Exploring the Potential of Micro-credentials and Digital Badging: Micro-credentials - The innovative change agent

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If you know what microcredentials are, then you probably know of the opportunities they unlock for higher and professional education. But the problem is, most people (on the street) do not know what they are and those who do might hold different definitions of what they are. This is something that will improve, but we probably need to acknowledge that microcredentials are still in the innovation phase.

Innovative solutions are designed to fix problems. Much like multiple discovery, where convergent evolution can drive numerous, similar new outcomes, microcredentials themselves are being simultaneously invented by educators and technologists globally. As this continues, standard practice will emerge; this has happened for other areas of education technology and will happen for microcredentials too. We may also be closer than we think.

Their premise is solid; microcredentials enable access to smaller, credible, meaningful learning experiences which are increasingly recognised by education providers and employers. Driven by numerous education trends; microcredentials are the product of a market demand for flexible learning. Part of the design is to take degree level learning and offer it to wider audiences who do not want, or need, a complete degree.

FutureLearn has seen the various definitions appear across different markets. We are part of the conversation to help leaders, practitioners and policy makers challenge their evolution as we work together to close the largest unknowns. Having worked with partners to launch over 50 microcredentials, we can be sure that they all have the same underlying framework. We've worked within the European MOOC consortium (EMC) to develop, and bring to life, the Common Microcredential Framework (CMF). This has become the standard approach across Europe for the size and shape of a microcredential. It also allows for creative freedoms, which always remains important, and encourages further innovation.

However, outside of our consortium, and depending on who you ask, a microcredential's definition can vary person-by-person. However, we would argue that some definition ambiguity isn't problematic, consensus could stifle valuable developments. Additionally, some agreed flexibility within a shared framework is a good place for microcredentials to exist. This means non-technical audiences can become comfortable with the term but also appreciate ongoing variations due designing microcredentials for a target audience.

Even with the Common Microcredential Framework, there's still a large amount of innovation for microcredentials to enjoy, or overcome. For some, microcredentials might still be coined as a 'disrupter' while they go from innovative to more mainstream. Being delivered digitally means microcredentials can be designed to also challenge traditional norms. For example, their delivery is decoupled from physical constraints. They are delivered as cohorts but could become on-demand. They have a start date, but the actual pace is set more by the learner than an instructor. With physical constraints being challenged by microcredentials, it creates numerous opportunities to experiment until standard practices stabilise.

Microcredentials challenge the typical perceptions of a series of courses. Instead of taking a defined path, FutureLearn offers a selection of microcredentials that can be standalone or taken together to form a larger learning experience. This adds a huge amount of flexibility for learners as once they have completed their first course they have outcomes which can be applied immediately in their professional, personal or academic life. They also have banked academic credit which can be used to stack into a larger qualification. Taking multiple microcredentials leads to customised programme of study, which for most providers, including FutureLearn, is an emerging area. As we grow availability of microcredentials so

too will we grow the options for pathways, stacking credit and building personalised routes.

A stack of microcredentials is like a degree with infinite electives. Similar to liberal arts degrees, or unbundled standalone models, the options become unlimited and interdisciplinary as learners can build their own collection of accredited learning experiences. The outcome still falls towards a degree level qualification - recognised widely by employers and institutions. The UK's Open University runs an 'open qualification' billed as the 'UKs only truly "open" degree'. It has no entry requirements and the 'largest choice of subjects to study in any combination'. It should be no surprise that FutureLearn's microcredentials are similar, we were founded by the Open University and are guided by them in many ways.

With so much choice also introduces levels of uncertainty. How can you be sure a collection of learning experiences provides a cohesive bundled outcome? This is one challenge for microcredential pathways; to support learners (and providers) in building logical connections, resulting in pathways and credentials with meaning and value. It also ensures various experiences can be mapped to obvious, compatible, building blocks that lead to the achievement of significant goals, such as a career change or further academic study.

Digital credentials will play a leading role to utilise credit transfer and stacking. This requires connected learner record systems, strong partnerships and defined standards, such as the CMF, to build interoperability for a global academic credit system. This is still a big challenge to overcome as learner records need portability and trust; both are critical to success. It will likely start with smaller partnerships, building capabilities over time and emerging as solved problems that failed gracefully and were iterated into a stronger proposition for learners, academic organisations and employers.

To conclude this opinion piece, we must also acknowledge the situation in which most higher education providers find themselves. The pandemic has introduced a serious set of challenges to academic life that makes adding another innovative new idea as One More Thing. Balancing innovation alongside the existing workload can be daunting. Perhaps instead, the strategy requires a rethink, the near-term will require more of an overhaul than previously assumed. Digital education now firmly lives alongside campus, blended and hybrid learning. The evolution of microcredentials therefore needs to have investment in resources and a change in plan to ensure it lives inside a bigger, coherent strategy for education; not just a bolt-on to the existing plans.