



# **Exploring the Potential of Micro-credentials and Digital Badging: Digital credentials and free learning at the Open University**

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**Dr Patrina Law, The Open University (UK)**

## Introduction

The OpenLearn website ([openlearn.com](https://openlearn.com)) was launched in 2006 to be a platform for free learning resources in support of the Open University's (OU) commitment to its social mission. It now hosts thousands of articles, videos and several hundred courses. Content on the site is a mix of OU curriculum excerpts, adapted for an online audience, and specially commissioned courses, videos and articles. Aside a strong social mission to open up free learning to everyone, the platform's aims are:

- to be topical and engaging,
- to reflect the output of university research,
- to serve student needs for induction and study support, and
- to deliver content that supports employability.

All material on the platform requires a self-directed approach to study and learners can use the resources at their own pace; no course has a start or finish time. Almost all the learning materials are the OU's IP, are published with a Creative Commons licence to allow reuse and (for courses) are downloadable in a variety of offline formats e.g. Word and PDF.

The first UK lockdown in March 2020 saw an overnight five-fold increase in visitors to OpenLearn. Pre-pandemic it was reaching around 10m learners a year with numbers significantly rising from March 2020 to March 2021, to around 18m. Research undertaken in December 2020 showed that over half the audience was using the platform because of events relating to the pandemic – a combination of furlough, redundancy, supporting others' education, needing to improve online teaching skills or simply having more time to learn.

Notably, across the platform, 38% of learners declared they were using the platform to upskill for career development and 20% were working as educators at a variety of levels.

## Micro credentials as recognition for non-formal learning

In terms of the current appetite for online, bite-sized learning, not all micro credentials have to result in the output of a digital badge but can provide a form of certification that verifies skills competency. Digital badges are commonly understood to be a way of acknowledging the completion of a micro credential. They are digital because they contain metadata particular to the skills gained, the issuer and the recipient, and can be used to digitally match badge earners with employment opportunities. They are considered to be a core component of the micro credentials landscape, recognising skills and educational achievements that are not degree-shaped. Hence, with their association to recognise employability competencies, they can form a useful adjunct to formal education alongside traditional academic endeavour.

Whilst all courses on OpenLearn deliver a free certificate to those who complete an online course, digital badges are awarded for completion of a 24-hour long course with online assessments which must be passed and which cannot be gained by repeatedly inputting different responses. These [badged open courses \(BOCs\)](#) have fulfilled a need for the recognition of non-formal learning achievements and remain some of the most popular content on OpenLearn (Law, 2016). By March 2021, over 133,000 digital badges had been issued for completion of OpenLearn BOCs, 76,000 of which were in the first 12 months of the pandemic alone.

Of the 70 BOCs on the platform, around 20 have been commissioned to support employability of informal learners and the OU's own student body, including some of the so-called 'soft skills' needed by employers (Taylor, 2017) such as leadership, resilience and communication skills.

## What OpenLearn learners think of digital badges

In 2021, a review of the end of course surveys for 22 of the BOCs on OpenLearn was undertaken to learn more about learner demographics, motivations to study and how learners might practically apply their achievements. The study examined 42,195 survey responses.

Learners can share and display digital badges in a variety of ways including their OpenLearn Profile, exporting to e-portfolios, or downloading and sharing via social media. The study showed that 86% of learners intended to share their badge in places other than their OpenLearn Profile, with LinkedIn, Facebook and their employer, being the top three places. Few studies exist that examine the perception of digital badges by employers, although OpenLearn survey data show that they have a professional value to learners with 77% declaring that they would be sharing their badge with an employer or prospective employer.

When asked if learners thought whether the digital badge was more important to them than a printable/downloadable PDF Statement of participation (certificate), 65% said that they were both equally important, 21% that the Statement of participation was more important and 9% that the badge was more important. Data show that badges offer a sense of achievement in a free learning context, a tool for motivation and to gain branded (or co-branded) university recognition.

General use of digital badging in higher education in the UK and Ireland is the subject of forthcoming research to quantify and qualify the extent and purpose of use. Anecdotal evidence shows a mix of use in four key areas:

- 1 As a motivational tool to complete a formal course/module,
- 2 To support employability and broader skills required for a modern, digital workforce,
- 3 Clustered – or ‘stacked’ – to show evidence of prior learning, and
- 4 For successful completion of staff development activities.

OpenLearn is not unique in being a platform for delivery of free learning by an educational institution. However, its use of digital badges to show recognition for non-accredited learning has provided data that reveals an appetite for digital credentials, by both formal and non-formal learners, and how this has grown since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Summary

Digital badges, as a form of micro-credential, have become a popular means of recognising achievement for non-formal learners on OpenLearn, particularly in support of career development. For educators, they provide a means to motivate and reward learners for co-curricular or non-formal study. The huge rise in uptake for non-formal learning and digital skills recognition seen on OpenLearn in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-21) has provided a fresh view of commissioning to support students and non-formal learners’ professional development goals.

## References

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18 Bothwell Street, Glasgow G2 6NU  
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Tel: 0141 572 3420

Web: [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)