



# Microcredentials: Why, what and how – Editorial

COLLECTION:  
MICROCREDENTIALS

EDITORIAL

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The European Commission states that microcredentials “certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competencies they need for their personal and professional development” (European Commission 2022). They can be viewed as an extension of the interest in MOOCs, and a means of addressing employability and upskilling. A number of higher education institutions globally have made significant investments in relation to microcredentials.

They are an area of the curriculum that has received considerable interest and investment over the past few years. The current period then provides an opportunity to reflect on what has taken place in their development beyond the initial potential. In this collection five articles are presented that contribute to our understanding of microcredentials, including critical perspectives and experiences. These articles allow us to begin to answer questions such as “what is an effective implementation of a microcredential?”; “how do they differ from traditional offerings?”; “what is the learner experience like on a microcredential?”; and “do they meet the needs of a different audience?”

Microcredentials are often aligned with alternative credentialling, offering learners smaller units of credit or informal recognition. This has built on the assessment and credentialling work developed with MOOCs as providers and learners sought ways to recognise the achievements in these non-traditional curriculum offerings. In the first paper, Farias-Gaytan, Ramirez-Montoya and Aguaded explore alternative credentialling in the context of a Mexican provider. They report a high degree of consensus on what an alternative credentialling framework should contain and propose an alternative credential management process as a guide for higher education institutions.

The next paper, from Brown, McGreal, and Peters, takes a strategic perspective, examining the business models, risks and opportunities of microcredentials. They highlight the need for effective leadership in the implementation of microcredentials, and often the absence of such informed decision making when taking the decision to pursue this model. As with MOOCs the decision to develop microcredentials is often driven by a fear of missing out (or being seen to miss out) and the authors suggest that “investing in micro-credentials may be a risky venture without vision, strategic leadership and alignment with your institutional mission. How you position the micro-credential from the outset is crucial as this influences the type of leadership, structures and business model(s) that best serve your strategy.”

Following on from this institutional perspective is a paper by Chandler and Perryman, which examines the impact on learners. Research on 23 microcredentials presented by The Open University, UK. They report significant impact for learners in terms of their knowledge, attitudes, practices, and impact at work and/or on everyday life. The authors apply

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the Value Creation Framework (VCF) (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011) to analyse narrative contributions from learners, providing a useful means of assessing the value that learning provides for different stakeholders.

Having examined alternative credentials and learner experiences in two articles, the paper by Sargent, Rienties, Perryman, and FitzGerald combines these perspectives. The case study focuses on 'stackable qualifications' that is combining the credits from separate microcredentials into a formal qualification, in this case a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP). Their survey of learners on the microcredentials that constitute this qualification found that learners valued this method of study. Contrary to some criticisms that microcredentials can fragment learning, they report that when multiple microcredentials form a cognate programme of study leading to a qualification, there is a coming together of knowledge and skills that provides a comprehensive foundation for practice and professional development.

The last paper in this collection, from Ward, continues a theme of the previous one, in examining how microcredentials can be incorporated into higher education offerings. The author outlines how micro-credentials can be accommodated within higher education provision, using a skills based framework. Using case studies from six universities it explores an approach for mapping a higher education degree programme and microcredentials onto a skills framework, which can aid communication of capabilities and competencies acquired through microcredentials.

These five articles present different perspectives on the development, recognition and impact of microcredentials. As such they represent a useful and interesting snapshot of the adoption of microcredentials at this stage in their implementation. Many institutions are still in the process of ascertaining what they mean by a microcredential, what format they should take, and who they should be aimed at. This special collection goes some way to helping answer those questions I believe.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Martin Weller is a member of the curriculum team that has developed some of the microcredentials at the UK Open University.

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