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## Making Microcredentials Count

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# Making Microcredentials Count

## Dr Tyrrell Golding

The Open University, United Kingdom  
tyrrell.golding@open.ac.uk

## Dr Klaus-Dieter Rossade

The Open University, United Kingdom  
klaus-dieter.rossade@open.ac.uk

### Abstract

The popularity of microcredentials across Europe is growing fast. They have the potential to become standard provision of learning for professional development or personal growth because they provide standalone chunks of learning that can deliver up to date knowledge and skills timely and flexibly. The ‘micro’ in the name addresses these benefits. The notion of credit in the ‘credential’ part of the name is less clear. The adoption of European-wide standards within a widely accepted framework for microcredentials helped to raise the currency of this learning opportunity independent of quality accredited learning providers such as universities. How the credits from these microcredential can be brought back into traditional higher education is less developed – few institutions have found solutions for integrating microcredentials within their qualifications. This is not for lack of interest or trying.

The Open University, United Kingdom (OUUK) established a microcredentials programme in 2019 with the aim to reach new and different learner populations in new curriculum areas as an alternative to the university’s standard 30 and 60 UK credits ‘core’ modules provision. The Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies (WELS) presented two of the first pilot microcredentials in 2020, including HZFM881 – Online Teaching: Creating Courses for Online Learners, a 15-credit postgraduate module, created in six weeks as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. WELS now have a portfolio of nine microcredentials, with a further nine in the pipeline.

What is less clear is how the development of microcredentials can become something that universities simply do alongside their core provision of module and qualifications. What quality assurance standards need to be in place that can assure the quality of the learning experience but that remains true to the ‘spirit’ of bite-size, timely and innovative professional and personal learning. And finally, how can credits at undergraduate and postgraduate levels be integrated into existing qualifications? What would it take to offer a university degree, consisting entirely of microcredentials? The paper will address these questions and present the processes WELS and the OUUK put in place to make microcredentials ‘business as usual’, sometime in the future.

**Keywords:** microcredentials; stackability; integration; continuous professional development.

### 1. Introduction

The Open University is the largest University in the UK (OUUK) and operates across the four nations of the UK, Ireland and worldwide. Our mission is to be ‘open to people, places, methods, and ideas’. Through an open-entry policy, we promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential. Through academic research, pedagogic innovation, and collaborative partnership we seek to be a world leader in the design, content, and

delivery of 'personal open and distance learning'. OU students are an extremely diverse group, and different from the sector.

This paper explores the experience of one faculty at the OUUK of launching a suite of microcredentials on the FutureLearn platform. The first author is the Academic Lead for Microcredentials in the faculty and the second author is the institutions' Academic Lead for Assessment and led the policy changes needed for integrating microcredentials into the university's core curriculum. It will explore the unique context of OUUK, discuss the politics of the launch of microcredentials, the operational governance challenges and the university academic quality governance procedures needed to enable the faculty to launch this new curriculum product.

## **2. Context**

The OUUK covers the four nations of the United Kingdom. It has four faculties with central and regional staff based in Milton Keynes and in offices in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Nottingham. The Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies (WELS) has over 400 members of central and regional staff and over 1,100 Associate Lecturers who support approximately 45,000 students. The majority of these are in the UK, but the faculty also has students in the Republic of Ireland, Continental Western Europe and elsewhere in the world. The faculty's curriculum comprises programmes at undergraduate, Masters', and doctoral levels.

The faculty is organised as three Schools:

- School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport (ECYS)
- School of Languages and Applied Linguistics (LAL)
- School of Health, Wellbeing and Social Care (HWSC)

Each school has a Senior Management Team (SMT) comprising a Head of School (HoS), Associate Heads of School with portfolios appropriate to the individual school's needs (AHoS) supported by professional services colleagues. The SMTs are supported by Associate Deans in Curriculum, Teaching Excellence, Research and Knowledge Exchange and their deputies.

The OU launched FutureLearn, a social learning platform, in December 2012 with a dozen UK university partners to test opportunities offered by digital learning and massive open online courses (MOOCs). In WELS we have delivered MOOCs on FutureLearn in subjects from Childhood in the Digital Age, Spanish, Italian and German as well as many others on our own OpenLearn platform. In 2019 the OUUK established a microcredentials programme with the aim to reach new and different learner populations in new curriculum areas as an alternative to the university's standard 30 and 60 UK credits 'core' modules provision. In 2020 the OUUK appointed a Managing Director, Paid Short Courses & Microcredentials (MDPSCM) who established a Microcredentials and Short Courses Unit (MSCU) which oversees the development and delivery of content for FutureLearn including our Microcredentials offer.

This work is essential to the university, in particular for meeting one of its five strategic goals:

greater reach, offering unrivalled choice, quality, and flexibility to more people from all parts of society through a range of channels and learning opportunities, with the University's core offer of qualifications and accredited learning at its centre (The Open University, 2022c).

## **3. The Politics of Microcredentials**

Whilst the popularity of microcredentials across Europe may be growing fast and at an institutional level Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may identify their role in meeting their strategic goals as identified above, there

is not necessarily general buy-in from the academic community. Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus regarding the purpose and place of Microcredentials in reference to or alongside what might be considered core curriculum.

In WELS we identified three main areas of contention in launching microcredentials for academic staff:

1. Microcredential production in relation to 'core' curriculum
2. The commissioning model adopted by OUUK
3. The pedagogy of microcredentials on FutureLearn

### **3.1 Microcredential production in relation to 'core' curriculum**

Reservations have been raised even from academic colleagues who are generally very positive about innovation and happy to be early adopters. The first of these can be broadly defined as 'learner experience'. This can be defined firstly as a perception that one group of students will have a 'lesser' experience. The former belief is somewhat reinforced by the fact that the university articulates a difference between OUUK students on our core curriculum by identifying them as 'Students' whereas those studying our microcredentials are considered 'Learners'. Furthermore, it is true that our microcredential learners do not have access to all the resources that our students do. However, the point has been made that the needs of microcredential learners are different from our students. Demographic learner insights from FutureLearn tell us that learners are more likely to be professionals, most likely already with an undergraduate degree or even a master's degree. Microcredentials provide an opportunity for individuals looking to change or progress their existing careers or respond to rapid changes and demands for new skills as their industry evolves. As such, both microcredentials and their learners in some ways are worlds away from our traditional student who may well be an adult, without undergraduate qualifications and who are often seeking to address a lack of educational opportunity earlier in life. At any rate, traditional OU students' study for qualifications and microcredentials learners' study individual courses.

The second aspect of 'learner experience' that concerned colleagues was the notion that expending resource on new curriculum products will take away resources from current students. As the development of microcredentials was of strategic importance to the university the funding for this work was ringfenced, meaning that it could not be allocated to core curriculum. Therefore, if the faculty had decided not to produce microcredentials we would not have had access to this funding and furthermore, access to the learning opportunities created, for both learners and educators, of producing microcredentials on the FutureLearn platform. A process that has enabled us to reflect on and improve some aspects of our pedagogical approaches in our core curriculum such as changing the positioning of student forums to promote student engagement.

### **3.2 The commissioning model adopted by OUUK**

The second contentious issue is the commissioning model chosen by OUUK. As outlined above, the OUUK established a Microcredentials and Short Courses Unit which manages the relationship between the academic communities in faculties and FutureLearn. The funding for microcredentials is ring fenced and the Managing Director, Paid Short Courses & Microcredentials has responsibility for the strategic direction of the development of microcredentials. Due to their need to support addressing sector skills gaps and responding to rapid changes in industry the university has taken a market driven approach to identifying potential curriculum areas rather than taking the lead from academics. This has sometimes created issues where we did not have the correct academic expertise in the institution to write the new microcredential that the market needed. This led to a mixed approach to production: in some cases, Faculties employed consultants and we have extensive experience with these models as we frequently employ academic consultants to contribute to

our core teaching. In some cases, Faculties decided to upskill their core academic staff to write for microcredentials, who then go on to oversee and support other academics or consultants in the production of future microcredentials. This way, the pedagogical and practical expertise can snowball across disciplines and programmes just as it did when the Open University developed its core curriculum open supported distance education model which the university is widely known for.

The market driven approach can also suffer from being reactive to what other providers are doing and following market trends. It may then not capitalise on our capacity to create *new* markets based on the knowledge and expertise of OU academics in their fields. This tension is perhaps inevitable and needs continued negotiation and fine tuning which may well be addressed in the current strategic review of Microcredentials by the Microcredentials and Short Courses Unit.

### **3.3 The pedagogy of microcredentials on FutureLearn**

The third contention is about the overall pedagogical approach of Microcredentials on FutureLearn in contrast to the established Open University core provision of modules and qualifications. The 'OU-way' is widely recognised for its quality in assessment, teaching and student support. This quality is a result of continuous adaptations following major technological and cultural changes over the last 50 years. This included the switch from live TV broadcasts to recorded media (VHS, audio cassettes, CDs and DVDs during the 1980s and 1990s, the use of internet websites and learning management systems for our modules since the early 2000s, and the use of computer-mediated conferencing (synchronous and asynchronous) over the last two decades. Alongside, models for tutors supporting students through marking and feedback, tutorials and general student contact adapted to changing needs and technologies that allowed for ever greater refinement of what it means to teach and learn at a distance. Tutor groups of typically between 15-25 students per tutor group (more or fewer depending on subjects and disciplines) are at the core of the OU's teaching model, and National Student Surveys and External Examiner reports repeatedly confirm the high standards of teaching and learning on typically 30 or 60 UK credits modules (15 or 30 ECTS). Add to this the extra support for example through alternate formats or extra tuition for (a) students without the usually required entry qualifications (34% of students had just one A-Level or none of the three A-levels required for mainstream HE entry), (b) over 36,000 students with declared disabilities, or (c) students studying in over 150 prisons and 50 secure hospital environments (2020/21 figures (The Open University, 2022a) and it is easy to see how academic colleagues have become proud and protective of their modules and qualifications.

Contrast this to the leaner model of teaching and learning on microcredentials for which a Common Microcredential Framework (CMF) was launched in 2019 by the European MOOC consortium (European MOOC Consortium, 2019). The Framework guarantees minimum standards that eventually allow for 'eclectic' qualifications, i.e., students combine their credits from microcredentials towards qualifications at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, subject to the regulations by the awarding institution. Minimum standards assure a degree of portability that would otherwise not be possible. Minimum standards do not say anything about the quality of a course which is the responsibility of the provider institution. It does not mean a lesser experience either. It does mean that the level of tuition support such as the student-tutor ratio is different, that assessment and feedback may be more automated than in many OU core modules, and that the support for students with additional needs may not match the high standards of OU core as described above. In short, microcredentials are a different learning 'product' that facilitates learning in a different way based on a different pedagogical design. Quality monitoring by the provider institution will ensure that the learning experience meets the required standards, which is what quality monitoring also does for the traditional HE modules and qualifications.

Higher Education institutions that seek to broaden and diversify its learning offer to short courses such as microcredentials, will need to navigate the different pedagogical models and learning cultures. As we have experienced in our institution, there has been a tendency to try and make microcredentials more like OU core, just shorter. This is understandable but not sustainable in terms of resourcing, nor desirable in terms of the pedagogy for these courses. The challenge, in our case, is to take 50 years of experience in delivering quality in distance education and adapt it to genuinely new ways of learning. Campus based universities face the challenge to translate successful classroom practice onto a microcredential platform like FutureLearn.

With challenges come opportunities: microcredentials forced us to rethink our production models, for example the time needed to produce a new course. We expect that, in time, this will influence how we approach OU core modules. Shorter microcredentials may also allow us to test and learn new curriculum (and fail fast if need be) which is not possible in our standard production model with the lead in times and the comprehensive learning support described above.

#### **4. Operational Governance**

To launch a new curriculum product at OUUK that remains true to the 'spirit' of bite-size, timely and innovative professional and personal learning within Faculty of WELS we established the WELS Microcredentials, Expert Tracks and Short Courses Working Group. This group supports the three schools, secures faculty resource, and acts as a central conduit between Faculty and university, both learning and adapting to a new product and its potential to support flexibility in accredited learning (Kydd et al., 2003). The key aims, and responsibilities of the WELS Microcredentials, Expert Tracks and Short Courses Working Group are to:

- bring all discussions regarding prospective production plans for WELS on FutureLearn into a monthly decision-making forum, where each will be deemed ready for commission, requiring further development, or declined
- consider and agree the appropriate delivery model for each production plan i.e., Microcredential, Expert Track, short course
- define and agree faculty priorities for FutureLearn production
- monitor the progress of faculty products in production for FutureLearn
- evaluate and review processes and procedures
- review regularly the faculty's portfolio on FutureLearn

The remit of the group is broader than just microcredentials as they are responsible for all our short courses curriculum, including those that sit outside the focus of this paper. In establishing this group, we have identified three key areas that we would like to highlight.

Ways of working: One significant reflection on the launching of microcredentials in WELS is the importance of thinking about ways of working (Thompson, 2006) when bringing together different units with ostensibly similar priorities but where there are fundamental cultural and procedural differences. The approach adopted in WELS was informed by the first author's experience of leading collaborative working in the voluntary, community and statutory sectors (Conradie & Golding, 2013). On arrival at the OUUK, the MDPSCM took some time to orientate themselves to the institution and the work and the WELS Microcredentials, Expert Tracks and Short Courses Working Group was paused to support this to happen. When the work and the group was relaunched, a co-chairing model was adopted between the MDPSCM and the faculty lead, in this case the Deputy Associate Dean, Curriculum. This approach was adopted to foster a sense of shared collective responsibility and partnership across the two units (Boydell & Rugkåsa, 2007). It created a shared mandate to make things work including co-owning agenda setting. Furthermore, it created open and proactive

opportunities to discuss the priorities of the partners. This was particularly important as the PSCMU are an agile team established to positively disrupt the institution, whereas the faculty has a very different culture and planning cycle. For example, the faculty has an annual planning cycle for staffing and core modules can take over two years to produce, whereas the PSCMU can support the delivery of microcredentials in as little as six weeks.

This co-chairing approach has enabled us to coordinate our planning and resourcing across our three schools and professional services team and has been broadly successful thus far with the faculty having nine microcredentials in the pipeline for 2022/23 with five in the pipeline for the other three faculties. This will double the number of microcredentials that we currently offer, which is nine. However, there were not just two units coming together to produce our microcredentials. At the OUUK we work with our Learner and Discovery Services (LDS) to produce our core curriculum. So, it is standard practice for us to work with LDS colleagues from the initial inception of an idea to the first presentation of a module, with dedicated teams within LDS focussed on delivering the best possible learning experience for our students. Inevitably we have various structures in place to ensure that teams remain on track and communication remains open. In focusing on the support for and inclusion of the new PSCMU we were not as inclusive in our approach to working with the colleagues that we already knew and so as we continue to support the 2022/23 pipeline, we will be putting in place the safeguards that we have in core curriculum in microcredentials as appropriate. So, just as we have adopted good practice learned through our microcredential product to improve our core offer, we are ensuring that good practice in our core offer informs our ways of working to produce microcredentials.

The second key learning for us, both institutionally and as a faculty is that there is no one way to operationalise the production of microcredentials, and in the remit of our working group, short courses generally. In another faculty at OUUK they have a lecturer who is leading solely on their response to microcredentials. In WELS we have found that the working group was needed to coordinate the faculty's strategic decisions to support our short courses offer generally, including microcredentials. As such, microcredentials are part of the range of CPD and lifelong learning (LLL) opportunities offered by universities (Swain & Hammond, 2011). As we developed a broader curriculum in terms of product as well as content it became clear that one size doesn't fit all, and different curriculum products do recruit differing audiences. As we have developed our short courses offer across WELS the importance of the right curriculum product for the right learning experience has become key to good decision making.

We have also needed to adopt a differentiated approach across our three schools in terms of the types of short courses they prioritised. This was informed not only by the market-based commissioning approach as discussed, but also to support the three schools to meet their different strategic objectives. For example, there were a range of microcredentials identified as important CPD offers within the education programme in ECYS, and they were interested in working towards accepting them in their Master's in Education. Whereas the other schools prioritised other short course production.

Finally, the WELS Microcredentials, Expert Tracks and Short Courses Working Group provided a central space for staff across the faculty and other relevant units in the university to share practice, remove barriers and most importantly creating a learning community (Wise et al., 2012). It has also become a space for transparent decision making where all parties can represent their own challenges and priorities and consensus can be created.

## 5. Academic Governance

The award of credits for learning are UK-wide defined in several qualification frameworks, which are set out in detail in the opening pages of 'Micro-Credentials Characteristics Statement' (QAA, 2022), the most recent publication by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) from May 2022. The Statement acknowledges the difference of microcredentials from traditional Higher Education offerings, including that they are standalone products with a stronger employment focus driven by industry need; their role for up- and re-skilling of the workforce and their potential for widening access to higher education. The document also lists some of the challenges for integrating Microcredentials within traditional HE qualifications. These include the conditions under which credit can be counted towards qualifications, the maximum number of credits allowed for each qualification type (e.g. Bachelor or Master degrees), the shelf life of each course, the mapping and suitability of Learning Outcomes, the different student experience and what providers need to tell students from the outset, and, more generally, all the processes that need to be in place to ensure quality standards are met.

As quality assurance remains a matter for the provider, there needs to be a fine balance struck between the processes for quality assurance that institutions have in place for their traditional provision (referred to as 'macrocredentials') which can be complex and 'heavy-handed', and the need to maintain the flexibility and portability that Microcredentials can bring to Higher Education. While 'stacking' Microcredentials towards a qualification needs to be a feature in the integration process, this also poses challenges "as the simple act of credit-counting has never been an acceptable proxy for acquiring a recognised qualification" (QAA, 2022, p. 11).

This 'simple act of credit-counting' has however been a hallmark of open and supported distance learning at the Open University UK ever since its first student enrolled on a course in January 1971. Their only degree option then was the Open BA/BSc Degree. A quarter of a century later, named qualifications were introduced with increasingly tighter defined pathways over the years, but the Open Degree has remained one of the most popular degrees on offer. At its core, the OU Open Degree demonstrates a measure of trust in the student, that they, on the whole, make sensible decisions – and there is support available to help with this process. The website states proudly: "The BA/BSc (Honours) Open is a degree with a difference. Free from the restriction of a subject-specific specialism, you can set the direction of your learning" and quotes Open (Honours) graduate Carol Dow: "The fact that the OU has the option of choosing an Open degree is fabulous. So many people I have spoken to wish they'd had this option at university rather than going down one route" (The Open University, 2022b).

Credit transfer policies are also well developed, including, more recently the recognition of prior experiential learning. In 2021, 11% of students completing a named degree had some credit transferred from another recognised provider. For the BA/BSc (Honours) Open, that percentage rises to 48% (RPL Annual Report, 2022, internal and unpublished). The Open University, with their Open Programme and over 250 modules over 16 subject areas, therefore, already meets in some measure the policy drivers for microcredentials, namely:

"the opportunity they provide learners to take control of their engagement with education, selecting short courses as and when they want, and on focused content that quickly delivers knowledge and skills. Some learners may find that this meets their needs sufficiently. There could be others, however, who would value the opportunity to build a series of micro-credentials into a recognised qualification, particularly those who do not currently hold a higher education qualification and might find that some employment opportunities are closed to them for that reason" (QAA, 2022, p. 12).



Academic colleagues at the OU realised soon that microcredentials could become an important element in support of the university's strategy 'Learn and Live' (The Open University, 2022c) most directly towards the goal 'greater reach', but in some measure also the goals 'success for our students', 'societal impact' and 'equity'.

The existing credit transfer framework allows the university to count credits (including Microcredentials) from other providers, subject to the usual checks regarding levels and learning outcomes. Credit transferred-in is unclassified and does not count towards the final qualification classification. This route is not available for microcredentials offered by the OU, colleagues discussing this in the relevant governance committees soon realised that credit awarded by the OU should always count, no matter if awarded for our core modules or our microcredentials, and also count towards classification of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Over the last two years, nine 'Principles for Microcredential Stackable Qualifications' have been approved through governance. They are listed below, with short explanations only for some principles for space reasons here, but also because many are self-explanatory, despite the lengthy discussions that preceded them (for further details contact the authors).

1. Microcredentials follow OU academic governance approval processes and quality assurance requirements in line with all credit-bearing OU curriculum.  
This principle addresses the overall quality assurance concerns for the design, production and delivery of Microcredentials. Operationally, these courses are scrutinised by subject and quality assurance experts prior to their passage through governance committees. This allows for more speedy processing and great flexibility outside the institutional governance cycle.
2. Those studying on FutureLearn microcredentials should be referred to as 'learners' to distinguish them from OU students on OU standard modules and qualifications and from apprentices.  
This addresses the different student experience and pedagogical model and allows for clearer communication to students and staff. It also aligns with the QAA terminology (QAA, 2022).
3. OU microcredentials must align with the latest version of the Common Microcredential Framework (CMF) agreed by the European MOOC Consortium.  
This ensures portability across institutions in Europe and elsewhere and may deliver the spirit of the Bologna Process in ways not fully realised with traditional HE provision.
4. Microcredentials should align with a single pre-approved model for assessment and tuition delivery.  
This is potentially a radical step towards simplified assessment design across subjects and it keeps the approval process lean. The more important task for academic colleagues is to devise modes of assessment that meet criteria for good assessment such as those outlined in the JISC report on the Future of Assessment (Jisc, 2020).
5. OU microcredential credit is OU credit and may be counted towards an OU qualification and may be used within the qualification classification.
6. OU microcredentials can be counted towards an OU qualification provided the established principles, frameworks and policies are followed.
7. OU microcredential stackable qualifications and the constituent microcredential modules will follow the first six Principles of the Academic Framework for Microcredentials.
8. OU microcredential stackable qualifications will align with the OU Qualifications Framework and associated policies.

9. The maximum total credits for an OU microcredential stackable qualification (i.e., where a qualification is comprised wholly of microcredentials) is 120 at undergraduate and 60 credits at postgraduate.

The last principle, referring to qualifications ‘comprised wholly of microcredentials’ points to unfinished business. The Open University is currently piloting a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), delivered by colleagues in the Institute for Educational technology IET with the School of Education, Childhood and Youth Studies. It consists of four 15 credit Microcredentials, chosen by the learner from a suite of currently three core microcredentials and an option to study one of three optional microcredentials, with potentially many more in the future. It is part of an MA in Online Teaching and within that qualification covered by the nine principles. As a standalone PGCAP, we need to discuss further issues around verification and invigilation that have also been raised in the MCCA (European MOOC Consortium, 2019). One solution put forward there, to add a capstone assessment that would evidence the learning on any of the Microcredentials chosen by the learner, may be a way forward for the Open University. More discussion will be needed but it is safe to say that Microcredentials are here to stay and that, in time, they will be fully integrated in our qualifications.

## 6. Conclusions

To conclude, launching microcredentials in our faculty and university has not been without its challenges. However, through a pan university collaborative approach, supporting a dedicated Paid Short Courses & Microcredentials Unit we were able to draw upon the experience of some very knowledgeable OUUK colleagues. Together with innovative colleagues new to the university we have been able to not only reach a significant number of new learners, but also support them with bite-size, timely and innovative professional and personal learning.

Whilst there is clearly further work to do to fully integrate microcredentials into our qualifications, we have made significant inroads. What we have seen thus far is how microcredentials have supported us to meet our current university strategy (The Open University, 2022c) and will support us to continue to innovate and respond to the needs of learners and employers by offering flexibility, choice, and providing a range of opportunities to support lifelong learning.

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