TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

STACKING SKILLS: MICROCREDENTIALS AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SECTOR LEARNING

WORK WITH PURPOSE | EPISODE #143

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28 July 2025
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Delivered in a partnership between IPAA ACT and contentgroup

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David Pembroke: Hello everyone, and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian people. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. As we begin, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders past, present, and emerging. I also acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region, and indeed extend that respect to other First Nations families connected with our region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is joining us from.

Lifelong learning is for all of us essential, if we are going to continue to make a useful contribution in our working lives. As the impacts of digital transformation continue to swim through all parts of both our professional and personal lives, we must keep our knowledge and skills relevant and up to date. But where is the time, I hear you ask? A three-year undergraduate degree or master's degree just doesn't fit with a busy life and a demanding schedule. While listening to podcasts and reading LinkedIn posts is useful, it isn't quite what's required to build necessary and useful skills.

An emerging and increasingly popular form of knowledge and skills acquisition are the micro-credential. This time-efficient model of learning includes short, stackable, academic approved courses that meet university quality standards. They open pathways and earn credit for further postgraduate university qualifications. During 2024, the APS Academy has worked with the University of New South Wales, Canberra, Flinders University, and the University of Melbourne on a set of specific micro-credentials which are designed to enhance the skills and capability of Australia's public servants.

Professor Deborah Blackman is the Associate Dean of Lifelong Learning at the University of New South Wales Canberra. She's responsible for the development of the University of New South Wales Canberra micro credentialing portfolio, which includes the research, design and application of courses, including public sector policy implementation, systems level change, employee performance management, organisational learning, and organisational effectiveness. She joins me in the studio. Professor Blackman, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Professor Deborah Blackman: Thank you very much. Thank you for being here.

David Pembroke: Kristen Risby leads the Capability Strategy and Insights Team at the Australian Public Service Commission. Kristen has over 30 years of

experience in learning and development across public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, and is currently responsible for shaping the system-wide approaches to workforce development. She has been instrumental in designing the APS learning and development strategy and action plan, and for establishing partnerships with universities to co-design postgraduate micro-credentials that are practical, scalable, and aligned to Australian public sector needs. Kristen, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Kristen Risby: Thank you, David.

David Pembroke: Deborah, I might start with you. In learning and development circles, micro-credentials are all the rage. Why are they so popular, and how are they different to just your garden variety short course?

Professor Deborah Blackman: Well, if I'm going to be honest, sometimes they're not. One of the really important things to understand is that not every micro-credential you look at is exactly the same. To me, a micro-credential is what I would describe as an accredited short course. I.e. at the end of it, you actually get units of credit from the administering organisation. That's why universities are particularly interested in them, because that's how they become stackable. A lot of micro-credentials, really, they're the same as a digital badge, if we're going to be honest. They're quite interesting. They're good to do. They're a short, sharp bite of learning and they're very useful, but they don't necessarily give you the option to stack. What we are talking, and what we did with the APSC, which was so valuable and so interesting, and when we were doing it, was that these were ones which if you put them together, they can start to get credit towards other qualifications at universities. And so, the size that we were working on were two credit points, which is quite common. When I say two credit points, the volume of learning of a course that the government recognises is usually 150 hours, 50 hours is usually a micro. It's a small chunk of learning, but it's assessed. The critical thing, I would say, in terms of making them successful, is that you make them very valuable to the people who are going, and in this case, the APSC, so that the assessment is really embedding the learning back into the organisations they're coming from. That's when I think they become really valuable.

David Pembroke: Are any two micro-credentials the same, or are they all different?

Professor Deborah Blackman: Well, that's a very interesting question. I suspect that many are different. I'm going to pass over, because there's somebody who knows about the different ones that she had.

Kristen Risby: From my perspective, they're all different. They're different in topic, they're different in credit value, they're different in duration of hours. They're different with respect to the target audience, as well as the qualification level that they are pitched around.

David Pembroke: Take me through the process then, really, of how does this work? Deborah, do you ring Kristen and say, "Hey, I've got an idea?" Or is it Kristen saying to you, Deborah, "Hey, we have consulted with our audience and, really, we've identified that there's potential here for a micro-credential" Where does it start, or does it start both ways? Kristen, I'll throw to you on that.

Kristen Risby: Sure, thank you. The ones that we've done, we initially did a single micro-credential as a bit of a test balloon to see whether or not it was doable, and whether or not it translated into public sector practice. We then were very fortunate to be able to seek some funding through the Capability Reinvestment Fund, which identified six critical priorities for development. We then isolated out three of those development areas, and conceptualised the opportunity for developing micro-credentials.

David Pembroke: So it started with that exploration of the Capability Investment Fund priorities to be able to say, okay, if they're the priorities, what do we need to be teaching? And then you stripped it out from there. What was that? What was the first one that came out?

Kristen Risby: We actually, through that fund, there was an opportunity for us to develop three micro-credentials. One was around gender impact analysis, the other was around strategic foresight, and then the third was around developing Pacific cultural capability, which we did with Flinders University. Our approach when we went to market, we essentially put a tender out into the marketplace, and people like Deborah came forward and pitched us their concept around micro-credentials. But our approach was really defined around we want a micro-credential at a postgraduate level, because we were very focused on developing the systems thinking, critical thinking skills of our public servants. We thought that was an important consideration in determining the right complexity or pitch of the qualification, not just the topic.

And then the other key thing for us was we wanted to ensure that we could co-design the micro-credential with the universities. We have extraordinary expertise within the public sector, and we want to be able to harness that public sector expertise and bring a level of relevancy and job readiness to the development of academic programs or courses.

David Pembroke: Deborah, the RFQ, the RFT, whatever was, lands on your desk, what happened on the day that arrived? Take us through the story.

Professor Deborah Blackman: Well, to be fair, when it came in, it came into different parts of the university. And so, we partnered with the Australian Graduate School of Management, which is based in Sydney, because obviously we've got UNSW in Sydney and in Canberra. It was clear that it was one of those ones that we wanted to do together, because we had skills on both campuses, and also it just made sense that we worked together on that one. Then we all sat down and we said, can we do this? We said, yes. Who's got the expertise? Who's got the skills? Why do we think we would be the right people to do it? I would say that this is one where we did follow the tender. We do others the other way up, where we go, we have the researchers who have a really strong skill set in this area, and we think this would make a good micro, so it does work in both ways. But in this one it was like, yep, we've got people who can do this. Let's put it together. Let's write a tender that we think is compelling, and send it and cross you fingers, which is what always happens with a tender.

David Pembroke: Very true. In terms then of planning for the co-design, how do you go about that particular piece, given that Kristen and her team made it pretty clear that we're coming with you on this journey and we want to be involved?

Professor Deborah Blackman: To be honest, that was not an issue for us at all, because that's pretty much how we do all of our work. One of the things for both AGSM and all of the people at UNSW Canberra, we're used to working with government. We expect to do co-design. We actually prefer it that way, because that way you know that the client is getting what they're expecting, as opposed to a horrible surprise later on. I know we wrote in there, this is how we'll do it. We'll talk to you, we'll have sessions, we'll do this, we'll do that, because that's what we do. That was never an issue. We knew that we were going to be working with their experts, and to be honest, we welcomed it.

David Pembroke: And so, Kristen, from your point of view, how were you going to contribute to that co-design? What was it that you were specifically bringing to the discussion?

Kristen Risby: For myself personally, as well as my team, we really were just facilitators, and sometimes we were mothers smoothing over any tension that might've existed. But we-

David Pembroke: Tell us more about that, were there tension?

Kristen Risby: Yeah. Well, yes, but I think good co-design process has to surface that. If there isn't tension around different perspectives or concepts, I don't believe you're doing it right. I think it's important to give people a permission structure to disagree, because that brings the innovation and the creativity to the surface. For us, the tension really manifested through academic perspectives that may actually differ from government, or the government of the day policy or posture. When we are looking to develop a solution that is fit for purpose and is job ready, it needs to equip public servants with the ability to perform on the job, and in the current context or climate. For us, it was a little bit of smoothing over the waters, facilitating, and really helping people understand those different perspectives. I think the other thing that we did within my particular team was really try to identify where the practitioners were from across the system. We stood up an advisory group. We put through an expression of interest for public servants to come forward who had some expertise around the particular topic, that wanted to participate in the co-design, not only with ourselves but also with the university. And then we really brought that group together with the academics at key points within the design journey to both influence learning outcomes, shape assessment activities, review materials, but also surface key resources that was helpful for the university to understand the APS context.

David Pembroke: Typically, Deborah, how long did this particular micro-credential take to develop?

Professor Deborah Blackman: I think we had three months from start, I think.

Kristen Risby: It was a tight timeframe.

Professor Deborah Blackman: It was a really tight time frames, and we knew that. We knew going in that this... One of the things you have to accept as a university when you're going into something like this, is you know it's a different style of business. If you want to be nice and slow and have a think about it, probably not the one to do. But if you go into it knowing that you're going to be doing this and this, we knew what the timelines were, we were comfortable with that. There were a couple of things behind the scenes that were always going to be exciting, but we got them sorted.

David Pembroke: What about the academic rub that Kristen was talking about, where it sounds like the academics were like, "Well, that doesn't quite fit with the theory"? As to the public servants, well, that's great. But-

Professor Deborah Blackman: No, I wouldn't say that it didn't fit with the theory. I think it's about what you prioritise. There were two different areas where we had to have a really big think, or different on each of the micros that we did. One was, who was the target market? Some people thought it should be for experts, some people thought it should be for everybody who was a beginner coming in. That was a big difference of perception. We had to decide, we had to make a decision as a group, because it hadn't been clear when we started that there was going to be that difference. For example, there was that, and then that made a big difference on the content. The other was about, yes, in particular topic areas, academics get very excited about certain things that they think are really important. Kristen's team were not quite so convinced about that. And so, we all had a chat and we worked on a way forward that made everybody happy. But it wasn't that it was right or wrong, it's just what do you prioritise? It comes back to what was important for the APSC at the time, and that was where we landed, was you have to do that. The other issue, of course, is that sometimes there's some research that we would want to bring in because we think it's really interesting, but they're going, "It might be interesting, but really, please not now." It's all about what your interests are.

David Pembroke: I imagine that's a fairly typical sort of engagement between the university as the service delivery, and the APSC or the federal government as the partner. Or, sorry, as the customer.

Professor Deborah Blackman: Yeah, we do it a lot. And then you work out what are the most important things? Sometimes when we do research, for example, we'll come up with answers that people don't like. We'll have to say, "Well, we're really sorry, but that's what the data says." It's about, what are you talking about? In these ones, it was just about what are the choices that we're making in content? And we can make those choices, and we can do it in a way that everybody felt that we had really good products at the end, and that was the important thing.

David Pembroke: Yeah, of course. The courses were piloted in May last year and then made available to all APS staff later in the year. Kristen, what's the feedback been like?

Kristen Risby: Well, the feedback on the actual programs that we have piloted has been excellent, with respect to learning acquisition and transfer of learning back into the workplace. We ran a fairly comprehensive set of evaluation activities, including obtaining insights from participants and managers several months after the micro credential finished. We wanted to see whether or not the learning was sticky, whether or not it took root in the

workplace and made a difference to the individual performance, but also whether it influenced positively the performance of others within an individual's team. It's been fantastic. We had 88 and 92% of participants, depending on which program we're looking at, that had positive changes back in the workplace, and that data was validated by managers. And 68% of our participants indicated that they saw the value of micro-credentials as a mechanism to support their own career, and were positively influenced and interested in completing additional micro-credentials as a way forward.

David Pembroke: In terms of the impost on the person doing the course for this particular micro-credential we're talking about, what did it look like? How many hours? Were there lectures that they had to attend, tutorials they had to attend, in-person, online, study away from the face-to-face? What did that commitment look like?

Kristen Risby: es, absolutely. I might geek out a little bit here and use some terminology. The programs or the micro credentials themselves included synchronous as well as asynchronous learning, so things that you did together as a group and things that you did by yourself. Study, additional research, deep dives, a little bit of work back into your workplace. As Deborah mentioned earlier, the duration or the actual impost was 50 hours for these particular micro-credentials, across an eight-week period. Individuals would come together for a couple of hours each fortnight? I think we-

Professor Deborah Blackman: It was about five sessions altogether, yeah.

Kristen Risby: Yeah. And then would engage together as a group, but then there would be work for individuals to take offline in between those sessions. It's certainly not for the faint-hearted, but I see part of the value is the learning is spaced. You're revisiting previous content, and you're getting guidance from the lecturers over that period of time. And of course, we're talking micro-credentials, so it's shorter and it offers the short outcomes. It is assessed, and therefore we've got confidence that learning has taken place.

David Pembroke: Deborah, what did your team learn through the application of this micro-credential?

Professor Deborah Blackman: I think it was the first time we had trialled this particular combination of activities in that format. We've done lots of different formats, it's probably the first time we've done that particular one. It's important to know that as a university, we've done quite a lot of online synchronous

learning before, so it wasn't our first time with online. But it was our first time doing online micros in this particular way, so we learned a lot in terms of the value adds. We had always been determined that the assessment would be valuable, so seeing how that worked and making sure that the reflective pieces were actually adding value and we could see how they built, which was what we were doing each time, was people had to think about, how do I take what we've done in the synchronous session, how do I take it straight back into my workplace?

Everybody being asked right at the beginning to identify the thing they wanted to reflect on, and they told us about that upfront, so that they could keep thinking about that issue, problem, plan, whatever it was that they were looking at. And we could see that building, and we could see how that was working, and then they could bring that back. The nice thing as well, is it's amazing how quickly a group can build trust. We were aiming for 20, which is a nice number, because it means it's small enough that online you can still talk to everybody, you can still see everybody, but it's big enough that you've got multiple voices. One of the things for anybody learning online, and many people listening to this will know, is you've got to make sure you don't lose people. But you've also got to make sure that you're not doing that classic pick on everybody on the top left-hand side. We were good at putting people into small groups, we were good at bringing them back again. We learned every system has fun and games, there's always going to be an issue with the software. You just don't know where when you start. But yeah, I think for us, it was really about reflecting on what was working, what wasn't working. When we re-ran the full site course after the first pilot, I know that there were a few tweaks that we made. We were pretty pleased with how it had worked, but we made a few tweaks of the assessment, a few | 8 tweaks of the timing on some of the sessions. But the content, because of the way we'd done it, the content we knew was solid.

David Pembroke: And those results, the satisfaction, 88%, 92%, they're in line with what you would hope or exceeded what your expectations were?

Professor Deborah Blackman: would say they were what we would hope. We would be very upset if we weren't doing a good job. The reality is that's what you're trying to do. You can never be sure. The important thing is we knew we'd had very high levels of engagement in the synchronous sessions, and that tells you that people are with you, and it tells you that people are thinking about it. And then also we could see, again with the reflections, that people were engaging with the content, they were thinking about it. I think the other thing is to say that I was part of the evaluation process, so I went back to talk to a lot of the participants in focus groups. It was really interesting,

people wanted to come back and tell us it had worked. They really wanted to be in the groups. We had to open up a couple to allow more people in, in fact. And they would say, "And I wanted to come and tell you that I really enjoyed it, and it's been really valuable. That's why I wanted to come." It's like, okay, I'm really happy you came. Yeah, nothing's ever perfect. We would always learn from each one. But yeah, we were pleased with it. We knew it was going well when we were going along, to be honest. We knew it was going well.

David Pembroke: Kristen, that's a pilot, so what happens now that you have these successful pilots where you've delivered this micro-credential? How is it going to change the way the Public Service Commission delivers education?

Kristen Risby: That's an excellent question. Micro-credentials have certainly built prominence, post-COVID. Micro-credentials offer the opportunity to be flexible and adaptive in the acquisition of your capability. And so, I think for an individual learner, there's a fabulous value proposition there. For us as the APS Academy, or within the system, micro-credentials are only one component part of what we've got to offer. I think it's really difficult to be early adopters to something which is really a reform initiative.

I'm really hoping that there is a greater awareness of what micro-credentials can offer for individual learners, not only as part of their career but as part of this lifelong learning journey, but also for individual organisations or agencies across the public sector. I think that my hope is that the investment we have made in these micro credentials is realised through greater interest and greater enrolment. We need to work harder at building awareness, and removing any potential confusion as to what a micro-credential is, and it being an assured outcome and of credit-bearing value, so it can articulate into further study. I think we'd like to do more, but it all comes down to timing, and making sure there is a real need and a suitable need for a micro-credential to be developed.

David Pembroke: Deborah, your views? Where do you see the micro-credential sitting as part of that continuous learning and continuous improvement of the skills of Australia's public sectors? Where do you feel it should fit in the mix of offerings that the Public Service Commission offers?

Professor Deborah Blackman: I would probably take the question a bit more broadly, if you don't mind, because I don't think it's just about the commission. Because obviously, we really value working with the commission, but that's not the only way we do micro-credentials. For us, it's about creating a much broader portfolio of micros, and areas that we would do that. Because to be

honest, for the commission, if their learners are going to be able to use them well, then they've got to have things that they can do elsewhere as well. The important part for us is to say, right, where are the other areas? For example, we're going to deliver a small range in probably the next two or three months, one's in evaluation and performance, one's in systems thinking, another's in public service implementation. Those all go together as a nice package, which work for the public service, and hopefully for the APSC if they're interested. But also more broadly-

David Pembroke: So they're not initiated by Public Service Commission?

Professor Deborah Blackman: No. As I said to you, they work both ways. We get some that we do as a result of tender, we do others based on things that we think we do well. And so, at UNSW Canberra, we would say those are three things that are very relevant. When you look at what the Australia Public Service says it needs as durable skills, it needs evaluation, it needs systems thinking, it needs better implementation. Those are all things they talk about. They're things we do. We've got micros in those coming up, and therefore, anybody who's done any at the APSC, if they were interested, could come and take some of those. And then they can build them and put them together, and if they're interested. For me, there's two ways that they really add value. One is for somebody who has an idea that they do want to go back into education, but they're not sure where. And they could start to build and think about, well, I can come in with some credit, and that will help me reduce some of the time later.

The other place where they're really valuable is when people haven't been in education for a while, and they don't want to go straight into a grad cert or something. They want to build up their skills, they want to practice doing assessments, which are more practical assessments to start with, so they feel more confident. And they can build up their confidence, and then they can put some things together, and then they can go, right, now firstly, I know what I want to do, and I know I'm ready for study. That can happen, predominantly at the moment it's at Level 9, which is the postgraduate level, but I can think we can start to see that that may happen at earlier level, for people who have left education early or have been out for a long time. We've got it as part of our veteran strategy, for example, to enable people to think about coming back into education.

David Pembroke: Kristen, just a final question to you. In terms of these micro-credentials, are they now set? Are they now available? Will they continue to be rolled out? Are there opportunities for people to enrol in these, and will they continue into the future? Or is it dependent on funding?

Kristen Risby: Excellent one question there, David. First of all, we have four postgraduate micro-credentials which are available now for members of the public service, and they can enrol in those. As I mentioned, we need to scale up to actually get a greater demand behind those, so that they can run and be very successful within the system. Potentially, there are more around the corner. I guess, again, it comes back down to the demand, the content, the suitability of the content for us. But to Deborah's point earlier, micro-credentials are part of a tapestry of people's lifelong learning. I think prior to micro-credentials coming onto the market, people were learning or developing capabilities through experience, and on the job learning, as well as formal qualifications, or full qualifications that took many years | 10 of investment. And now micro-credentials really offer us the opportunity to weave through a few golden threads, and create a spark, and something that's really interesting to a person's tapestry, and help them shape their own career and be successful within it. I'd love to do more. I think four different micro-credentials at postgraduate levels with three different universities, gives us a really solid base to know how to do it and how to do it well.

David Pembroke: Well, congratulations to you, and to Deborah as well. It sounds like a great initiative, a successful pilot, and really ultimately the beneficiaries will be the Australian people, because we will have a more effective public service because of the people who have these new skills, and they've acquired them in a way that is easier, and more relevant to them and their lives, and it can fit in. Sounds like a great idea. Congratulations on the success, and thanks for coming into the studio today. Thanks to you, audience, for coming back once again. Very grateful for your ongoing support of Work with Purpose. A rating or a review of the podcast is gratefully accepted at any time, because it does help others to find the podcast. You can also listen to the vast library of past episodes on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or wherever it is that you do listen to your podcasts. You can follow contentgroup and IPAA ACT on LinkedIn to stay up to date with all the goings-on with Work with Purpose. If you do have an idea about a person, or a policy, or a program, or something that you would like us to talk about, please be in touch with us and we will arrange that guest, or that topic, or that discussion for you. We always like to hear from our audience. Work with Purpose is produced in collaboration between contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration of Australia, ACT. My name is David Pembroke. We will be back soon with another great conversation from the leadership across the Australian public sector. But for the moment, it's bye for now.