them? What positive change do they think it will lead to?

The second thing we do is we connect open competency frameworks. And I'm going to leave this to Dennis Green, the next speaker because he is an expert in this. But all you should really know is that competencies don't like to stand alone. They're part of a network. They're connected to each other and they're housed in these spaces. That's a really encouraging thought as well. Because as soon as you take one, you can do the next one and you understand how they are connected and interrelated to each other. And that's very exciting.

The last thing we do to make sure that they're real is we make them clear and transparent. This is what I always tell my staff, no black boxes. What does clarity and transparency mean in a micro-credential context? It means that the full details of the assessment are available upfront to the student. That they can have, take an informed decision and make a good choice about whether they're ready to proceed or whether they need to go and learn something else. Very, very important that we make sure that that transparency is upfront and that we're not asking the learner, especially a learner who might be coming to us from an untraditional space. We're not asking them to take a chance. It's all our cards are on the table.

So we started this conversation talking about transitions, talked about competency, why it's at the core, explored competency and micro-credentials. I just want to end with a couple of minutes I have left with this question of why does this matter today? If you work in health care, maybe the trades, or continuing education or some other space in a post-secondary education or outside of it, this might all be old news to you, which is, which is fantastic. You're absolutely right. Your competency approach to education, short- duration programming. These are not

concepts that are being discovered for the first time. All of these things come back, right? They always loop around. But we're talking about it more right now. And I think we have to ask ourselves why.

The first is about career fluidity. The assumption is that someone's going to stay in their job for 30 years, 40 years, a lot of the time. And this always strikes me as really interesting because what we know is that young people today plan on the opposite. They plan on having multiple careers, spanning different sectors, different fields, different geographies. They want to travel the world. They want to go live somewhere else. They want to come back. They're just, everything is so expansive and exciting for young people today. And this idea that you're going to stay put in one role is just not happening. And what we know is that this has important implications for the education system. Young people are going to assume that they can access education in the same way they approach their career and their passion, which is coming in and out, learning opportunities, new interests, path that they emerged for them or that they create on their own. And in these moments when they do decide to swing back to higher education, we have to be ready, right? Are we, are we going to be ready to say, welcome back. Here's this incredible array of options for you to choose from and pick the one that best suits this time and place in your life.

The second reason we're having this conversation right now is because skills-based hiring is becoming the norm in fast-growing fields. This means in a lot of cases that there's this suspension of the idea of the degree as proxy for competence. And they're now thinking about skills and competencies. This shift has significant potential impact for a large population of potential employees that might have been excluded from hiring in periods of degree inflation. If you've not seen this campaign in the U.S., Tear the paper ceiling. I think it's really interesting. This is a concerted and focused effort to open up job opportunities to individuals with diverse experience, skills, and perspectives, we have to know that this is happening. And they describe this population as stars. I love this, stars. These are individuals that are skilled through alternative routes, which includes partial completion of a post-secondary degree. In the U.S., this is represented to be half of the American workforce. And I wonder, how many stars do we have in Canada? Are we reaching them? And if not, why?

The third and final reason that we're having this conversation right now is because we have big... we've got big problems to solve, right? We all know we've got a climate crisis that's crystallizing for us. We have the discovery of mass burial sites, murdered Indigenous children across our whole country. We have the knowledge that our lives can be turned upside down at any moment by the random mutation of a virus. And I'm sure other things come to mind for you. But the point is not to despair, but to think critically about how we, as educators, designers, learners, leaders, actualize the higher education system we know we deserve and help us all uncover a purposeful learning path that fits into that looping, non-linear approach to learning and work.

One of the ways we do this is by enabling meaningful transitions from education to work and back again. And we can make those transitions smoother. We can make them more equitable, we can make them meaningful, we can make them empowering if we build a micro-credential system filled with opportunities that are low barrier, quickly and easily accessed, competency-based. Spent a lot of time on this, focused on the application of knowledge and skill in context, using that language that translates for them, and that are real and relevant, built upon strong partnerships and design principles.

This is the system of recognition that we deserve and it makes sense in our current climate because what we know is that nothing stays the same. But if we notice, name, and speak to the competencies, the things that we can do for our communities, our workplaces, our societies, we're equipping ourselves with the ability to grow and adapt as the world around us changes.

And this is a really hopeful thought for me. This is our imagined future forest of competency, micro-credentials. It's rich, it's relevant, it's meaningful, it's empowering. And I want to thank you for opening your hearts and minds to this possibility this morning. Thank you so much. Really appreciate it.

ROSS:

Thank you very much, Lena. So many nuggets in there. And actually before I go on, actually I'm wondering if we can use our reaction down at the bottom. And imagine you're in a face-to-face environment and what would you be doing right now? You'd be clapping. And so Lena, congratulations. It's actually down in the bottom under reactions. And then one of the options is the one on the top left, which is clap. So if you were in a room right now, you'd be hearing a thunderous applause and I can hear it. And also standing ovation as well. So thank you so much. And as we were saying, there was lots of really, really great learning in that keynote. Now, we are going to have this opportunity to have folks answer or ask questions actually. And so we're gonna have, we're going to have, we're going to select two from the chat and two from the hands-up function. And the hands-up function is actually also in reactions by the way. And let's see here, Raise hand is what it's called. And so my colleague Declan is going to help with these. And Lena, I think you probably have access to the chat as well. So you have a bit of a precursor there. So now's your opportunity. We've had a really engaging keynote from Lena, what questions come to mind? And we'll do the questions by chat first. Then will move on to the raised hand ones. So if we can turn our attention towards the chat, then we'll select one. By the way, I'm sure they're all very good questions. We won't be able to select all of them to answer, but there will be an opportunity here. Okay. Some really good ones here. I'm going to actually, I guess I'm kind of doing your job here Declan. Sorry about that, but I do see a good one in the chat. And that is, what's your biggest challenge that you've had to overcome in furthering micro-credentials? I think that's a really good question.

LENA:

A great question. I'd love to know what context, particularly, because there's lots of layers of work, right? But I can speak to the higher-education context. The biggest challenge I think is, is

organizational change that supports this vision, right? Because one of the things that I run up against every day is that all of the systems and structures, technologies that we use in our day-to-day lives within the institution are focused on one particular format, which is the course. And what we're trying to do with some competency-based assessments is change the lens on that. And open up opportunities for our learners to be able to choose what makes sense for them, right? And which pathways they want to go through. So there is a lot of work and it's difficult work and it's slow work within the institution to make sure that all of the systems are rep, behind the vision, right? Because we can all have this incredible vision. But the reality is, is that what we have is built, purpose-built for something else. You can reuse a lot of stuff, but it takes, it takes a willingness to collaborate together and work through some of those really thorny problems. Again, all with this idea of the student in mind at the other end, because it's easy to get sidetracked by the status quo and what the, what the existing approach is. Because it's so deep, it's so entrenched. And sometimes you're asking questions that challenge that. And it's for the good of the student, but it really is. It really is big, big mountains to move. So my best advice is small wins, little milestones. And kinda keeping that vision alive in support of the student, a new kind of student. And when you do speak to them and hear from them about their experience and how kind of surprised they are at how it went. That really makes it, that really makes it all worthwhile.

ROSS:

Great. Thank you so much.

LENA:

Hope that was okay, it's a tough question. Excellent. Thanks, Lena. And let's try a hands up question now. It'll be a little bit more challenging for Lena because we won't know what's coming, but I'm sure there'll be good questions and kind questions as well. So if you can raise your hand if you'd like to ask a question verbally, and then we'll talk about one next. Declan, feel free to choose here. Do we have anyone? Yeah. Yes. Go ahead.

DECLAN:

I was going to say, Ross. There's a question in the chat here that seems to be getting a lot of traction from Claire. She asked, how do you see this from a development perspective? How do we respond to this fluidity while maintaining high standards of delivery?

LENA:

Development of the programming, I'm assuming. How do we respond to fluidity? While maintaining... Okay. I see the tension there. Yes. You just, you can build in iterative cycles for redevelopment. That's what I would recommend. Because micro-credentials are short, you can offer them more frequently, right? So you can, and this is something I run up against all the time. We're so stuck in terms. What term is that? What term is it? Well, it's not really a term and we just run it and then it stops, right? And it's two weeks or whatever. So you really get an opportunity to free your mind in terms of the regular cycle of review and revision and the process that I've put in place that I think is working pretty well is that we really stay connected

to the learners that are going through the experience. Take their advice and integrate it right away into, into tweaks of the programming as we're going. It will depend on the governance process that you have set up at your institution. But if you are at the beginning of designing that governance process, I would really give a lot of thought as to how and make the argument that fluidity and flexibility is really important and that you need to be able to make fast changes to your programming as the space changes and as learner feedback comes in. If you can do that, I highly recommend it. And I would be cautious about tying it to any existing structures that are more spaced out. A year, for example, would probably be too long. So that, I hope that answers the question, but it is a very good one and that is one of those tensions that comes up as you're doing the work.

ROSS:

Great. Thank you so much, Lena, for that answer. And I think we'll actually continue with the chat method of asking questions. And then there are some other really good ones in here right now. Do you have access to the chat, Lena? Are you looking at it right now?

LENA:

I'm looking at it. Yeah. So I haven't caught up yet.

ROSS:

All right. So maybe we'll do this as your choice of answer, your question choice. Oh my goodness, there's so many. There are. I mean, I see a short one from Susan, How do we include employers in this important space? I think that's a great question, Susan. And it's again, it's going to differ depending on where you are, but there are, there are lots of opportunities. So you can expand that to not just be employers, but to be anyone outside of your institution that cares about that competency. Because you're gonna get all sorts of different really interesting angles on that competency. So as many of those different voices as you can bring in, the better, and I would have them part of the development of the idea. So get your ideas from them, really. Go out to them. Ask them, Hey, how's it going? What's happening for you in your spaces right now? What keeps you up at night? What's the thing? What's the thing that's coming down the pipe that you just don't know how to address? Or maybe they've just hired a whole bunch of young people and those people are really, really struggling in one key area. Getting out there and having those conversations is really an important start because those problem statements become your competency, right? Because you are directly addressing that concern that they have. And then I would engage them in the development process in terms of what context and scenario that competency is being applied in. So it's not just what can you do, but it's what are the circumstances that this is commonly occurring in. What are some of the complexities of those circumstances and how can we replicate that in an assessment in a way that is going to be real and meaningful for the learner. So there's lots of points of engagement. And these have to be, these have to be, these can't be transactional engagements. These need to be ongoing and meaningful engagement. And what I have found is that people who care about that competency are really, are really willing to engage because they can see from you that there's

gonna be some actual, some real opportunity to address that and they get very excited. So bring them in, definitely bring them.

ROSS:

Thanks, and by the way, we're going to be actually speaking with two such employers in the afternoon. And so there'll be lots of great learning. And I know that's been a question about how these competency needs are identified. How does it all come about? And it does indeed start with industry and employers. And so there'll be some best practices around that. I've realized I missed someone that put their hands up and she actually put the answer... put the question in that chat instead. And it was Jean. Jean, do you want to actually verbalize it or would want me to just read it from the chat if that's better? Yeah, sure.

JEAN:

I'd be happy to verbalize it. Thank you so much, Ross. And thank you, Lena, for taking my question. When we think about micro-credentials most of the time it's really adult learning. But I can see the possibilities throughout where we are in our learning journey, especially in the K to 12 sector. One of the projects that I'm working on is, excuse me, really looking at how we can use micro-credentials as an alternate learning pathway for high-school graduates who may not necessarily be ready for post-secondary, whether it's trades or whether it's formal, formal institutions. And so my question to you is, do you see a pathway there and what leadership strategies should be considered or need to consider to introduce and embed micro-credential as an alternative learning pathway for our new high school graduates.

LENA:

Such a great idea and such a rich question. Thank you Jean, really appreciate it. I think that the first most important thing about building a pathway is to make sure that what's on the other end. Where are these? Where, how is this... How is this credential facilitating a journey for those individuals? Because sometimes you don't need a credential, right? Sometimes you just need the learning. So this is an important question. You gotta ask yourself like, do we need a credential here? Is a credential gonna be the thing that's really going to make a difference? And if yes, because it often is, then where is that? What space is that translating into? I'd be really interested to hear from you about, yeah, about what's on the other end of that pathway. But I think it sounds lovely and really exciting option for a young person who may not know whether they're ready for four years of deep learning and self-exploration. Maybe they want to go do something else, but they still need, they still want or would benefit from having something. The second half of your question was about leadership approaches. And I'm assuming that you're talking about maybe your role in leading those conversations. Or I'm not sure if you're talking about leadership of the learner. But if it's your role in leading those conversations, I think it really starts with working with those students. I would get, I would get some of those students together, engage with them, and have them work with you to map that pathway and co-create that learning opportunity. That was gonna be the thing that they needed to go on with their career. I hope that helps answer the question, but I think it's a really exciting area. I've never

worked in any K to 12 bridging projects myself, but I would love to hear what you come up with.

ROSS:

Great, Thank you so much. And thanks again, Lena, for that great keynote with lots of, lots of things for us to think about. It also really did answer the why. Why competencies are at the core of micro-credentials.