



‘People have Started Calling Me an Expert’: The Impact of Open University Microcredential Courses

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ABSTRACT

Evaluating courses' impact on diverse stakeholders can be immensely valuable as a means of identifying ways in which curriculum can better support learners' personal and professional development and achieve wider societal aims. Yet, few empirical evaluation studies exist exploring the impact of microcredentials. This article reports a study intended to address that knowledge gap by examining the impact of microcredential courses provided by The Open University UK – one of the largest universities in Europe. A survey and narrative interviews were used to explore courses' impact on learners' knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices six months after the course ended. Analysis of the data, and the application of Wenger, Trayner and de Laat's (2011) Value Creation Framework, suggests that microcredential courses do have impact, in multiple ways, even for those learners not completing their course. Areas of impact include the development of learners' knowledge and skills, changed thinking about the subject studied, and impact at work and/or on everyday life. For some learners, study of a microcredential course also enables a career change or provides the confidence to go on to further study.

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Microcredentials have emerged in response to social, technological and economic shifts that have produced a demand for courses offering skills for the workplace (Kukulska-Hulme et al. 2022). There are multiple definitions of a microcredential. The lack of a common definition has been identified as a barrier to course uptake, since both learners and employers lack understanding of what they involve (UNESCO 2022). Experts consulted by UNESCO broadly agree with the following definition:

A micro-credential

- Is a record of focused learning achievement verifying what the learner knows, understands or can do.
 - Includes assessment based on clearly defined standards and is awarded by a trusted provider.
 - Has standalone value and may also contribute to or complement other micro-credentials or macro-credentials, including through recognition of prior learning.
 - Meets the standards required by relevant quality assurance.
- (UNESCO 2022: 6)

Since the first microcredential course offered via a MOOC platform was launched in 2013, the number available has grown considerably. There are now 2,500 courses with most focused on either business or technology (Shah 2022). Wang (2022) identifies four benefits of microcredential courses: their efficiency, agility and responsiveness enables their relevance to employment and market-focussed programmes; they allow non-traditional providers to make a relevant contribution to provision; learning is flexible and personalised, making courses convenient for learners; and they are accessible and affordable. The last two stated benefits feed into what UNESCO (2022) identifies as a further potential benefit – making education more equitable and bringing new skills to those who are part of underserved, vulnerable communities.

Despite the identified benefits, there is increasing debate about the value of microcredentials. For example, they have been described as a ‘craze’ within higher education that reflects a rush to ‘unbundle’ in the interests of profit (Ralston 2021). Critical analysis of the dominant narratives around microcredential provision suggests that they embody an instrumentalist approach that results in neoliberal subjectivity (Pollard & Vincent 2022). It is suggested that microcredentials are unlikely to be appropriate for every higher education institution and are certainly not a low-cost option or without challenges for educators (McGreal & Olcott 2022).

Studies do exist giving a limited indication of microcredentials’ impact. For example, an examination of the records of 46,791 people registered on an online freelance job searching platform identified that gaining a microcredential results in offers of better paid work in the fortnight after gaining the qualification, possibly because it reduces employers’ uncertainty over potential workers’ abilities (Kässi & Lehdonvirta 2022). Few of the claims made about microcredentials’ benefits and weaknesses are supported with research evidence, however. There is little published data about the outcomes of microcredential courses (Oliver 2019). There is also little data about the experiences and perspectives of those who complete microcredentials. An examination of literature published in the past five years concludes that, whilst microcredential learners are positioned as consumers who are central to managing their learning, their voices are missing from the discourse (Reynoldson 2022). There is a need for further research to establish the extent to which microcredentials successfully develop learners’ skills (UNESCO 2022) and particularly for research that draws on learners’ lived experiences and which features their voices.

The study reported in this article prioritises learners’ voices as an insight into their experiences, offering an alternative to the notion of ‘student voice’ often dominant in higher education. Hall (2017) suggests that ‘student voice’ has become a phrase connected with measurement and benchmarking and which happens according to the ‘rules’ prescribed by official bodies. As a result, some voices, especially minority voices, become muted (Canning 2017). Young and Jerome (2020) observe that where ‘student voice’ is present, it can easily be reduced to a feedback loop driven by ‘neoliberalism and managerialism’. Students provide feedback, the university listens, and then explains the response, so closing the loop with no acknowledgement

of the way in which power is unevenly distributed. Hall (2017) proposes that the relationship between voice and power needs reconsideration, finding ways in which learners can determine the agenda and focus on the issues that are important to them. Canning (2017) concurs, suggesting that learners' experiences are best gathered by breaking the link with measurement and focusing instead on 'what happens'. One way of doing this is via research methods that enable students to share their own narratives of their experiences. This study shares the narratives of microcredentials learners at one institution: The Open University.

MICROCREDENTIALS AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

The Open University (OU) began offering microcredentials as a 'test and learn' project on the FutureLearn platform in March 2020. The number of courses has subsequently grown. At the time of this evaluation, there were 23 courses available across all faculties of the university, including eight at postgraduate level, and more in production. Undergraduate level courses involve 10 hours of study per week over 10 weeks, whilst postgraduate courses involve 13 hours of study per week over 12 weeks. Learners in Northern Ireland can apply for funded places through Skill Up, the Flexible Skills Fund offered in partnership with the Department for the Economy. Similarly, learners in Scotland can apply for funding from the Scottish Funding Council Upskilling Fund. Other learners are self-funding, or their study is funded by their employer.

Microcredentials give educators the freedom to combine multiple pedagogies, including conversational learning, case-based learning, competency-based learning and the use of e-portfolios (Kukulska-Hulme et al. 2022). In OU microcredentials, conversational learning is the main pedagogical focus (Sharples & Ferguson 2019). For a number of courses, partnerships with industry also provide opportunities for competency-based learning and courses are endorsed by these partners. Whilst credit from microcredentials can sometimes contribute towards a qualification, currently, this is only the case for some of the postgraduate courses considered here.

Prior to this study, there was already some limited data available indicating the impact of OU microcredential courses. There are examples of posts within course discussion areas suggesting that learners perceive a particular course is developing their knowledge and skills. Evidence of initial impact is also apparent within marketing survey data collected at the end of each course. Open question responses, particularly those explaining why the learner would recommend the course to others, sometimes describe how learners anticipate their learning has potential for impact in the longer term, either in terms of work, everyday life or in respect of future study intentions. The current evaluation study set out to establish whether and how the microcredential courses have impact *beyond* the end of the course. The following questions were formulated by stakeholders for the evaluation and were addressed by the study.

RQ1. What is the impact of the courses on learners' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour or practice?

RQ2. Are courses delivering employability skills that are helping learners get jobs or change jobs, upskill or reskill?

RQ3. Are learners going on to register for further study?

METHODOLOGY

Data was gathered from learners across 23 microcredential courses that started in October 2021. The data was collected six months after the courses ended. A project outline was submitted to the OU's Human Research Ethics Committee and permission for the study was obtained from the University's Student Research Project Panel. Participation in the study was based on freely given, explicit consent, which required participants to opt in, following BERA Ethical Guidelines (BERA 2018: 9).

The study data was collected in two ways. Learners were initially invited to participate in an online survey about the impact of their microcredential study. At the end of the survey, they were invited to volunteer to provide more information via a 30-minute telephone/online interview. All data was anonymised.

SURVEY

The JISC survey tool (Jisc 2023) was used to design a survey collecting data about microcredential courses' impact. An invitation to participate, followed by one reminder, was emailed to 955 learners. Participants were invited to identify their course and answer a series of questions intended to gauge different types of impact. These were 'immanent' questions, designed to reflect the interests, formulations and language of the participants, rather than 'exmanent' questions, which reflect the language familiar to the researcher (Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000). The closed questions listed below, to be answered with 'yes', 'no', 'not sure' or 'not applicable', were each followed by an open question asking the participant to explain their response and add details:

1. Did the course provide you with any new knowledge and/or skills?
2. Did the course change how you think about the subject that you studied?
3. As a result of your course, are you doing anything differently at work?
4. Since studying the course, are you doing anything differently in your everyday life?
5. Since studying the course, have you changed jobs or roles?
6. Since studying the course, have you registered for any further study with the Open University or elsewhere?

The survey ended with two further optional open questions that invited participants to identify ways that the OU could increase the benefits of microcredential courses for learners and to share anything else that they wanted to tell the university about their course. Data about participants' personal characteristics was also collected to indicate whether the survey reached a diverse range of learners. The data was used for this purpose only, consistent with the explanation provided to participants, and not in connection with analysing the interview data.

NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS

Viewing the microcredentials learners as the experts on their own experiences, or what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011: 42) term the 'privileged knowers', this part of the evaluation study took an experience-centred narrative approach, which gives external expression to individual, internal representations of phenomena. Narratives obtained via interviews are well-suited for exploring learners' experiences and their impacts (Cousin 2009; Baughan 2017). Narratives can also provide a mechanism for determining the impact of learning in terms of the value that the learning creates, highlighting both audience and perspective (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011; Dingyloudi & Strijbos 2015). Learning is driven by the tension between the 'ground narratives' or the learners' accounts of what happens and the 'aspirational narratives' or the accounts of what learners aim to achieve (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011: 18).

Every narrative provides a large quantity of rich data, and researchers using narrative methods within higher education are advised to draw on a minimum of five narratives and ten if time allows (Cousin 2009). Nine narratives were gathered for the current study. The interviews were conducted remotely via telephone or Microsoft Teams and participants chose their own pseudonyms. A minimal interview schedule was used to maximise learners' control over the telling of their stories. To facilitate the sharing of narratives, participants were first asked how they came to choose their course and then asked to provide more detail about their survey answers, copies of which they were given prior to interview. Some participants had a lot that they wanted to share and continued beyond the 30 minutes allocated. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to review and amend their transcripts.

The interview data was subjected to a case-centred narrative analysis with a focus on what was said, looking for answers to the evaluation questions. After each narrative had been analysed individually, a conceptually clustered matrix was created.

FINDINGS

Survey responses were received from 39 learners (4%), nine of whom agreed to be interviewed (Table 1). The low response rate means that the data cannot be used for quantitative analysis

PSEUDONYM	COURSE(S) STUDIED	LENGTH OF INTERVIEW
Lisa	Online teaching: Evaluating and improving courses	17 mins
Annabelle	Online teaching: Improving courses for adult learners	21 mins
Tom	Tackline the climate crisis: Innovation from Cuba	44 mins
Olympus	Digital photography: Discover your genre and develop your style	110 mins
Sean	Cyber security operations (Cisco)	102 mins
Andrew	Cisco: Python programming (OpenEDG)	20 mins
Ethan	Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners	27 mins
Eva	Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners	46 mins
Anna	Online teaching: Embedding social, race and gender-related equity and Online teaching: Accessibility and inclusive learning	48 mins

Table 1 Learners who were interviewed about the impact of their microcredential course.

and not all courses were represented in the responses. All learners had previously been given the opportunity to complete a feedback form at the end of their course and many may have felt that they had nothing further to add.

The findings of the study will now be presented, looking first at the extent to which participants identified an impact associated with their course and then considering each evaluation question in turn before also outlining participants' suggestions around increasing course impact. Where quotes are used, pseudonyms are provided for the learners who were interviewed.

The respondents were spread across a wide age range, except for the '25 or under' group (Table 2).

AGE GROUP	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
25 or under	0%
26–35	26.3% (10)
36–45	26.3% (10)
46–55	26.3% (10)
56 and over	21.1% (8)
Prefer not to say	0%

Table 2 Survey participants by age group.

The majority reside in Northern Ireland and all but two were from the UK (Table 3). Those outside the UK were from Canada and the Republic of Ireland.

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
England	23.7% (9)
Scotland	21.1% (8)
Wales	2.6% (1)
Northern Ireland	47.7% (18)
Other	5.3% (2)
Prefer not to say	0%

Table 3 Country of residence of survey participants.

All but one learner identified as either male or female (although a wider choice was given). Male and female genders were almost equally represented, and 13% of learners (n = 5) declared a disability/long-term health condition.

Eighty-four percent of learners (n = 32) received funding for their course, a higher proportion than the overall percentage of funded learners registered for this presentation (75%). Most of these learners were funded through a government scheme, as shown in Table 4.

FUNDING SOURCE	NUMBER OF LEARNERS
Government scheme	60.5% (23)
Employer	18.4% (7)
Self-funding	15.8% (6)
Another source	5.3% (2)

Table 4 Learners' sources of funding.

Of the learners surveyed, 86.8% (n = 33) responded positively to one or more questions around course impact (Table 5).

AREA OF IMPACT	YES	NO	NOT SURE	NOT APPLICABLE
Knowledge and skills	78.9% (30)	7.9% (3)	13.2% (5)	
Changed thinking about the subject	71.1% (27)	15.8% (6)	13.2% (5)	
Impact at work	36.8% (14)	31.6% (12)	18.4% (7)	13.2% (5)
Impact on everyday life	21.1% (8)	52.6% (20)	26.3% (10)	
New job or role	15.8% (6)	73.7% (28)	0%	10.5% (4)
Further study	39.5% (15)	52.6% (20)	7.9% (3)	

Table 5 Percentages and numbers of learners identifying an impact of their course.

The survey answers from five participants suggested that their course had very limited impact, with the learners answering 'no' or 'not sure' to each question but providing little detail to explain why. COVID-19-related illness was mentioned as a key factor for two of them. One of these participants, Andrew, volunteered to be interviewed and he explained how COVID prevented him from completing the course.

But I was just wiped. I couldn't even watch TV, I was so tired, never mind complete a course. I wasn't even well enough to look at deferring (Andrew, funded learner, *Cisco: python programming (OpenEDG)*).

He also gave more detail about the impact of the course.

I wouldn't say it hasn't given me any skills. When I said I hadn't learnt anything, it's because I hadn't been able to practice it more. I've got 5% of how the language works, you just need to do stuff in it to learn it and cement it in your head and that's where the second part of the course is. You would be applying continuously all the stuff you've learnt in the first bit (Andrew, funded learner, *Cisco: Python programming (OpenEDG)*).

RQ1: WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE COURSES ON LEARNERS' KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR OR PRACTICE?

Of the participants who completed the survey, 78.9% (n = 30) felt that they had gained knowledge and or skills and were able to give details that suggest the knowledge and skills were used subsequently, for example:

I learned more about marketing and tools to use to develop my business (Funded learner, *Business management: Marketing principles and practice*).

The course enabled me to think of new approaches to work and more importantly how to engage others in an agile methodology (Funded learner, *Agile leadership and management*).

I learned theoretical knowledge and practical skills of making online courses accessible for diverse audiences with various needs. For example, I learned about the social model of disability and the need and urgency for the course development teams to consider and address the needs of diverse learners during the design phase to reduce the need for accommodations when the course is offered to students.

I also learned how to create an accessibility audit (Self-funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

The survey responses showed that 71% (n = 27) felt that their course had changed the way that they thought about the subject that they studied and were able to provide examples.

I used to think about accessibility and inclusive practice more like a checklist, rather than holistically. It encompasses many aspects of the learning experience – from the learning outcomes to the types of assessment learners are asked to complete (Funded learner, *Online teaching: Accessibility and inclusive learning*).

In some cases, their thinking changed more than they anticipated.

I wasn't expecting to gain a lot from the course, but I delved a lot deeper into the topic and started to explore other areas I'm less knowledgeable in (Funded learner, *Management of change: Organisation development and design*).

At interview, participants provided more details about how their thinking had changed, for example:

I think it's always been, in health care, what information do we want to impart, basically, whereas this gave me a different way of approaching, how am I going to do that? (Annabelle, funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

Other participants already had a good understanding of their course topic and they explained why their thinking did not change, for example:

I have worked in IT for 25 years and already have programming knowledge (Funded learner, *Cisco: Python programming (OpenEDG)*).

These same learners with a good understanding did, on the other hand, describe changes in practice at work and in their everyday life.

In the survey, 37% of participants (n = 14) reported that they were doing something differently at work because of the course. They gave details of what they were doing differently, for example:

I've completely reorganised our work network and incorporated security appliances (Funded learner, *Cyber security operations, (Cisco)*).

I'm reflecting more on behaviours I see in the context of the course material. Being more understanding of poor behaviours when they are explained by defensive decision making. Considering story telling (Funded learner, *Management of uncertainty: Leadership, decisions and action*).

I am more aware where my business is standing out in the Market and in front of my competition (Funded learner, *Business management: Marketing principles and practice*).

At interview, participants provided more detail about work impacts. Anna explained how she had implemented aspects of the courses she studied into her own learning design.

So, one thing that I implemented based on the course was the downloadable content PDF. In our LMS, it comes in an HTML page and it's not visually formatted in a way that may foster learning for some learners, and it requires a number of clicks (Anna, self-funded learner, *Online teaching: Embedding social, race and gender-related equity and Online teaching: Accessibility and inclusive learning*).

She also explained how she has come to be seen as an 'expert' around accessibility.

I feel more confident in advocating for accessibility. I've been quite outspoken at work and about creating accessible materials. People have started calling me an expert, although I don't feel like that yet because there's still lots to learn. What I've learned shows in my conversations with colleagues and in the work I do (Anna, self-

It might be assumed that courses have no impact in the workplace if only partially completed but as Toms' narrative illustrates, this is not necessarily the case. Tom, who only got two and a half weeks into his course, explained that his studies had still had a significant impact on his behaviour at work, with him becoming more concerned about waste and recycling.

You don't notice your own habits until you start studying a subject. I didn't understand with the company I work for, how much single-use waste there is that you just see people throw literally into a hedge. At an individual level I've made more of a conscious effort to separate the waste that I produce (Tom, learner, *Tackling the climate crisis: Innovation from Cuba*).

Two of the learners interviewed studied a microcredential course as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP), which features microcredential courses as stackable elements. Whilst this qualification is only open to internal candidates at the OU, all but one of the microcredential courses are open to the public. These two learners, Eva and Ethan, have had different experiences when it comes to applying their learning within their work. Ethan is still relatively new to his role and has not yet had opportunities to put his knowledge into practice. In contrast, Eva has had plenty of opportunity. She was producing two modules whilst studying the course and she felt that it helped improve her module authoring.

In her workplace, Eva is a strong advocate for the PGCAP programme and the microcredential courses.

I really would recommend the microcredentials. [...] I'm saying to people, 'Oh my goodness, there's a microcredential, *Embedding social, racial and gender-related equity*. Cancel all these meetings. Send everybody on that! That's the course! Everybody go and do it!' (Eva, funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

Andrew also provided an example of how impact at work can extend to recruiting further learners. He described how he had recommended the course he studied to a colleague, despite not having been able to finish it himself.

I recommended it to my colleague, and he's actually signed up for it. He's doing it now. He wanted to do stuff, the stuff that I do, and I said, 'Well, here's your start.' (Andrew, funded learner, *Cisco: Python programming (OpenEDG)*).

A question in the survey about whether learners were doing something differently in everyday life since studying the course was more relevant to the learners on some courses than others and only answered positively by 21% of learners (n = 8), but it did provide an opportunity for learners to share further impacts, for example:

More awareness of disabled people's experiences (Funded learner, *Online teaching: Accessibility and inclusive learning*).

Again, more aware of requirements for good cyber security (Funded learner, *Cyber security operations, (Cisco)*).

The impact on everyday life was particularly relevant to Olympus, a retired, self-funded learner, who studied digital photography. For him, the way that the course focused on work-based skills came as a surprise and was not relevant. He took the course to help him progress towards being an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society (ARPS). His survey answer indicated that he was taking fewer photos since studying the digital photography course. He explained in more depth at interview:

I'm waiting for the right moment and so the clicks on my camera get less but the results are far better, quality over quantity. I go out with an objective. All because of the course, I went to take the two sides of Santa Maria in Cape Verde. I saw the affluence in the five-star hotel, and I took a trip down into the town itself and I saw the difference between the haves and the have-nots and I came away with tears

in my eyes. The people were living in shacks. They don't consider themselves poor. That's what they are used to but the contrast of what we were experiencing and what they experience and if that's what photojournalism is sometimes about, bring it on because it has to be known and it's really made me more aware. I went out especially with a statement of intent just in my mind to find pictures which showed that, you know. And I probably wouldn't have done that, not in such a positive and objective way, without starting on this course. And I'll take that along with me (Olympus, self-funded learner, *Digital photography: Discover your genre and develop your style*).

A very significant impact of a course on everyday life for another learner, Sean, was not apparent from his survey responses and only emerged at interview. Sean described how he has made good friends through the course who are now like 'family'.

I made some really good friends. One of the guys had posted on the FutureLearn on the replies to comments, 'I'm starting up a Discord.' Now, I'd never used Discord before. It was what the young people use. I had no idea really what it was. He'd created a room and put a link to it. I kind of randomly went into it and a few of us just gelled and we were posting stuff and helping each other with the things that we were struggling on. Because I had extra time, I was able to do all this extra reading and I would take all the links and put that into the Discord for the other people and say, 'This relates to this, and this relates to that.' And I would do the research and send them the links once I had validated their usefulness. There were quite a big group at that stage, but a lot of people weren't really contributing to it. So, although it wasn't my personal preference, the moderator, he trimmed it down and the remainder of us stayed and bonded to a really close kind of group, family and stuff. There's about 10 of us. We put up job postings and video trainings (Sean, funded learner, *Cyber security operations*, (Cisco)).

Anna described how one of her microcredential courses had an impact around the language she uses:

The course had an impact on my thinking in terms of, for example, inclusive language, so using pronouns and always considering how I address folks. I immediately started adding my pronouns to my introduction and I have a little button that I carry with me with my pronouns. It was a learning process because I'm taking a language course and the instructor is... identifies as 'they' and it took me a little bit to get used to using the pronoun. One has to be really intentional about doing this and sometimes I've made mistakes, but I just kept pushing myself to learn it and to be really mindful about using the correct pronoun (Anna, self-funded learner, *Online teaching: Embedding social, race and gender-related equity*).

Impacts were not always immediately positive. One learner, Tom, described both in his survey responses and at interview, how he became depressed about the state of the world whilst learning about climate change. However, he also explained how he has subsequently identified strategies to manage his mental health, developed an interest in economics, and how his political views and voting intention have been influenced by his studies.

RQ2: ARE COURSES DELIVERING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS THAT ARE HELPING LEARNERS GET JOBS OR CHANGE JOBS, UPSKILL OR RESKILL?

Of the survey participants, 15.8% (n = 6) said that they had changed jobs or roles since completing the course. In the open comments, only one of these participants said that studying the course had not been a factor in securing the new job. Others gave details of how the course had been helpful.

It allowed me to show my current employer I was proactive in developing gaps in my skill set (Funded learner, *Business management: Fundamentals of management accounting*).

It was certainly a major factor – I had some experience of delivering classroom training, which moved to online delivery due to COVID, and later to fully asynchronous via an LMS (Blackboard) – but the course gave me another layer of information and context to work with. Also, someone on the same cohort of the course I did was on the interview panel! (Self-funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

It helped me gain confidence and knowledge required for a new role (Funded learner, *Management of uncertainty: Leadership, decisions and action*).

At interview, Lisa described in detail how the course that she studied supported her successful application for a new job.

The course showed my recruiting manager that I had this theoretical background now that I could put into practice in that role. She was quite happy to see that I did a microcredential at university level [...] The organisation that I work for as a whole is very much about belonging, inclusion, making sure that that is taken into account when developing learning materials, so I think in my interview, I said that the course covered those things as well. She liked that (Lisa, funded learner, *Online teaching: Evaluating and improving courses*).

Sean, a funded learner who was also interviewed, sees study as his route to better paid employment in cybersecurity after a long series of low paid jobs. As a result of the course, he gained confidence in his technical abilities and became part of an online community of practice that shares job adverts and resources.

RQ3: ARE LEARNERS GOING ON TO REGISTER FOR FURTHER STUDY?

In the survey responses, 39.4% (n = 15) of participants indicated that they had registered for further study since completing their course or were planning to do so. Eleven of these participants specified that their next course would be another OU microcredential. Other participants specified a range of courses, for example:

ISC entry level Cybersecurity course, Linux +, CISCO Network Defence (Funded learner, *Cyber security operations (Cisco)*).

Microcredential in finance for non-finance managers and post-graduate module in supply chain management (Funded learner, *Agile leadership and management*).

One participant, Olympus, said in his survey response that he had registered for further study, but when this was explored at interview, it was not the case. He was, however, supporting his daughter with her OU studies and felt like he was studying vicariously. For others, the interview narratives provide insight into how learners' experiences can influence their future study intention.

Annabelle describes how her course was a 'good way of dipping my toe in the water' of postgraduate level study but she concluded that online, part-time study is not right for her.

I have to say, it did kind of put me off! [Laughter] I'm glad I did it! A full-on masters, I'd find it really difficult. It made me think that maybe online isn't for me. I need to approach it as a kind of all or nothing. So, trying to do it alongside family life, alongside full-time work, I don't think it's realistic for me (Annabelle, funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

In Sean's case, his course helped him to overcome the long-term challenges associated with having dyslexia and gave him the confidence to apply for master's level study.

Could I do this? But as I went through the stuff in NetAcad and knew my technical abilities were coming through, that gave me strong confidence in myself. Through the OU and the independent learning, some that I had from some of the other students, I just gradually gained that confidence (Sean, funded learner, *Cyber security operations (Cisco)*).

Some of the study participants were very happy with their learning experience and had no suggestions for improvement, for example:

Nothing [to suggest], the courses are fantastic. I find the study material and support to be excellent, this is my second microcredential and I love them (Funded learner, *Cisco: Python programming (OpenEDG)*).

Principally, suggestions around increasing impact focused on changes that would reduce negative impacts on the learners during study and thereby make it possible for them to gain more from the course. Two learners would have appreciated more information beforehand to help them prepare. Four learners would have liked more time to complete their course. These included Lisa and Annabelle who both work and have young children. At interview, Lisa explained how the lack of a break over Christmas was challenging.

The course not including a Christmas break, that for me was a very big disappointment. I've got a young child. We visit family over Christmas. I actually had to write my assignment over Christmas (Lisa, funded learner, *Online teaching: Evaluating and improving courses*).

There were also suggestions around employability and career development. At interview, Eva suggested making employability skills more explicit. Two survey participants would have appreciated access to careers advice. One of these was Sean who also felt that the course would have had greater impact for him if academic writing skills had been included.

If the course had been 16 weeks, it wouldn't have been too long. If you incorporated academic writing and help with CVs, I think it would benefit everybody (Sean, funded learner, *Cyber security operations, (Cisco)*).

Other suggestions learners made regarding how to enhance the impact of microcredential courses included increasing the range of courses available; linking the courses with further study; and creating an area for alumni to discuss and compare experiences, network and stay in touch.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data collected, and particularly the narrative interview data, suggests that OU microcredential courses do have an impact for learners. Impact areas identified include changes to learners' knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices, with learners able to describe new knowledge or skills, changed thinking about the subject studied, and impact at work and/or on everyday life. For some learners, microcredential study enables career changes or provides the confidence to go on to further study. More research is needed to determine whether the courses provided by other institutions have similar impact, particularly those courses that adopt different approaches to learning from those featured in the OU courses considered here. There is also the question of whether impact is sustained in the longer term and whether any changes to courses result in increased impact for learners.

It is important that educators go beyond considering impact and also give learners input into how courses are designed, delivered and marketed. It could be suggested that this is only practicable on longer courses and programmes but this study shows that there is much to be learned by providing even brief opportunities for microcredential learners to share their experiences.

Another area that could be explored further is the value that microcredential learning holds for the different stakeholders involved. The Value Creation Framework (VCF) is of relevance here (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011). The VCF can be applied to learners' narratives of learning in communities and networks and goes beyond evaluating learning in terms of outputs and outcomes to assess the value that the learning holds for different stakeholders. The VCF conceptualises the learning process in terms of five cycles, which each hold different types of value: immediate, potential, applied, realized and reframing. An example of applying the

framework is shown for Anna, whose interview narrative describes her experience of studying two courses in online teaching, one around embedding social, race and gender-related equity and another in accessibility and inclusive learning (Table 6).

CYCLE	VALUE TYPE	WHAT HAPPENS	EXAMPLE FROM ANNA'S NARRATIVE
Cycle 1	Immediate values	Learners describe participating in a meaningful activity.	It was very easy to contribute to the comments.
Cycle 2	Potential values	Learners describe outputs from their learning that might be useful later.	The first thing that I noticed was the overall design of the course as a way to embed equity. I'm talking about the flexibility where all the weeks are open.
Cycle 3	Applied values	Learners describe putting their learning into practice.	I've been quite outspoken at work about creating accessible materials. I know where we have gaps in terms of the materials that we share or we create, so I've been working to address those.
Cycle 4	Realized values	Learners explain what difference their learning made.	I feel more confident in advocating for accessibility. People have started calling me an expert, although I don't feel like that yet because there's still lots to learn. What I've learned shows in my conversations with colleagues and in the work I do.
Cycle 5	Reframing values	Learners explain how their thinking has changed or their goals have been re-defined.	One thing that was eye-opening was learning about the social model of disability. That really has changed the way I think about everything.

Table 6 Application of the Value Creation Framework to Anna's narrative.

Within Anna's narrative it is easy to find examples of each type of value but not all types are identifiable within every learner's narrative. In Ethan's case, he was new to his role at the time of interview and only immediate and potential values can be identified.

I think I have an awareness of certain aspects and certain concepts but whether I've implemented those as yet, I'm not sure. I probably will have opportunity to do that (Ethan, funded learner, *Online teaching: Creating courses for adult learners*).

Whilst other types of values might become more obvious in Ethan's narrative if he were to be interviewed again at a later date, this is not always the case and not necessarily a concern; the cycles of the framework are not linear or hierarchical (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011).

In addition, the different types of value are variously important for different learners and other stakeholders in the learning process (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat 2011). For microcredential courses, employers might be particularly pleased to see evidence of applied values in the workplace, whilst learners may attach more importance to the experience of learning itself (immediate values) and the way in which the learning subsequently informs their professional development (realized and reframing values). Microcredential course marketing can easily target the least experienced learners who can struggle to know which courses will meet their needs or understand how best to represent their value to employers (Healy 2021). As suggested by some of the participants in this study, universities providing microcredentials need to consider whether they have a responsibility to support learners' career development, just as they do for students on longer programmes.

Over 84% of the learners who participated in this study were not self-funding. Their learning was made possible by their employers or in most cases by either the Flexible Skills Fund in Northern Ireland or the Scottish Funding Council Upskilling Fund. There is an urgent need to consider how microcredential learning can become more equitable and accessible (Pollard & Vincent 2022) and this is the case in the UK where there is disparity between different nations. The development of similar government schemes in England and Wales has the potential to generate similar levels of impact in these nations.

LIMITATIONS

An obvious limitation of this study is the low response rate to the survey (4%), which means that the data cannot be used for quantitative analysis. A study gathering information via interview only without the requirement to complete a survey first may have elicited more detailed responses overall. The qualitative, narrative data is also limited in that it comes from a self-selecting sample within a single presentation of courses at a single institution.

Adopting a narrative approach brings its own limitations in terms of the extent to which findings can be generalised. Everyone who participates in the sharing of a narrative has their own agency, expanding or reducing the story as they play their role of attending, telling, transcribing, analysing, or reading (Riessman 2008). Researchers have a responsibility to share participants' narratives in a way that makes the relevance of the stories obvious (Hollway & Jefferson 2000), but it is the readers' responsibility to judge the extent to which the narratives are useful and transferrable to others' contexts. These limitations are often outweighed by the unique insights that narratives of lived experience can provide.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that OU microcredentials courses have an impact for learners who participated in the study in terms of changes to their knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and practices, with learners able to describe new knowledge or skills, changed thinking about the subject studied, and impact at work and/or on everyday life. For some learners, microcredential study enables career changes or provides the confidence to go on to further study. The study also finds that the VCF can be usefully applied to learners' narratives of their learning experiences to assess the value that the learning holds for different stakeholders. Such findings are not easily identified without the use of a narrative approach. The choice of research methods matters when seeking learners' perspectives; the insight gained from narrative interviews is more detailed and occasionally very different to that gained from the same participants' survey answers. Having the opportunity to share their stories is also appreciated by microcredential learners themselves.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. It's wonderful because you are taking the students' views into account and it means an awful lot (Olympus, self-funded learner, *Digital photography: Discover your genre and develop your style*).

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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