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# Investigating the Views and Use of Stackable Microcredentials within a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice

COLLECTION: MICROCREDENTIALS

ARTICLE

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## ABSTRACT

There is increasing interest around the use of microcredentials for upskilling, employability, professional development, and reaching a wide range of learners. However, little discussion exists around the use of microcredentials to contribute towards broader qualifications and accreditation. This paper investigates the use of a series of microcredentials contributing towards a broader Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) qualification. Using a descriptive case study approach, we explore the initial development of this qualification. We also discuss PGCAP learners' experiences of microcredentials study, drawing on the results of a survey. In doing so, we present both the merits of microcredentials from the learners' perspectives but also some of the pedagogical and practical considerations involved.

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## INTRODUCTION

Online courses and learning have diversified substantially over the past decade, with higher education institutions seeking to offer online and distance education through avenues such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and microcredentials. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a more recent and global influence on online learning as institutions sought to temporarily (and sometimes permanently) expand the boundaries of the classroom and increase access to learning at a distance.

Jordan and Goshtasbpour (2022) recently reflected on a decade of research on MOOCs and highlighted that MOOCs have largely failed to live up to their initial hype (around 2012) to drastically disrupt education. However, this is not a new mantra in the sense that many digital technologies in education claim to revolutionise education yet few truly revolutionise or innovate the status quo (Divjak et al. 2022; Hernández-de-Menéndez et al. 2022). Subsequently, it is important to critically investigate 'new' approaches to online teaching and learning and challenge their positioning as somewhat of a panacea for education.

Microcredentials are relatively 'new kids on the block' in terms of online and distance learning courses. They differ somewhat to other credentials offered by universities in that they are delivered in a relatively short and compressed timeframe, are usually delivered online, and are usually formally accredited (Pollard & Vincent 2022). Designed largely as a solution to quickly upskill professionals (Oliver, 2019) they are popular with the general public as well as professionals (Kato, Galán-Muros & Weki 2020). Research on microcredentials is relatively sparse, largely limited to studies identifying key definitions and approaches, with few offering empirical evaluations (Brown & Nic-Giolla-Mhichil 2022; Iniesto et al. 2022). However, the interest in, and provision of microcredentials amongst higher education institutions is increasing. In 2020, for example, 36 out of 42 Australian universities were either developing or already offering microcredentials (European Commission 2020).

The European MOOC consortium defines microcredentials as 'a proof of the learning outcomes a learner has acquired following a short learning experience', stating that these learning outcomes 'have been assessed against transparent standards' (European Commission 2020: 10). However, there are many different definitions of microcredentials used outside of Europe such as 'any credential that covers more than a single course, but is less than a full degree' (Picard 2018: 1). Recent work such as that by Iniesto et al. (2022) has put forward frameworks to help microcredentials providers to check aspects of microcredentials such as assessment and quality assurance to ensure the best possible learning experience for their learners. However, due to there not being a single and universal definition of microcredentials, there are many variations in terms of microcredentials assessment, quality assurance, perceived value added and validation processes (European Commission 2020).

Oliver (2019) adds that microcredential courses have stand-alone value as well as complementing other short courses. Such values include personalization, flexibility of study, cost-efficiency, and collaboration (Hunt et al. 2020). These short, online courses (around 10–12 weeks in length) can often be credit bearing or, upon completion, learners can receive an online badge or certification (Clements, West & Hunsaker 2020). Providers of microcredentials include both platforms, such as FutureLearn and Coursera, and the various institutions presenting courses on these platforms such as The National Education Association, Victoria University and the University of Birmingham. Topics covered by microcredentials range from online teaching to climate change, space technology and sports coaching.

We know from some of the literature that microcredentials have the potential to provide practical knowledge and skills that have applications to the workplace (Hunt et al. 2020). Yet evidence is still mixed regarding who benefits from microcredentials (European Commission 2020). For example, Hollands and Kazi (2019) argued that learners completing microcredentials in the USA, India and Canada were generally young, well-educated and in highly paid jobs.

Substantial gaps remain in terms of academic research that focuses on implementing and sustaining microcredentials in higher education (Selvaratnam & Sankey 2021) as well as their relevance to the workplace or to practical contexts (Woods & Woods 2021). The current literature provides a picture of microcredentials as a form of organised but flexible learning that has potential for supporting skills such problem solving and which offers new opportunities

for learning recognition (West et al. 2020). However, it is increasingly emerging that, despite their practical focus, many employers are unfamiliar with microcredentials or how they can be 'stacked' into qualifications (Ashcroft et al. 2021; Owen 2022; Perkins & Pryor 2021). Furthermore, there is concern that microcredentials can perpetuate neoliberalism, positioning education as a commodity and learners as consumers (Pollard & Vincent 2022). Questions are also being raised about the equity of access to microcredentials (Ralston 2021). Subsequently, there is a need to explore microcredentials' relevance to learners/employers as well as the value of these courses for aspects such as professional development, networking or academic support. While some have sought to provide descriptions of sets of microcredentials and their design (e.g., White (2021), such studies offer limited insights into issues such as equity or employment-relevant skills development, and empirical research focusing on these areas is much needed (Selvaratnam & Sankey 2021).

Whilst microcredentials can be viewed in isolation as credit-bearing courses in their own right, there is increasing interest in their use within qualifications, either as optional or compulsory courses alongside non-microcredential curriculum, or as 'stacked' or stackable microcredentials, whereby a series of cognate microcredential courses are put together to comprise all the credit for a qualification. Focusing on the Australasian context, Selvaratnam and Sankey (2021: 4) identify the use of stackable microcredentials as 'postgraduate courses built-up by undertaking a number of shorter courses for academic credit and stacking those credits to attain a recognised award (usually a Graduate Certificate)'. Qualifications featuring stackable microcredentials include 'traditional' certificates, diplomas and degrees, in addition to newer macro-qualifications, or accreditation (Desmarchelier 2021). Macro-qualifications have been variously branded, with examples including 'NanoDegrees', 'MicroMasters' and 'Micro-degrees' (European Commission 2020; Gallagher 2018). This study explores microcredentials' use as stackable components of a 60-credit Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) provided by The Open University (OU) in the UK.

Postgraduate Certificates or PGCerts are common both within Masters programmes, comprising a third of the credit for a full Masters qualification, and as standalone offerings. The PGCAP that is the focus of this study is a standalone qualification, comprising 60 credits gained at FHEQ Level 7. The credits are gained by learners successfully passing four 15-credit microcredentials.

Postgraduate Certificates in Academic Practice (PGCAP) are a common feature of initial professional development provision for early career academics (Reimann and Allin, 2018). They are often delivered by higher education institutions to support teaching and learning practices and can be a route to receiving broader accreditation such as, in the UK, Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy[1] (FHEA),[2] which is offered to learners successfully completing the OU PGCAP. Relevant literature suggests that such qualifications can aid educators in gaining new skills, reflection and adopting more student-centred approaches to their teaching (Chadha 2015).

Many of the studies focusing on PGCAPs have tended to explore courses that are delivered face-to-face, commonly in the UK (e.g. Rienties & Kinchin 2014). There is little research on the use of stackable microcredentials within such postgraduate certificates, in part as microcredentials-based PGCAPs are uncommon. However, with the increase in online provision in recent years, especially in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now important to explore whether the affordances offered by the face-to-face delivery of courses within PGCAP programmes remain, whether online alternatives are viable and, in particular, whether the employment-related skills focus and flexibility offered by microcredentials are of value. As argued by Rienties et al. (in review), there could be several limitations in providing a PGCAP online, such as uncertainties around standards, fragility and fragmentation of communities of practice and competing disciplinary perspectives (Reimann & Allin 2018). As such, they merit further, empirical exploration in diverse contexts. This study investigates the affordances and

1 The Higher Education Academy is now called Advance HE. Advance HE is a sector-owned charity that works with institutions and higher education across the world to improve higher education. It is based in the UK and Ireland.

2 Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) refers to the recognition awarded to professionals who demonstrate that they meet the criteria for Descriptor 2 (D2) of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) – 'Demonstrates a broad understanding of effective approaches to teaching and learning support as key contributions to high quality student learning. Individuals should be able to provide evidence of all areas of activity, core knowledge and a commitment to values.'

challenges of delivering a PGCAP programme online and, in particular, the use of stackable microcredentials within such a programme.

The increasing interest in stackable microcredentials, the lack of research in this area, and the low number of online qualifications being formally accredited (Desmarchelier 2021; Pollard & Vincent 2022; Ralston 2021) have informed the current study, which is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do learners perceive their experience of studying microcredentials within the OU PGCAP qualification?

RQ2: What challenges and affordances are involved in the use of 'stackable' microcredentials within the format of a PGCAP?

## CASE STUDY

### CONTEXT

The OU Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) is currently available solely to academic staff at The Open University who study four microcredentials in connection with the programme. The use of microcredentials in this format, as well as contributing towards a broader qualification, is also accredited by Advance HE, allowing learners to gain Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) upon successful completion of their microcredentials study and the submission of two supporting statements from colleagues.

Each postgraduate-level microcredential featured in the PGCAP is worth 15 credits[3] and lasts for 12 weeks. In order to obtain the credits necessary to complete the 60 credit PGCAP,[4] learners complete two compulsory microcredentials, a further course chosen from three optional microcredentials, and a compulsory final microcredential to conclude their study pathway. Table 1 outlines the structure of the PGCAP.

**Table 1** Microcredentials details and UKPSF[5] mapping.

| TITLE OF MICROCREDENTIAL | OTHER RELEVANT INFO | MAPPING TO UKPSF CRITERIA | COMPULSORY/OPTIONAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| HZFM881 – 'Online Teaching: Creating Courses for Adult Learners' | Externally available and endorsed by the Association for Learning Technology | A1, A4, A5, K1, K2, K3, K4, V1, V3, V4 | Compulsory |
| HZFM882 – 'Online Teaching: Evaluating and Improving Courses' | Externally available | A3, A5, K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6, V1, V2, V3, V4 | Compulsory |
| HZFM883 – 'Teacher Development: Embedding Mental Health into the Curriculum' | Externally available and endorsed by the Mental Health Foundation | A1, A2, A4, K2, K6, V1, V2, V3, V4 | Option |
| HZFM884 – 'Online Teaching: Accessibility and Inclusive Learning' | Externally available | A3, A4, K2, K4, K5, K6, V1, V2, V3, V4 | Option |
| HZFM885 – 'Online Teaching: Embedding Social, Race and Gender-Related Equity' | Externally available | A4, A5, K5, K6, V1, V2, V3 | Option |
| HZFM888 – 'Teacher Development: Using Scholarship to Improve Practice' | Only for OU staff on the PGCAP and developed for that qualification | A1, A2, A3, A5, K5, V3 | Compulsory final course. |

The programme is in its second year of release and is still in a pilot phase in terms of its development. As the working context of staff undertaking the programme is teaching and learning online and at a distance, many of the microcredentials that form a part of the qualification are focused on 'online teaching' or 'teacher development'.

3 Credit is awarded to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level. In this context, the credit is equivalent to Level 7 of the FHEQ (The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland), International Qualifications Framework and European Qualifications Framework.

4 Postgraduate courses can use credit to define the relative weighting of their constituent elements – a postgraduate certificate is made up of 60 credits in total as deemed by the QAA (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education).

5 The UKPSF refers to the UK Professional Standards Framework. A framework created by Advance HE to benchmark success within HE teaching and learning. It covers the different dimensions of activity, core knowledge and professional values relevant for teaching and supporting learning in higher education. The PSF (Professional Standards Framework) is due to be launched in January 2023 but is not reflected in this paper.

All of the microcredentials that form the PGCAP are currently delivered using the FutureLearn platform. FutureLearn is a pedagogy-informed learning platform that incorporates the use of social learning and enables learners to engage with frequent social conversations (Beer 2019; Sharples 2018). The platform is based on three fundamental pedagogical principles: telling stories, provoking conversation, and celebrating progress (Sharples 2018: 9). Courses comprise a series of 'steps' (pages of content) focused on specific activities, for example reading text, engaging in discussions, watching videos or listening to audio resources. The platform helps to facilitate discussion by providing comment boxes at the bottom of every step (Beer 2019). Learners are supported in their study by one or more Course Mentors allocated to each microcredential. PGCAP Community of Practice sessions were also set up by the lead educators on the qualification to support the sharing of ideas, to offer support and to develop the collaborative nature of the qualification.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study uses a case study methodology. This approach was chosen as, by focusing on a particular case and looking at it from a variety of angles, it is possible to get closer to the why and the how of the case focus (Thomas 2011). We have taken a 'descriptive' (Merriam 1988) or 'intrinsic' (Stake 1995) case study approach, describing and interpreting the case in order to analyse its development and how it is experienced. Yin (2009) proposes that case studies are the preferred choice when 'how' and 'why' questions are being posed, when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon that has some real-life context, when the researchers want to cover bounded contextual conditions because they are relevant to the phenomena of study (Baxter & Jack 2008; Njie & Asimiran 2014) and/or where the situational context is relatively unknown or somewhat unique. For the current research into The Open University's PGCAP programme, the case study method provided structure for enquiring into an educational site at a particular moment in time (Stake 1995) – a time period after participants have studied their first microcredential for the PGCAP programme.

## PARTICIPANTS

This case study focuses on the first two cohorts of learners on the PGCAP programme, who started their study in October 2021 (Cohort 1) and March 2022 (Cohort 2). The total number of learners starting the programme in Cohort 1 was 19. Out of those learners, 11 chose to participate in this study. The total number of learners starting in Cohort 2 was 13. Out of those learners, 4 chose to participate in this study. All of the participants are members of staff at the OU and cover a variety of academic roles.

As is typical for a case study approach, several different methods were used to investigate the case. In this paper, we draw upon data collected from a survey. Findings exploring the specificities of learners' social and learning networks through reflective exercises and other aspects of the survey are reported elsewhere (Rienties et al. in review).

## SURVEY OF LEARNERS

An online survey was sent to all the Cohort 1 learners (n=19) one month after they completed their first microcredential of the PGCAP programme (February 2022) and 11 learners responded. The same survey was also sent out to all Cohort 2 learners one month after they completed their first microcredential. The survey questions were intended to evaluate learners' emergent experiences of the PGCAP programme and were loosely based around Kirkpatrick's (1975; 2006) evaluation model, which comprises four levels:

1. Reaction – learners' feelings about the learning experience;
2. Learning – the resulting increase in knowledge or skill resulting from the learning experience;
3. Behaviour – the implementation of acquired knowledge/skills in employment/other contexts;
4. Results – the broader impact of the training on an organisation (or, by extension, any other environment or stakeholders, though this is not covered in Kirkpatrick's original model).

As we were looking for rich in-depth experiences rather than numerical data, we specifically refrained from using typical Likert response items. In order to explore Kirkpatrick's Level 1, 'reaction', and Level 2, 'learning' participants were asked about:

- the best part of the PGCAP
- the worst part of the PGCAP
- their lived experiences of using FutureLearn
- what they were looking forward to when starting the PGCAP, and whether their expectations were met.

To explore Kirkpatrick's (2006) Level 3, 'behaviour', we asked participants whether the PGCAP was helping them to develop their teaching and learning, and with professional development in particular. Finally, given that several studies have shown that line management support is important for professional development, we had two specific questions about whether participants felt supported by their line manager and faculty in studying on the PGCAP. The timing of the study prevented us from exploring Kirkpatrick's Level 4 – 'results' in depth, though it was covered by some of the responses to Level 3-related questions. The survey comprised eleven questions in total, allowing learners to write their thoughts in an open response text box. In this paper, we report on the qualitative, open text responses generally and acknowledge that additional data has also been explored using social network analysis in Rienties et al. (in review).

### ETHICS

This research received Human Ethics Research Approval from The Open University. Participants were fully informed about the study, informed about their rights to withdraw and consented to participate through consent forms. Data has been anonymised and all names provided are pseudonyms.

### ANALYSIS

This study used a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2022) comprising the following stages:

Stage 1 – data familiarisation, by reading through the data.

Stage 2 – initial coding, applying labels to the open text.

Stage 3 – a phase of more focused coding consolidating and expanding on the initial coding stage and identifying/developing emergent themes.

The themes and areas presented in the findings below represent the more refined and defined themes from Stage 3 and the 'writing up' phase of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following discussion explores the findings resulting from the survey data analysis, relating them both to emergent themes pertinent to the two research questions and to relevant literature.

### RQ1: HOW DO LEARNERS PERCEIVE THEIR EXPERIENCE OF STUDYING MICROCREDENTIALS WITHIN THE OU PGCAP QUALIFICATION?

Themes constructed from the analysis of the survey data and relevant to RQ1 include:

- The value of microcredentials' linking theory and practice (particularly relevant to Kirkpatrick's Levels 2 and 3)
- Learners' views about the length and breadth of microcredential courses (particularly relevant to Kirkpatrick's Level 1)
- The mixed realities of social learning on FutureLearn (particularly relevant to Kirkpatrick's Levels 1 and 2)

### The value of microcredentials' linking theory and practice

Learners described the best parts of their microcredentials study experience within the PGCAP as the application of theory to their practice. They mentioned enjoying the experience of peer interaction and collaboration, developing knowledge, and the value of being encouraged to apply what they were learning in the course to their practice. This was nicely summarised by Abigale (Cohort 1) when she mentioned 'putting some theory behind the practice'.

Learners commented on how their microcredentials study helped them to build and apply their teaching skills. This is highlighted by Tim (Cohort 1) who commented that the first microcredential he studied had 'helped me learn the skills and develop my ability to produce more useful and effective online learning sources and assessment tasks'. Tim pointed to the value of the studied course having 'a mix of theoretical and applied knowledge' – a link between theory and practice repeatedly made by survey respondents and identified as a benefit of the microcredentials. Ross (Cohort 1) stated that his microcredential study experience was a 'chance to reflect on my own practice and link with theory' and Ollie (Cohort 1) also discussed the relationship between theory and practice:

> 'The PGCAP is helping with my professional teaching and learning by enabling me to ground my practice in teaching and learning theory and gain insight into new approaches and practices to enhance my skills'.

Iniesto et al.'s (2022) recent framework guidelines on the assessment and recognition of microcredentials points out that course content needs to be aimed at employers' needs and future work and to combine theory and practice to ensure direct relevance to the workplace. It would seem that for the learners in this study, the microcredentials that form a part of the PGCAP qualification do have theoretical and practical relevance to the practice of online teaching and learning that will support learners in their future academic careers. In this sense, it is beneficial to see how microcredentials 'can be useful where learners need to address a short-term skills or knowledge gap in a way that can be a part of the lifelong learning journey' (QAA 2021: 5).

### Length and breadth of microcredential study

As tends to be the case in other online learning experiences whereby leaners are required to fit their study around other work commitments (Iniesto et al. 2022), the learners on the OU PGCAP qualification commented on the time available to fully engage with the constituent microcredentials' content and discussions. Ross (Cohort 1) mentioned difficulties 'finding the time' to fit his study around other work commitments, as did other learners. Learners also commented on the duration of the microcredentials they studied. Lucy (Cohort 1) mentioned the courses' rigid nature and that they 'require too much time each week'. Cory (Cohort 1) commented that the 'amount of time needed to fully engage with all readings and activities' was challenging. This point was echoed by Misha (Cohort 1), noting that 'it is quite challenging to find the time to participate as much as possible'. Another learner, Rory (Cohort 1), shared his view that the worst part of the course was 'the duration', adding 'I think they need to be 8 weeks to accommodate with the working commitment of the students'.

Several learners shared that fitting microcredentials study around other work commitments felt restrictive. Ollie (Cohort 1) commented that 'there is a struggle to manage time to study the module material and complete activities in a way that contributes to my learning' while Ralph (Cohort 2), argued that 'finding the time' meant that it was a 'struggle to keep up and complete it alongside [their role] in the University'.

### Mixed 'realities' of social learning on FutureLearn

Learners in this study conveyed a mix of realities concerning studying microcredentials through social learning on FutureLearn. Some learners clearly found collaborative interaction with peers, to be beneficial. However, these elements of the learning process also posed challenges, for example the difficulties in sustaining such social interaction. This points to some of the challenges of 'micro' delivery and the social constructivist pedagogy framing of the courses. It also became clear that the platform on which microcredentials are delivered (in this case FutureLearn) can both support and compromise socio-constructivist pedagogy.

Harrison (Cohort 1) commented on how 'interaction with peers through forum discussion helped [me] to understand the diversity of thought on many subjects' while Ollie (Cohort 1) revealed that 'the best part is developing my knowledge of academic practice and engaging with others'. Misha (Cohort 1) suggested that early collaborative group work can help to 'establish relationships with colleagues' and Harrison (Cohort 1) stated that it can achieve 'connection with peers'. The PGCAP learners' responses offer an insight into how the benefits of social learning can extend beyond the bounds of a specific microcredential course where learners are studying with work colleagues.

Other learners commented specifically on the scaffolding of the microcredential content and functionality of the platform:

> '[FutureLearn] is very simple to use and progresses in a very logical step-by-step order. However, in some respects, it can be too linear. As I progressed, I stopped engaging so much with the discussion boards, because once I'd moved on, I didn't have reason to return to follow up on comments and dialogue' (Harriet, Cohort 1).

In looking into these views of microcredentials further, tensions can emerge between the socio-constructivist approach commonly underpinning microcredentials pedagogy and the challenges of sustaining social interaction amongst learners when they are working alongside their study. Building upon this, learners commented directly on the benefit of the microcredential course design in the platform to support their learning experience. Brad (Cohort 2) noted the 'structured, weekly process of the microcredentials' while others made similar points:

> [The best part is] the flexibility and bite-size nature of the learning materials on the FutureLearn platform [which] made it [the learning in the microcredential] both interesting and achievable (Abigale, Cohort 1).

> I like the different use of media within the modules [content] and I do like how you are encouraged to think and reflect rather than just learn (I do struggle with this, but I like how it is presented) (Fiona, Cohort 2).

These comments offer support for the conversational pedagogy underpinning the FutureLearn platform (Sharples 2018) and align with the views expressed by Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) who argue that it is not just the content of microcredential courses that matters but how that content is structured within online platforms. However, as has been documented elsewhere, learners can experience a 'drop off' in their participation as well as in their sustained interactions with their peers (Liu et al. 2007).

Whilst it is clear that the structure of the FutureLearn platform encourages collaboration and social learning through embedded comments and discussion, this can feel burdensome for some microcredentials learners, contributing towards mixed feelings about individual progress:

> The structure of the platform and the timing of the comments [from other learners] depending on where people are at with their studies means that you are having to jump back and forth when you are trying to progress [and] does restrict the level of [peer] support through the platform. I have had discussions with others in my group which has helped motivate and encourage (Brad, Cohort 2).

> It's nice to hear about experiences of others at times, but this links into when you are behind, you don't have the time to read all the comments and I feel as if that means I'm missing out. I also feel a bit like I'm taking but not giving, by reading and not necessarily responding' (Fiona, Cohort 2).

> The feeling that you have to contribute to discussions – it's very difficult when you get behind and then it feels like it's something onerous and weighs you down (Fiona, Cohort 2).

Fiona's mention of 'taking but not giving' and the feeling of needing to contribute to social interaction and discussion on the microcredentials is of particular interest in terms of suggesting that learners on a PGCAP programme, combining study with full-time work, can feel pressured when social learning is foregrounded as it is on FutureLearn. However, despite the reservations raised above, it is notable that learners also highlighted collaboration and connection with peers

on the PGCAP programme, in these early microcredential study experiences, as something that they felt could be further developed. Cory (Cohort 1) suggested that 'I think some collaborative work would be good at some stage' and Tim (Cohort 1) argued that 'I think more collaborative learning is needed'. Harrison (Cohort 1) similarly suggested that 'what's missing could perhaps be a small group project or activity'. These comments also highlight the challenges of building supportive learning communities, and sustaining meaningful social and group activities, within microcredentials' typically short timescales. These comments have significance for RQ2, discussed next.

## RQ2: WHAT CHALLENGES AND AFFORDANCES ARE INVOLVED IN THE USE OF 'STACKABLE' MICROCREDENTIALS WITHIN THE FORMAT OF A PGCAP?

The comments from PGCAP learners participating in this study are of value beyond giving an insight into Kirkpatrick's Levels 1, 2, and 3. They also have implications for the design of the PGCAP programme and the use of stackable microcredentials.

Wheelahan and Moodie (2021) have argued that 'micro-credentials are gig credentials for the gig economy' and that their emphasis on small chunk, 'just-in-time' learning focused on the skills of specific jobs can fragment occupations and the knowledge base of practice. Our study of the use of stackable microcredentials in the OU PGCAP offers contrary evidence indicating that when multiple microcredentials form part, or all, of a cognate programme of study leading to a qualification such as a postgraduate certificate, this coming together of knowledge and skills can provide a comprehensive and extensive foundation for practice and professional development.

The flexibility offered by microcredentials will inevitably be limited if a qualification to which they contribute has to adhere to the requirements of a professional body, as with the PGCAP. Arguably, there is a tension between offering a choice of microcredential courses that allows learners to study content directly relevant to their practice, needs and interests, and making some courses compulsory in order to ensure learners can meet the requirements of an external professional accreditation framework such as the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The OU PGCAP attempts to reconcile this tension by combining compulsory microcredentials with a selection of elective courses, as shown in Table 1.

For many taking part in this study, fitting in part-time study alongside full-time work is the biggest challenge of taking part in a PGCAP programme. Unlike MOOCs, which tend to be about 6–7 weeks long (Weller 2022), or even shorter, the microcredentials involved in the PGCAP programme are 12 weeks long and require professionals to invest time and energy for acquiring and mastering potentially new skills and competencies (Hall-Ellis 2016).

However, the focus on employment-relevant skills development that is inherent to microcredentials, when combined with course activities and assessment tasks that have real world relevance and can both draw on and be applied to learners' professional practice, can also help counterbalance the demands of studying alongside full-time employment, as indicated by some of the responses given by the learners taking part in this study.

The length of microcredentials is both a challenge and an affordance, especially when they feature as stackable elements in a qualification. Microcredentials' small size makes it easier to offer learners flexible study pathways through a qualification, with pathways ranging from fast-track, full-time equivalent study completed in a single year, to more leisured study taking several years to complete. As the OU microcredentials are typically presented three times a year, this gives learners plentiful opportunities to choose when to study them.

The short length of microcredentials has implications for social interaction too. The OU PGCAP learners' comments indicate that social interaction can be influenced by individual progress through a microcredential course, with students who are struggling to keep up with their studies having less time to post messages in communal discussion areas. Where students have the flexibility to work through a course at their own pace this can help them achieve the course learning outcomes. However, it can also compromise social interaction when learners don't encounter the course discussions simultaneously with each other. Ideally, a balance should be achieved between study flexibility and sustainability of social interaction.

Managing learners' expectations is also key in respect of the social engagement activities. Learners studying with others in their employing institution may expect to form new professional relationships with their peers on a particular course. However, despite the opportunities offered for social learning, communities of practice can be difficult to achieve within the context of PGCAP programmes (Reimann & Allin 2018) and, more generally, online courses. Learners on such programmes should be informed that making connections with others takes time and that participating in optional course collaborative activities can help establish communities of like-minded peers.

## CONCLUSION

Reimann and Allin (2018) note that the literature offers relatively little evidence and discussion of the ways in which PGCAP courses are designed, taught and assessed. This paper seeks to redress this by investigating the use of a group of stackable microcredentials within a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) qualification, thereby also responding to calls such as those made by Ashcroft et al. (2021) who have argued that awareness of microcredentials is limited. Our findings indicate that microcredentials have many merits from PGCAP learners' perspectives but also that attention needs to be paid to choosing pedagogy appropriate to the demands of studying alongside full-time employment, and to ways in which students could be supported in managing the challenges of combining study and full-time work.

It is clear that microcredentials linking theory and practice are of particular value to PGCAP learners, as are course content and skills development opportunities with strong practical relevance to learners' professional contexts – in this case study, their work teaching online. The early indications of our study suggest that, for many learners, studying the PGCAP microcredentials was already supporting changes in their teaching practice, offering at least some evidence for Level 3 and Level 4 of Kirkpatrick's (1975; 2006) evaluation framework.

Many learners said that they found the 'step-by-step' structure of the microcredentials presented on FutureLearn a useful means of navigating and scaffolding the learning content but not all learners were benefiting from the social learning aspect of their studied courses, in part due to conflicts with their paid employment. Future research could explore ways of better reconciling these two factors with the aim of sustaining course discussions in the later weeks of a course and maximising the opportunities for students to come together in communities of practice around common interests and job roles.

While this study is limited to exploring the experiences of a small number of learners studying microcredentials as part of an online PGCAP programme the findings do suggest that these learners' experiences may be shared more widely. Further research could build on the findings, following McGreal and Olcott (2022) and investigating microcredentials' value as part of wider strategic initiatives, for example their inclusion in Masters programmes as a means of increasing choice, providing flexible study pathways, and offering learners just-in-time skills support within a wider qualification.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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