



Case Study: Modular learning by design not default, Staffordshire University

Context

Micro-credentials have recently acquired considerable focus and attention in the sector, as they offer a potential solution to the call to stimulate lifelong learning opportunities to improve social mobility, meet employer needs and boost productivity in the UK in the context of levelling up. Staffordshire University is responding to this impetus, by focusing our attention on developing place-based educational eco-systems to close the growing divide among post-secondary education learners in the UK. Those who have left school for higher education, and especially those that enter the professions, are more likely to participate than those who did not.¹ Microcredentials can provide an effective way to reach all potential learners, offering flexible pathways to lifelong learning and higher education while providing an agile response to industry needs.

Agility in design and delivery mean that they are perhaps the most responsive (higher) educational vehicle to meet immediate employer, industry, community and widening access objectives. They can facilitate national agendas for upskilling/economic growth, lifelong learning, and meeting diverse (l)earner needs.

Purpose

In June 2022 Staffordshire University launched a [report](#) with the [Lifelong Education Commission](#) about the role of micro-credentials in modular learning². The report, using our institutional framework and insights from the local area, seeks to develop a common understanding of micro-credentials and details twelve recommendations for government to consider as they operationalise Lifelong Learning opportunities envisaged by the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022, included in the Appendix.

Potential for Widening Access and Participation

Micro-credentials and anticipated modular/short course offers provide access routes into HE for harder-to-reach learners. These learners, traditionally in low IMD quintiles and Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) classifications, are representative of the Stoke-on-Trent socio-economic landscape. In this context, learners in the local area have their life

¹ THE ROLE OF MICROCREDENTIALS IN MODULAR LEARNING A Report by the Lifelong Education Commission and Staffordshire University ISBN: 978-1-908027-88-7, p.3

² ibid

chances significantly impacted. Developing lifelong learning systems via our current and proposed post-LLE offerings will successfully embed different opportunities for these learners to access HE in different formats and at different stages of their lives. These offers will also enhance learning experiences for existing students with the aim of improving student participation in terms of success measures (progression, attainment and graduate outcomes) and our wider understanding of education gain.

Staffordshire University is exploring the transformational impact of place-based offerings as both a driver for widening participation and levelling up locally.

Labour market skills gaps

The UK Government's focus on modular, flexible, lifelong learning is designed to address the skills needed to drive higher levels of productivity. Micro-credentials could be an important part of this approach, allowing employees and businesses to engage in bite sized learning that is targeted on specific industry needs. Their short, focused design could enable an agile response to current and future skills gaps. As jobs and the demand for skills continue to change, people will continually need to re-train, re-skill or redeploy to remain economically competitive.

In line with Levelling Up guidance, research indicates employers favour micro-credentials that are competency-based. It is anticipated that the student market for this post-LLE micro-credential pathway will be mid-career learners. There are 3 possible services this pathway could provide, including:

- **Upskilling** to develop and optimise learners in their current field,
- **Reskilling** to train, adapt and develop learners in a new industry (to the learner or the labour market) responsive to local needs and
- **Formalising** to support learners in gaining accredited formal qualification for the knowledge and skills acquired in their current or former careers.

How it works

Staffordshire University has developed a micro-credentials framework which anticipates offering alternative access into higher education for otherwise harder to reach learners, as well as offering enhanced opportunities for existing students, and those seeking lifelong learning options, mid-career learners for example. The development of the micro-credentials framework is part of a broader approach to access to learning, removing as many barriers to further and higher learning as possible, and to address the challenge of fragmented careers. At Staffordshire University, micro-credentials can be either for credit, or be taken on a non-credit bearing basis, representing 'bite-sized and priced' learning opportunities that can be studied flexibly.

Credits and stacking

Typically, micro-credentials will be designed to be no less than 5 notional credits and up to 40 notional credits. In order to provide evidence of learning towards a University credit-bearing module, currently, students must undertake micro-credentials with a combined notional value of at least 20 credits and complete an appropriate assessment of the learning.

Pedagogical Principles

Several pedagogical principles have been articulated throughout working groups, local and

collaborative projects championing LLE-inspired learning opportunities and HE and micro-credential research.

Models from the Micro-Credential Framework

For Micro-credentials, learners will be enrolled but not registered for an award through this process. The following models have been proposed in our Micro-Credential Framework.

Global challenge model

This is a combination of small learning opportunities with authentic phenomenon-based activities and assessments which develop skills and confidence to complete a student-led Global Challenge or project as a final micro-credential. Each micro-credential will be designed to develop particular knowledge, skills, or other graduate attributes. Micro-credentials will be available at levels 4-7 (although we are now considering extending the framework to include L3).

Self-paced/self-curated model

Micro-credentials are available to any student who is curious to experience the content. It is envisaged that once micro-credentials to a 20 credit notional value in total have been undertaken, that a negotiated summative assessment can be submitted, which is likely to be a reflective piece, allowing the student to demonstrate what academic outcomes have been achieved through the experience. By definition this mode is more experimental in nature and will be discussed with students on an individual basis.

Modular Offers

There have been some instances of modularised/short-course learning and Micro-Credentials piloted at the University already detailed below.

SHSEP/SEGway

Our Staffordshire Higher Skills and Engagement Pathways (SHSEP) and Staffordshire E-Skills & Entrepreneurship Gateway (SEGway) programmes provide a range of continuous professional development courses. Currently courses relate to either Business, Marketing and Digital industries or Health, Science and Wellbeing industries. Short courses within this portfolio embody lifelong learning providing opportunities for learners to upskill or reskill in their career.

Below are four examples from this programme:

	Managing & Leading People & Teams	Entrepreneurial Marketing Masterclass	Digital Transformation	HR Law & Legislation Masterclass
Course Length:	3 weeks	2 hours	15 weeks	1.5 days
Delivery:	Blended (1 day in first 2 weeks in-person, 1 week online)	Online, live	Online, live	On-campus
Credits:	20 towards further learning	Non-credit bearing	20 towards further learning	Non-credit bearing
Assessment:	Assessment in final week.	None	Assessment in final 2 weeks.	None
Entry Requirements:	This training course is exclusively available to Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire based businesses with a maximum of 250 employees.			

Challenges

Challenges that should be addressed as part of the modular, regional and sector-based lifelong learning conversations are:

- Flexibility vs curation – flexibility has significant benefits for learners and employers but can produce more complexity and therefore more cost to deliver;
- Mobility – place-based approaches to “levelling-up” educational and therefore economic opportunities should not deter learner mobility;
- Flexible/modular learners should still be able to access pastoral wraparound and extended learning offers. If micro-credentials and modular short courses succeed in opening up educational access to new types of learners, there may be an even greater need for student support services;
- Qualifications rather than credits – there is less value to a learner or to an employer “owning” credits rather than qualifications, which raises a challenge of where credits are housed or owned whilst they are being accumulated or as they are being transferred between learning organisations or converted into level-based qualifications. A learner could nominate a “home” learning organisation but with long gaps between potential learner credit accumulation, the relevance of a home institution is moot; MCs are end point qualifications so potentially have more traction here
- Consequently, there is an emerging rationale for regional clusters/consortia based around skills needs. For example, there are a number of industry/sector needs across the West Midlands, so learning organisations across that region could work together to provide a complimentary MC or modular learning offer based on those needs;
- If the OfS remains as regulator, as the learning finance approach and alternative routes through education emerge, the regulatory framework needs to join up.

Evaluation and development

2022-23 MC development at Staffs

The University is currently reviewing opportunities to develop micro-credentials provision through a mapping exercise of local, regional and industry/sector-wide skills' needs with a view to launching a holistic micro-credential offer in 2023. This will include a suite of digital MCs beginning with digital literacy to facilitate labour market and educational access in our local communities, carbon zero and green economy MCs, engineering and a suite of MCs for Policing. In addition, we are developing a range of MCs on inclusive education and training to support educational participation of non-traditional learners in the HE sector as well as our large public sector employers who offer degree apprenticeships and other significant work-based learning courses in health, education and policing.

Next Steps?

Inter-institutional Collaboration

The recent Government consultations have led to a focus on FE-HE partnerships across the sector. We are developing champions for partnerships through our short course trials and we are invigorating connection across the local community through our current and proposed portfolio.

Beyond FE institutions, sector changes will require greater collaboration and co-operation across the HE consortia. One challenge in relationship to the development of post-LLE offerings is the lack of standardisation across the UK HE sector. It is key that greater conferment within the sector take place to improve the transferability of micro-credentials between education providers. We are developing a role and function in the region as a convenor institution – bringing partners across Staffordshire and beyond together for effective collaboration. This challenge provides a strategic opportunity to use our growing role and function to initiate a regional consortium of HE and FE providers.

We recognise that the Department for Education's expectation is for the development of 30-40 credit units and our micro-credentials framework has been designed to achieve this through stacking. The University is advocating that micro-credentials are part of the LLE policy conversation as a bite-sized, and therefore bite-priced, learning offer since they provide an additional option for:

- those learners who need or want to balance their financial risk
- those who need or want to take smaller steps to accessing tertiary education
- those who need or want to access additional in-work training
- those who need or want an alternative route in to accessing the labour market

In creating micro-credentials it is important to have meaningful knowledge of what is useful to learners and employers. This type of provision may represent a learning opportunity for people to upskill or reskill based on regional labour market needs and sector specialisms. Those who study micro-credentials therefore may be different types of learners than universities currently, predominantly, support. Specifically – and key to the success of MCs as an alternative route to and through education or the labour market – we need to better understand who MC learners and the scale of the demand for this type of learning.

Recent indications from the OfS short course pilot (roll out from September 2022) show that 30-40 credit modular offers are not currently buoyant in the market – part of the reason for which will be because the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) is not yet in place nor has

sufficient currency and thus the narrative sell around the utility of this approach to learning is also not widespread. That means there remain opportunities for MCs to be part of a mutually beneficial – for learners and employers – earn and learn approach. MCs offer access and lifelong learning and training opportunities in ways which even 30-40 credit modules may not and may have even more added value if we move to a learning levy. This may be particularly the case in the context of the end of e.g. ESIF and the need for employers to utilise their own or other funding for upskilling the labour force as part of LSIPs.

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May 2023

APPENDIX

Recommendations

- 1 Government (DfE) should undertake a mapping exercise of all micro-learning courses in the UK to gather evidence and inform future policy making and funding for this form of learning.
- 2 Government should consider a regional pilot to test ideas, including peer consortia for the co-design, co-development, co-delivery, and co-funding of micro-credentials to level up skills.
- 3 Universities UK should promote national dialogue to mature the level of awareness, understanding and potential of micro-credentials in the UK.
- 4 Higher education providers should promote these forms of learning more widely with employers in local labour markets, and seek to recruit harder to reach students.
- 5 Adult careers advisors will also need to understand and communicate the benefits of micro-learning to enable learners to make choices.
- 6 Higher Education institutions in the UK should move towards a common definition.
- 7 Government should ensure that micro-credentials, with a value of less than 30 credits, should qualify for funding via the Lifelong Loan Entitlement.
- 8 Units of accreditation for a micro-credential should be costed at a price that is proportional to fees for an undergraduate degree.
- 9 Higher education providers should consider subscription-based funding models.
- 10 Government should also consider tax incentives for employers to invest in this form of workforce training.
- 11 Local government and Mayoral Combined Authorities should use devolved funds to invest in the development of micro-credentials as affordable solutions to local skill needs.
- 12 Government and regulatory bodies with oversight of higher education should adopt a streamlined approach to regulation and data requirements of those taking micro-credentials.

This case study is an output from a Collaborative Enhancement Project supported and funded by QAA Membership. The project was led jointly by Bath College and Bath Spa University in partnership with Coventry University, University of Plymouth, University of Middlesex and Staffordshire University. Find out more about Collaborative Enhancement Projects on the [QAA website](#).