

Intro (00:03):

Hello, and welcome to the CPA Australia podcast. Your weekly source for accounting education and career and leadership discussion.

Jackie Blondell (00:18):

Hello, and thank you for joining us today. I'm Jackie Blondell and editor within the Black Magazine. And joining us today is Simon Eassom, who is CPA Australia's executive general manager for member education. Dr. Simon Eassom has more than 20 years experience in the higher education sector. He is responsible for leading at CPA Australia's member education offerings from initial qualification through to essential continuing professional development, including setting the strategy that will lead the future of learning at CPA Australia.

Jackie Blondell (00:50):

Simon has international experience gained from various roles in the UK higher education sector. And most recently, as a strategy and solutions leader for IBM's global education industry, working extensively throughout the Asia Pacific region. Simon holds a Bachelor of Education, Honours, from the University of Warwick, a Master of Arts from University of Alberta and a PhD in Philosophical Ethics from De Montfort University.

Jackie Blondell (01:19):

Welcome Simon. It's great to have you here.

Simon Eassom (01:21):

Hi, Jackie. Great to be here.

Jackie Blondell (01:23):

Lovely. Let's kick off with the first question. What is a micro credential?

Simon Eassom (01:26):

Well, a micro credential is just as it sounds, it is a form of credential that is a form of recognition for a skill or expertise, typically, usually in a certificate form from a period of learning, but it's a small piece of learning. Unlike a degree, which might take you four years or a postgraduate certificate or master's degree, which might take one to two years, a micro credential is usually awarded for a period of learning of much less, typically anywhere between a few hours up to a maximum of say 120 hours, which would be the equivalent to a university degree subject, for example.

Jackie Blondell (02:07):

Right. Now, I believe there are digital badges involved. What does this signify to others in the industry and to potential employers?

Simon Eassom (02:16):

Well, we're used to certificates as paper things, and of course most of us lose them. If you've graduated for some years and someone says, have you got a degree and you've got to dig out in your cupboard somewhere to try and find this certificate, or you've got to apply to the university to get a copy of one.

And even then certificates can be forged which [inaudible 00:02:36] quite a significant amount, believe it or not on people's CVs.

Simon Eassom (02:41):

And so a digital badge or a digital certificate is simply a way in which you can represent that achievement digitally through an icon, so just as a symbol of a badge or a shield that can be used to display on your LinkedIn profile or in your email signature, but the important thing about a digital icon is that it contains metadata so it's not just a picture.

Simon Eassom (03:04):

It actually has a link to a site that will host those badges for you, and they will contain data around, when did you achieve the certification? Who was the author of the certification, in other words, which institution or education body awarded you the certification? When did you get it? How long does it last? Is it of a nature that the currency of it lasts for a year, three years, five years, 10 years? Would it be out of date? And what level? Is it introductory level? Is it intermediate level? Is it expert level? What were the learning outcomes? What is it a measure of? What did you achieve? And was it assessed and how was it assessed? And was it assessed in some kind of face to face manner, or was it through an examination?

Simon Eassom (03:47):

All of that data, we call it metadata can be embedded in that digital badge so that anybody who wishes to can interrogate it. They can click on the badge, it takes them to the site that hosts your badges for them. And that site of course manages the whole process so that they're tamper-proof and they actually check that the issuing authority has approved that you should have this badge.

Simon Eassom (04:11):

So, it gives employers for one thing, a great deal of comfort around the validity of the certification. So typically it, most of us tell all sorts of things on CVs and job applications about our experience, but the employer doesn't know any of it for certain, but with a digital badge, they can interrogate that and get a great deal more comfort around the validity of that certification.

Simon Eassom (04:34):

From the employee or from the owner of the badges point of view it's fantastic. So, if you think of your smartphone or your tablet, and you might have your credit cards or your store cards in a digital wallet, and you can simply call on them and scan them, or even send them to somebody else, it will be exactly the same with your digital badges. You'll keep them in a digital badge wallet. For example, if somebody says, oh, there's a job at a certain place, are you interested? You can go, yeah, well, let me send the company your details. I can simply share across my phone, three or four of my micro-credentials and digital certificates onto their phone. They can take them off, give them to an employer, show them to them, or even send them. And you don't need to write a letter of application. You don't need to produce a CV. Your credentials are there in a digital form.

Jackie Blondell (05:25):

Sometimes writing a letter of application is the hardest part of the job so I'm sure a lot of people will be pleased with that concept. Now, can we talk about micro-credentials stacking and how does this change the future of education?

Simon Eassom (05:40):

Well, stacking means kind of what it says. It means that in some cases micro-credentials are not just standalone certificates for one piece of learning. They actually might follow related subjects. So, you might break down a complex subject into a number of smaller areas and people might take individual micro-credential courses around those areas, but if they collect all of them, if they then stack them, and typically we mean by stacking you're taking them in a certain order and you're building up. So, the idea of a stack is you're building up from a low level to a higher, complete stack of micro-credentials that might lead to another award, or might lead to representation of something bigger than the sum of the parts.

Simon Eassom (06:32):

So typically, let me give you an example. You might have... And CPA Australia will follow this format, you might have micro-credentials representing about 20 hours of learning. Now, if six of them are on a related topic, if you stack all 60 and say that they actually consist of one unified topic, if somebody takes all six, we've done 120 hours of learning. 120 hours is roughly the equivalent to a university subject. Now, if that subject was at the proficient level or at the mastery level, it would be equivalent to a university undergraduate subject or postgraduate degree subject.

Simon Eassom (07:07):

So, stacking gives the opportunity to then award a further certification that's relevant to the whole stack of micro-credentials. So that way they become very, very useful building blocks. And you also in a stack, you might not need to take all of them. So, if you already have proven expertise in one or two of the items in the stack, you can get exemption perhaps from some of those and therefore just do the other three or four, and you can build your stack into a definition of who you are and what you are in terms of your learning and your skills.

Jackie Blondell (07:45):

How does this stacking actually change the future of education? How will it affect it?

Simon Eassom (07:47):

Micro-credentials in general are part and parcel of the whole future of learning and work. So there's no two ways about it. We are going to move into a situation where the requirement is to continually learn throughout your working life. Now, we've talked about that for a long time of course. We talk about continuous professional development, we talk about lifelong learning. But in some respects, people view that as, well, as soon as I need to, I will go back and do another piece of learning. So I recognise that mid career, I might have to go and do a different degree, or I might have to do an MBA or something else, or that I might have some professional requirement within my job that I've got to take to get a project management certificate or something.

Simon Eassom (08:33):

So, we've talked about it for a long time, but micro-credentials are going to change the whole way in which we educate and the whole way in which we continue to learn. There are two reasons for this. One is because the kinds of skills that we're currently seeing demanded by employers are a whole new area of skills, particularly around data and digitization of content, that are very fluid. We call them liquid skills because although the skill might be related to data management, the requirements of what that skill

means will change continuously. And so the acceleration of technological change in the world of work is going to mean that the kinds of skills we need around those technologies will constantly be changing.

Simon Eassom (09:16):

So, it's no longer a case that you'll study something for this period of time, and then once you've learned it, that's it, go and apply it and you don't need to study it again. Actually the skills you learn will constantly need to be upgraded as technology changes and improves. And that process is accelerating so it'll be more required for us to continue to change. So, that's the first thing.

Simon Eassom (09:36):

Second thing is, that with micro-credentials and within the world of education, we're going to see a move away from continually looking towards our current education institutions. That doesn't mean to say that they won't still serve the same purpose, or they won't be relevant, but when you come to reeducating, it won't automatically be that you'll look back at going to a tertiary education institution or some other provider, because education is now being provided by everybody. It's ubiquitous so it's being provided by individual corporations and typically in the technology sector, companies like Apple and Microsoft and IBM are very big in the whole area, are all actually teaching and learning now and providing micro-credentials around the skillsets and technology skills they require in their business and in their industry.

Simon Eassom (10:25):

Industry is getting into education. You're also getting students requiring the opportunity to gain further forms of certification. That aren't necessarily part of a long course that we typically have used in the past, such as a university degree, in many cases, we've got a number of situations arising that we're seeing across the world where a university degree alone, no longer guarantees you a job, or even a degree in a continued tertiary education skill, even postgraduate isn't providing the full range of what we call hybrid skills that you need in the world of work.

Simon Eassom (11:05):

So micro-credentials is going to be important to supplement those, but they're also going to be an important way into building blocks of different forms of certification. So you're going to see students, especially post COVID-19. You're going to see students asking very serious questions about the return on their investment for their education.

Simon Eassom (11:23):

They're going to say, well, maybe if I just do some micro-credentials plus one year of a course and then build up my own portfolio that makes me quite differentiated in the economy and the job marketplace. Then actually I don't need a degree, or I don't need a postgraduate degree, or I don't need to commit myself to four years, six years, eight years of study in order to get this. So you'll see people dipping in using, micro-credentials getting a job then going back and perhaps doing a full length degree.

Simon Eassom (11:52):

Now, stacking with micro-credentials becomes very important then because the student will go to a provider such as a university and say, I already have all of these skills. And they're certified. They've actually been validated and credentialed and they mean something in terms of the amount of hours of

study I've done. Why can't I get credit for those against your existing programme? Why do I have to do everything again within your firewalls, so to speak?

Simon Eassom (12:16):

Now, this is all speculative, but we are seeing these changes and it's demand-driven from the point of view of the learner, as well as from the point of view of the employer. I think we're moving into an area where then the next five to 10 years, everything is going to be rather shaken up and I think COVID-19 has probably accelerated that in terms of the way in which we look at what we call a mixed economy of education provision, that is part private sector, part public sector, part tertiary institution-based part corporate-based where people will collect credentials and mix and match and build their skillset.

Simon Eassom (12:55):

Now, that means you need to have a framework, which is part of what CPA Australia has done is built a framework to make sure that we're aligned with all the different players in the market that enable us to then offer the best possible value for our members by gathering micro-credentials because of the way in which there'll be able to use them as a currency that is interchangeable across multiple providers.

Jackie Blondell (13:19):

I know we're talking speculation here, but where does this leave the traditional qualifications and development? Are we saying that micro-credentials are much more customizable than the traditional [inaudible 00:13:32]?

Simon Eassom (13:32):

That's a really question. There's always going to be a place for the tertiary education sector and don't get me wrong. Universities are going to be very important and they're going to continue with their role, but even the tertiary education sector is responding with a move towards micro-credentials. They're gaining mainstream acceptance. Certainly in the Australian university sector, there are 36 out of the 42 universities in Australia that are already offering or developing micro-credentials for their own students and efforts are being made all the time and continually to align micro-credential frameworks with the work of things like the Australian Qualifications Framework, which is the process by which you can check against your own framework, the qualification systems of other institutions or even other countries.

Simon Eassom (14:16):

So it's making sure that everything is aligned if you like. And so it's not that one will replace the other, but you will begin to see the way in which you're adding value. So typically the way university sector is using micro-credentials is to say that, well, the student has done some in-depth study around a particular domain, the subject they've chosen to study. Now that can be quite a narrow domain, such as an academic subject, like English or chemistry or physics, but it might be a broader one such as business and management or commerce, for example.

Simon Eassom (14:49):

When you've done this in study around a particular subject, but there's lots more you've done in a degree that isn't embedded in the [testima 00:14:57] of your degree, in terms of the courses you took, for example, you might've learned a great deal about collaboration and ability to work with your colleagues on projects. You might've learned a great deal about presentation skills and how to stand up in front of a crowd and present to them in a dynamic sort of way.

Simon Eassom (15:16):

You might've learned a great deal about research methods. You might've learned a great deal about creativity, and these are things that aren't measured necessarily in the testima. So what we might do is then say, well, if you did five or six courses out of your 24 in your degree where clearly you had to present to an audience and you were graded and assessed on your ability to present, then why not give you a micro-credential that represents that skill, because then you have something else where when you leave my university, you can say, I have a degree in X plus I have these micro-credentials to show I have skills in these particular areas.

Simon Eassom (15:52):

So the university is getting into micro-credentials in that way as a sort of adjunct to what you're doing as part of your formal learning over a long course. And so you're beginning to see the way in which micro-credentials will be used by different sectors. And so we'll see the value of them being created in different ways by industry and by the university sector.

Jackie Blondell (16:14):

Can I ask you how micro-credentials are graded and assessed?

Simon Eassom (16:19):

Well, that's a really good question because it's a bit of the Wild West at the moment. So micro-credentials have been around for a good 10 or so years, but they really came from industry and they came typically in the technology sector to begin with. They came as a means of formally recognising skills and in some cases you rewarded a micro-credential without doing anything other than simply being in a job and demonstrating every single day that you had that skill.

Simon Eassom (16:46):

So your employer chose to issue you with a micro-credential as a formal recognition of that skill. So, as I said, it's a bit of a Wild West in that there are many micro-credentials out there where they haven't been assessed at all. In some cases, you're given a badge just for taking a one hour, two hour course. It is difficult for employers and it is difficult even for learners themselves to understand how you compare micro-credentials. And that's certainly part of the challenge at the moment with the world of micro-credentials as to how you determine what they're worth and what their value is.

Simon Eassom (17:23):

CPA Australia is set out with a very clear programme and a very clear framework that every single micro-credential we issue will be assessed. So assessment becomes a key component of that. In fact, the way we are using micro-credentials, which is very much aligned to the way in which the tertiary sector is using them, is that there are some rules and guidelines will follow around two things. One is the micro-credential, the badge and the certificate will be representative of an equivalent hours of learning as a consistent measure and it will represent the kind of average amount of time that a new learner, somebody who's new to a subject or with little, no prior experience of that topic or skill, how long would they require to develop the required competencies that's being expressed by the learning outcomes in that micro-credential.

Simon Eassom (18:13):

We're going to work in packets of 20 hours, 30 hours, 40 hours, 60 hours. All CPA micro-credentials will be representative of that kind of length of learning and then the second part, the second guideline or rule that we will adhere to is that there must be some evidence of achievement of those learning outcomes, and that's objectively measurable and demonstrable. So typically there will be assessment embedded into CPA micro-credentials.

Simon Eassom (18:40):

Now, the value of that for the learner and for the CPA member is that employers will have a great deal of confidence about what a CPA micro-credential means. They will understand because we will communicate with them and educate them around what the sort of bundles of learning are that CPA is measuring and how we're assessing them and at what level we're assessing them. So we have something called a capability framework, and that capability framework has a whole list of the types of capabilities we think an accountant should have, or a business professional should have, and it would include competencies.

Simon Eassom (19:14):

And those competencies will be measured by all of our micro-credentials and would have learning outcomes mapped against those competencies. So an employer will get a great deal of confidence of knowing what a CPA micro-credential is worth, and they will have high value because against, in this sea of micro-credentials where some of them are built according to certain standards, and some are just given for anything, then players like CPA will rise to the top of having a clear framework with a very clear value proposition about the quality and the meaning of a CPA micro-credential, which will be extremely important for the learner and the employer.

Jackie Blondell (19:52):

So we all moving away from... I'm very surprised to hear by the way that they've been going on for 10 years, I'm surprised at that, but we are moving now from the Wild West to a more rigorous approach to micro-credentials would you say?

Simon Eassom (20:06):

Absolutely, and they're over a million micro-credentials out there. Many of them issued by the technology companies that have all got their own micro-credential programmes. I mean, IBM are one of the first companies that started that. When I was working for IBM, was heavily involved in the development of what we called open badges, which would open and anybody could apply for them. Anybody could take the courses required to be given them. They didn't have to be an IBM employee. We had over 1200 open badges, 10 years ago.

Simon Eassom (20:36):

It started really with industry just issuing them, but now of course the higher education sector has become more interested in because we're trying to create uniformity and consistency, so that there's clear understanding of their value. You're starting to see those organisations, typically the higher education institutions, organisations like CPA Australia, trying to align to a clear framework because the most important thing, and there are three sort of four notions we talk about, when we talking about micro-credentials and we talk about things like the currency, the conversion rate of the badge.

Simon Eassom (21:15):

We talk about the consistency and we talk about the confidence. So what we want in terms of a currency, and it's just like a currency, you can imagine acts of units of skill or knowledge in the same way you might talk about dollars and cents and coins. So you can make up \$3 in multiple ways with dollar bills or with 57 coins or 20 cent coins. It will be the same, but you must have consistent units of currency in order to be able to do that stacking or in order to be able to build bigger products.

Simon Eassom (21:45):

Second thing is you need to be able to convert. You need to be able to say, what's the value of this, because it's not just a label, it's not just a name. I need to be able to convert it into something else, perhaps. So I want to be at a trade with it. So that's where stacking comes in, as I've just talked about, and you want consistency. So you want a consistent set of criteria that the employer or anybody else understands about what it means.

Simon Eassom (22:10):

So these things emerge, they evolve and so we are moving out of... and I call it the Wild West because it's sort of, it is lawless in that way. It doesn't have rules and regulations and guidelines, everybody can more or less do what they want. We're seeing that move away and that's normal in, in the growth and evolution of any organisation, whether it's a governing body, whether it's a regulatory body, you see that emergence of slow forms of regular regulation, consistency, procedures, principles, guidelines, rules.

Simon Eassom (22:41):

So we're moving into that space and we're going to see that as individual countries, New Zealand are very, very advanced in this. New Zealand have got a qualifications framework where they absolutely have got micro-credential rules and principles embedded into their whole higher-education framework. So they're a little bit more advanced in Australia. You'll start to see that. You'll see micro-credentials becoming more and more important in every single country's education system, not just as part of industry, but as a formal part of that education system.

Jackie Blondell (23:11):

Simon you've mentioned that micro-credentials come at different levels and they are graded and assessed. How do you actually measure excellence?

Simon Eassom (23:21):

Well, that's a really good point. I mean, we obviously do this all the time with things like the CPA programme and as well as with our professional development office. So we do go through a rigorous academic process of determining what are the learning outcomes we're trying to measure, and then whether the assessment corresponds to measuring those learning outcomes at a particular level. So our new capability framework, we'll actually look at competencies at four levels, both at a sort of an introductory developing level, at a sort of proficiency level where you've got a pretty competent knowledge of a subject, then a mastery level, which is probably the equivalent to a postgraduate certification or a postgraduate degree, and then an expert or thought leader level where you've moved beyond that.

Simon Eassom (24:04):

And so all of our micro-credentials will actually carry a stamp for want of a better term that shows whether you've gained that skill at the developing level, at the proficiency level, at the mastery level or the expert level. So it'd be very clear to an employer, but also to the person who's presenting their micro credentials, whether they have got those at a particular level of experience and understanding that will be part of that presentation of their expertise and skill.

Jackie Blondell (24:32):

It does sound exciting. Let's talk about someone looking to make the next career step or maybe they're looking at planning what their specialisation might be. So we're looking at early to going mid-career say professionals, why are micro-credentials important to these types of people?

Simon Eassom (24:53):

Well, they are really important for a number of reasons? Probably it's around two things, that's the focus. One's an external outside in and inside out. So from an outside in perspective, employers are looking for people with more than just a designation or more than just a degree in a certain subject. Now that might be disappointing for somebody who's just spent a great deal of time and effort getting their CPA designation, let's not undervalue that, that's still the bedrock and the foundation of your career as a professional accountant, it's absolutely essential.

Simon Eassom (25:34):

But what we're now seeing is companies saying, well, I want an accountant, or I need somebody with an accounting background, but they also need these other skills and we call them hybrid skills. So you're starting to see the creation of jobs and job roles, which are a hybrid of somebody who's at the core, an accountant, but they also need skills around things like data management, data analytics, business intelligence, cybersecurity data governance predictive analytics, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, all these different things.

Simon Eassom (26:09):

Now you're not going to go back and do another degree and even then the degree is too broad. We are seeing the formation at postgraduate level of some more specific degrees in these areas. So you can now do degrees at postgraduate, other than things like forensic accounting. So very narrow, very specific degrees, as opposed to the broader accounting degree. But you are going to see these requirements from employers for these hybrid skills. So members need to be able to, and want to be able to upgrade their skills without having to go back and complete another lengthy course or do another degree.

Simon Eassom (26:46):

They want to be able to pursue these just in time skills requirements with bite size chunks of learning that are very accessible. They can actually access them online. They can do them at their own pace and in their own environment using their own equipment. So they can do it on a tablet or on a smartphone or whatever, in terms of the learning. They don't have to go to an institution. They don't have to take time off work. They don't have to sign up for a lengthy semesterized programme for example, and they can keep their skills up to date.

Simon Eassom (27:17):

It doesn't matter whether they're newly qualified or whether they're mid-career. If you look at the mid-career individual, the mid-career individual says, well, perhaps I want to change my job. I want to change the sort of way in which I'm working. I've done this for 15 years, but what can I do? Now, typically the mid-career professional goes and takes another form of long course qualification. Another degree in a different subject. They might do a master's degree or an MBA. They do something at the macro level to kickstart a big shift in their career, but what people don't recognise, and that's very difficult for them to articulate to an employer is what are the skills they've accumulated along the way? Where in the future, those skills will be represented by these micro-credentials certifications, badges, and digital certificates and so on.

Simon Eassom (28:05):

So they'll be able to say, I've got all these skills that I've accumulated as part of my journey through my career. When you look at those skills, if I talk them up with two or three skills in a different area, I can actually shift my whole career from the focus I've had for the last 10 or 15 years into a completely new focus. I can see the way in which I can reinvent myself and I can reinvent myself over and over and over again. That's because the future of work is going to become more defined by your hybrid skillset than it is by your initial qualification or your initial subject that you studied, let's say at university.

Simon Eassom (28:42):

So it's going to become a very important process, whether you are newly qualified or a mid-career professional or late-career professional, in terms of how you reinvent yourself through your upskilling and reskilling.

Jackie Blondell (28:54):

You mentioned late-career professionals. How about those at the top of their game? They might be looking to upskill in an existing role, maybe even moving free, say from a CFO role into another type of executive role, how can they use micro-credentials?

Simon Eassom (29:09):

Well micro-credentials are equally valid. There are two things here that are really important. One is that micro-credentials will show you the level of understanding and skill. So micro-credentials can be issued for an area at a very introductory level, but they can also be issued at the expert level. The capability framework that CPA Australia is the new capability framework the CPA Australia's is developed has those different levels embedded within it.

Simon Eassom (29:35):

So we measure the competencies of somebody who you would consider an expert or a thought leader, and we will have micro-credential offerings specifically for people at that level around those different competencies. So another thing about micro-credentials is that it does differentiate that level of capability. So it's equally valuable to the late-career professional or the expert or the person who's already in a fairly high position within an organisation.

Simon Eassom (30:02):

Second thing about it is that the sorts of skills that you realise you need to develop when you get to that point are demonstrably different than perhaps the technical skills that you learned early on in your career.

Simon Eassom (30:15):

We typically find that a lot of CEOs, for example, in your newly minted CEOs don't actually have a lot of experience around things like persuasive presentations, how they lead, how they manage high performing teams, how they will develop the staff that report directly to them to be a high-performing senior management team, how they might do business intelligence analysis that they previously relied on part of the finance team to do, for example.

Simon Eassom (30:47):

So what analytics skills and what kinds of strategic skills do they need when they're moving into those positions. Some of those we call soft skills. Some of them are called behavioural skills, leadership skills, but they're all things that can be micro-credential and they're all things that typically don't exist as part of a long course, such as a degree. So micro-credentials are becoming increasingly important at every level, in not only offering course ware, but also certification around those skills, soft skills, behavioural skills, leadership skills, entrepreneurial skills that senior executives need to demonstrate, or perhaps have not accumulated along the way and there were some gaps in their learning.

Simon Eassom (31:27):

We, for example partner, very strongly with Harvard Business School. We've got a number of programmes that are available to our members already around all sorts of business, mentoring and management, how you lead teams, how you develop your individual staff and so on. They're very exciting set of online professional development courses. We will be looking to stack some of those into micro-credentials. So you can actually get in a formal CPA in Harvard certification in some of those skills that are equally exciting and valuable to our senior executives as they are to some of our newly qualified members.

Jackie Blondell (32:04):

So lifelong learning really is key then.

Simon Eassom (32:07):

Well, it is, and we're living longer and given what's happening, we'll probably be working longer. The idea of retiring at in our late 50s or 60s is more and more going to be a luxury and what the world will be like for those people who are newly qualified in their mid to late 20s and going out and starting their careers.

Simon Eassom (32:28):

What the world of work is going to like in 10 years time, you had loan in 30 or 40 years time is entirely different. We will be engaged in continuous learning, and we will restructure our education institutions and our education provision accordingly. You know, I'd love to sort of see, I won't be around, but I'd love to see what the world might look like in 50, 60 years in terms of the way we treat learning and education, because it will move away from an industrial model of box and corridor teaching in institutions that take you from five years old to 11, and then from 12 to 18, and then from 18 onwards in a tertiary system, I think we'll see the breakdown of those things. And we'll see learning embedded in everything we do for the entirety of our lives.

Jackie Blondell (33:17):

It'll make life more interesting. That's for sure. Let's look at... go back to the early stage people, because I think we can't overemphasise this. You may be saying, well, I have my CPA qualification. Why should I in the first five years top up my qualification?

Simon Eassom (33:34):

Well, that's a really good question. It's a question we often ask and why doesn't anybody take a seventh CPA programme subjects or eighth CPA programme subject. We've got nine on the programme and you take six to complete your CPA certification. Well, why don't you as a matter of interest or professional development, or in terms of filling out your entire portfolio of capability, why don't you take a seventh, eighth, and ninth subject? The reasons are fairly simple. It's not just a rhetorical question. The reasons are fairly straightforward and simple. One is they're not very accessible once you're in the world of work. They're heavily based around semesterized courses, examinations, they're expensive. They have a great deal of time commitment to do the whole subject.

Simon Eassom (34:26):

And so it's a bit off putting, and you've just been there. I've just done four years of an undergraduate degree. I might've done two years of a postgraduate degree. Then I'll spend two or three years doing my CPA certification. I'm over it. I've done with learning, get me out of here. Let me get on with my job and earn some money. There's not a great deal of motivation to continue with it. So one thing that we can do with micro-credentials is the opposite of stacking and we use the term unbundling. So you can take something that's quite inaccessible, quite expensive, quite complex, quite time consuming such as a CPA programme subject and unbundle it because the content is fantastic and the content is really interesting to people who might not have taken that subject as part of that programme.

Simon Eassom (35:09):

So there's an opportunity there for if you unbundle that subject and present it in consumable bite-sized chunks of say 20 hours for people who have just qualified to continue their learning in a much easier format and more easily digestible structure whilst they get on with their career and get on with earnings and money and get on with building their career development. So it is still important and I think it's important particularly for the newly qualified and newly certified member to actually start to differentiate themselves and begin to define themselves because at the end of the day, even though they have a very important designation as becoming a CPA member, we all look the same. We are all CPA members.

Simon Eassom (35:58):

How do I add that bit of differentiation to my portfolio, to my persona that says, yes, I'm now a fully qualified accountant, but I also have expertise in these other hybrid skills. How can I begin to differentiate myself in this very, very difficult job market. Where, I want to be able to show myself to be more employable than somebody else. It's partly why the university sector, as I said, are starting to move into micro-credentials to help their students differentiate themselves from other university students. And it's a way in which a newly qualified CPA can begin to think about developing their own personalised presentation about who they are in order to get a better job or a different job.

Jackie Blondell (36:42):

Say I already have a skill. How does demonstrating it with a micro-credential benefit me?

Simon Eassom (36:49):

Well, the thing with micro-credentials is that it's actually giving the formal recognition from somebody else that you have the skill. Many of us have skills, many of us develop those skills and we develop them... We almost develop through osmosis. You know, they just kind of become part of us just through the everyday way in which we are interacting in the workplace with different requirements. But it's hard to articulate them. And it's hard to actually... [inaudible 00:37:17] particularly on a letter application or a CV, it's hard to tell somebody what they are. And of course, at the end of the day, we can all say who we are, and it doesn't necessarily give confidence to somebody else that we're genuine or that they fully understand what that means.

Simon Eassom (37:33):

So the micro-credential is very, very important because it gives external validation of what it is you say you can do. Now, the whole idea behind one aspect of micro-credentials is that it's perfectly feasible for you to be given a micro-credential without doing the required learning, because we're all coming from a different position. So it might be that I've decided that I've actually got some skills that I've developed in the workplace, but I have no form of certification to prove that I've got them. So rather than taking the course of study, I might just take the assessment. If I think I'm ready, I might go and be assessed in that.

Simon Eassom (38:10):

We are going to explore that with our CPA micro-credential framework, we're going to explore the possibility that members can take an assessment to prove they have the competence without necessarily engaging in the formal study. Because as I've said to you in the definition of micro-credentials and some of the rules, the hours of study are representative of what it would take somebody new to a subject to study for that subject. Somebody else might already be there. We're going to move in the future towards, on demand assessment, within everything to do with all of our certification education, particularly on the CPA certification programmes.

Simon Eassom (38:47):

So we're going to move eventually in the next two or three years to an opportunity to anybody to be assessed whenever they think they're ready. So when you think you can demonstrate the competence, you can be assessed and be ready. So micro credentials are really important for those two reasons. One is it's an external validation of the skill you're saying you already have. So somebody else is agreeing with you and somebody else is validating it. And an authority is then saying, I'm prepared to give my stamp of approval that we have assessed you and recognise you have that skill. Then the second thing is the micro-credential gives somebody an opportunity to be certified first for skill they have and they want to be able to articulate, but have no means of demonstrating that other than saying, "Oh, I've got this skill trust me."

Simon Eassom (39:30):

It is about trust. All education systems are about trust. Where an employer trusts the education institution to say to them, this person has the learning, the knowledge, the skills, the understanding, the capabilities that they say they have because we've tested it and measured it and provided it.

Jackie Blondell (39:48):

I think that's brilliant because often that is the problem demonstrating to a would be employee that you have that skill and having that employer understand that you do. I think that's great. So Simon you've

mentioned that CPA Australia is developing its own micro-credentials programme. When is it coming? When can we see it?

Simon Eassom (40:06):

Well, it's in progress now. We have a micro-credential framework. So we have the rules and the principles and the guidelines, we know how we're going to offer those micro-credentials to our members. So in the second half of this year, you'll start to see those first offers where we'll have a few test cases. We'll certainly make the value proposition to our members. Very good, very exciting. Particularly in this COVID-19 world, but you will start to see in the second half of this year, our first micro-credential certificates on offer, and then increasingly as we move into next year and beyond, you'll see them expanded into a multitude of potential professional development offers and also part of CPA programme subject in terms of digital certification. So it's going to be a very exciting six to 12 months ahead of us.

Jackie Blondell (40:52):

We look forward to seeing what's going to happen in that time period and if listeners want to find any more details about the topics we discussed in this podcast, they can be found in the show notes. Well, Simon, thank you very much for your time. We've learned a lot today about our brave new world of lifelong learning. We'll be topping up our skills in a customizable way with micro-credentials. Thank you very much indeed for your time.

Simon Eassom (41:19):

Thank you for having me, Jackie.

Jackie Blondell (41:20):

Thank you.

Outro (41:21):

Thanks for listening to the CPA Australia podcast. For more information on today's episode, please visit the show notes at www.cpaaustralia.com.edu/podcast. Never miss an episode by subscribing to our podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Stitcher.