**Open University Microcredentials Podcast Transcript**

Martin Couzins: Welcome to The Open University's Open Up Your Learning Podcast series. In this series, we talk to experts around the university to shine a light on different ways the OU can help organisations widen access to learning and deliver flexible education that is shaped around both the employer and the learner. Welcome to this Open University podcast on Microcredentials. My name's Martin Couzins, and I'm a corporate learning journalist. And today I'm joined by a panel of experts from the Open University to discuss microcredentials, what they are, how they work and why employers should consider them as a part of their learning offering. Let's start by meeting our panel.

Dr Haider Ali: Hello. I'm Haider Ali, and I'm a lecturer in marketing at The Open University.

Tim Plyming: Hi there, I'm Tim Plyming. I'm the Managing Director of Microcredentials at The Open University, and I lead a team who are developing paid-for short courses and microcredentials.

Martin Couzins: Great. Thank you both. So we'll start by looking at what microcredentials are. So, Tim, I'd like to come to you. Could you just explain a bit about microcredentials and how long they've been around?

Tim Plyming: Yeah. Hi Martin. So microcredentials, the easiest way of thinking them really as many qualifications that demonstrate skill, knowledge, or experience in a particular subject area or a particular capability. They've emerged really out of, I guess, more of a focus on having dedicated skill-based short courses. Now, how long have they been around for? I guess I've been aware of them for about five years as a subject area, which would kind of indicate that probably people have been thinking about these kinds of what are either microcredentials or nano degrees for probably ten years or so. But we've really seen, I think in the last couple of years, both the number of entrants starting to provide microcredentials, and I guess the interest from both employers and employees really grow. So I would say really in the last couple of years, we've really seen them emerge as something that has I guess, captured the imagination more.

Dr Haider Ali: Yeah. And who are they for?

Tim Plyming: Really Martin, microcredentials have a really broad audience. The great thing, and I guess deliberately why they exist as a slightly different product, is they have a really wide appeal. I guess there's a particular focus on those who are perhaps already in work or those who are looking to change jobs and are wanting to make a short learning intervention. Typically something like ten weeks and to gain a credit bearing qualification in a particular skill or capability. And so they really suit. Really they suit anyone who is serious about a lifelong learning journey as part of their career. It suits those who want to gain a particular skill or to be able to prove capability in a particular subject area. And again, they particularly suit I think those who are already in work and wanting to up-skill.

Dr Haider Ali: And would you add anything else there in terms of why they were developed just to see why they... The benefit there for the person who's doing the learning? Are there any other reasons around that for why they were developed?

Tim Plyming: Yeah, I think there's a few reasons I think for why they developed. I think you've seen from employers a really key drive to have new training opportunities around particular skill gaps that are emerging. We know that across every sector, and it's only been accelerated by COVID-19, we see the pace of change in skills, training and development increasing, and therefore to be able to have short delivered pieces of skill training with an academic credit, to be able to deliver that at speed to market around skill gap demands is really a key opportunity. Now that was true, Martin, before COVID-19. And COVID-19, we have seen that accelerated. Probably we've seen five years of change in the last six months. So the people probably I trust most on this sort of talk about five years of change in the last six months. And that feels pretty reasonable to me.

And so employers are asking for skills and training around specific skill gaps. And that's partly just because of how they are also pivoting as businesses. You've seen the change that is now happening in retail with organisations who didn't make a pivot to digital retail to e-commerce a few years ago. That is now an accelerated demand. And so the same is true of leisure and hospitality and people really having to rethink businesses and rethink business models. And it's showing a huge skills gap. And so employees are really demanding new skills from their people who are coming to work with them. And of course employees are requiring to match that and then requiring a new set of skills. And not necessarily having either the money or the time to do a full degree and take three years out. They are looking for something that is, again, a shorter learning intervention.

Dr Haider Ali: So would there be any other reasons why employers would be interested in using these other than those that you've started to outline there? This desire to pivot and fill skills gaps that are emerging right now?

Tim Plyming: Yeah, microcredentials offer, I think, employees a huge opportunity around I think linking training and development. The microcredentials potentially as a series that really map to the individual learning journey of an employee are a really key opportunity. They can be personalised to the suite of microcredentials that an employee may go through over several years could be personalised to that person's learning journey. And of course they can be tailored very closely to the requirements of an organisation. And we know that learning and development teams across a wide range of sectors are really wanting to design tailor-made learning interventions around the specific requirements of their organisation. And microcredentials feel like a perfect fit for that.

Martin Couzins: Yeah, that's great. So now I want to have a look at how microcredentials work, and I'm going to bring Haider in shortly, but firstly, Tim, I'd just like you to talk about the part microcredentials play within the OU's educational offering.

Tim Plyming: Yeah. I think we're very much seeing it as just one product offer within a wide range of products at The Open University as we already know. And actually last week I was reading some fantastic numbers of the numbers of open learn, our free resource area, are doing for people coming through and potentially getting a taste of some new learning or skill intervention. And I think what's exciting for The Open University at the moment is to be able to think about a wide range of products that it might be able to offer, particularly those who are wanting to embark on a lifelong learning journey. So those may start with may start with free resources. It may be someone comes to The Open University from watching a BBC programme and is prompted to find out a little bit more. Now that may end up with them doing a full degree from what I guess we sort of think of as our core offer or even going on to do a Master's or a doctorate.

But I think also there's an opportunity for those coming and encountering the OU to be able to do either paid short courses or paid short courses with an academic credit, a microcredential. And therefore that becomes a really powerful suite of products that the OU can offer to a community of learners that need The Open University more than ever before I think in a post-COVID world.

Martin Couzins: Yeah, thank you. So, Haider, I'd like to bring you in. You're working on a set of six new microcredentials. what's the process behind their development?

Dr Haider Ali: Thanks. So what we have is a suite of six, which are integrated in the sense that they complement each other in terms of subject matter. We have marketing, organisation studies, leadership, financial accounting, managerial accounting, and project management. So they cover a good range of material. And really the advantage that we've got in this development is that we're building our microcredentials as a new platform that builds on the work we've done with the professional certificate in management. So this is a offering that The Open University business school has offered for the last 25 years or so. And it's got literally thousands of now alumni across a British and European industry in particularly, and also all over the world. And the idea here is that we've taken our pedagogy. We know what works. We've had a lot of very satisfied students over the years, and we're now transforming that material into the FutureLearn platform, which we're going to be using to deliver the learning. So that's where we're coming from.

Martin Couzins: So just picking up on that delivery, how are they delivered? You mentioned FutureLearn there.

Dr Haider Ali: Yeah. So we're working with FutureLearn, which is a business that The Open University co-owns. And what we'll have is for each of the subjects I've just mentioned, we'll be offering students ten hours of study per week over a ten-week period. That's what it boils down to. And as a result of studying each of these, at the end of the study period, the students have an assessment. And if they pass the assessment, they get ten credits for each of these microcredentials. And there are six of them in the suite. So from the student point of view, they have a lot of flexibility. Once the full suite of courses is up and running, they can choose as many as they would like to study concurrently. Their financial commitment can be down to just one microcredential and that's it, or they can do two or three or the whole lot.

Martin Couzins: That's great. So, Tim, what other microcredentials are available via the OU and FutureLearn?

Tim Plyming: Yes. So as Haider said, we are working with FutureLearn, essentially the platform we're developing our microcredential offer on. So currently you'll see a wide range of microcredentials delivered from the OU from data science through to digital photography. And actually the indication we have on numbers... We're actually, I think only three or four presentations through of microcredentials. So we're still in relatively early days, but the numbers are really encouraging of learners I think who are enjoying these courses. And on the FutureLearn platform, you'll see microcredentials from other partners that the FutureLearn work with. So you'll see those from University of Glasgow and Coventry University as examples.

Martin Couzins: Great. So I'd just like to shift the conversation to opportunities for employers. And, Tim, how can employers use microcredentials as a part of their learning and development offering?

Tim Plyming: Yeah, so I think the exciting thing that microcredentials offer, as I sort of hinted I think in an earlier answer, is that the micro-credential journey that an employee may go through as they adopt more of a sort of lifelong learning approach to what they do, it can be highly personalised to the skills or the capabilities that an employee has identified that they would like to increase their abilities in or in conjunction with an employer that are required. And also, I think for employers, as I indicated earlier, the microcredential offer can be tailored, can be a suite that is particularly aimed at what the organisation is wanting to learn and develop in.

So I recently had a chance to chat with a really large organisation, that's put its 360,000 people globally through a Introduction to AI microcredential. And that is one of the strategic priorities for the organisation. So to be able to actually put all of their people globally through that course and know that a certain level of knowledge has been imparted and indeed assessed against their strategic priorities feels like a really exciting opportunity. And particularly as you look at... AI is a great example, machine learning and AI, is often scoring in top three of strategic objectives for organisations. So to be able to know that you have put your people through a course and to be able to have a level of assessment of that feels both important and very attractive for employers.

Martin Couzins: That's great. And you picked up on this a bit earlier, but how is that short duration key in a business context?

Tim Plyming: Yeah, and again, I think this has only been accelerated because of COVID-19. The skill gaps, and in fact, The Open University does an annual barometer of this. And actually if you read the most recent report, the skill gaps that are there, they can emerge quite quickly. And there are not years in play to be able to develop an intervention and a response to that. So actually as you identify skill gaps, and those can move very rapidly. And, again, COVID has really increased that. You're able to respond with a skill and training intervention that is accredited, that feels as a micro-credential, a nano degree. And you're able to deploy that in all honesty within a few months. One of the micro-credentials we developed in online teaching was developed from start to finish in eight weeks.

And that is a remarkably fast amount of time compared to the amount of time it of course naturally takes for us to develop something in our core degree offer. So to be able to respond to a skill gap requirement and to be able to do that in all honesty within a matter of months is really attractive for employers, because as I say, the skill gap is accelerating, and you can find that you as a organisation have a particular requirements and you can find you need that and be able to respond at that speed is therefore really important.

Martin Couzins: Great, thank you. And, Haider, what benefits will business see from employees who complete your particular microcredentials?

Dr Haider Ali: What we have is an approach very much which is tailored on applying concepts to an own organisation. So all the activities that we do, all the assessments that we do involve students taking the material that we've given them and applying them to their own organisations. So it's very much an idea of helping students understand the activities of the organisation they're working in, identify potential metrics for success, how those could be improved, for example. And the emphasis is very much on application and the microcredentials that we're currently working on, carry on with that ethos. That it's not just management learning for its own sake. It's very much a question of saying, "Well, here's some concepts or theories. Let's now look at how these can actually be applied."

And what is becoming even more the case, given the digital platform that we're working on and the fact that people will be able to access these microcredentials using their mobile phones, they could be studying while they're, for example, on a bus journey and really helping integrate learning into people's lives. It's no longer the case that you sit down with your books for an hour and plough through things for set periods. It's very much integrating learning into busy lifestyles, but nevertheless, not compromising on the integrity of the teaching. And I think this is really important in terms of the fact that as The Open University with members of staff who have a lot of research experience who are full-time academics, that we create material that has that academic robustness and integrity, which I don't think should be taken for granted. The processes we go through are to ensure that we're not just providing the latest fad in management thinking, which by next month, will be completely debunked and no longer useful.

But rather we use the skills and the knowledge that we've developed as a group to put the ideas through a particular filter and ensure that students have learning, which isn't just useful and current today but will carry on being useful over a period of months and years. So, yeah, that's how we're trying to be relevant to organisations. And the pedagogy we have is very much using the practises and experiences of real organisations all the way through. And given the heritage of The Open University with our emphasis on diversity and inclusiveness, we don't just focus, say, on commercial for-profit organisations, which might be people's immediate understanding of management education, but we cover the public sector. We cover social enterprises, charities. We cover the health sector. And we've had students coming in from all areas of economic activity in the past.

Martin Couzins: Thanks, Haider. So, Tim, where can employers find out more about microcredentials?

Tim Plyming: Yeah. Thanks, Martin. So on your search engine of choice, if you Google Open University microcredentials, you'll find two places. You'll either find them listed on the FutureLearn platform, and you'll also find those courses also detailed on The Open University website as well at Open.ac.uk. But it's a simple search of a search engine of your choice on Open University microcredentials will take you either to FutureLearn or The Open University.

Martin Couzins: That's great. So that draws today's discussion to a close. I'd like to thank Haider Ali.

Dr Haider Ali: Thanks, Martin. It was a pleasure speaking to you.

Martin Couzins: And Tim Plyming.

Tim Plyming: Thanks, Martin.

Martin Couzins: For joining us today and sharing their insights. Thank you. Thank you for listening. To find out more about how the OU works with businesses, go to Open.Ac.uk/business.