Chapter 6
Designing Personalized Student Development Through Microcredentials:
An Institutional Approach

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ABSTRACT

2020 saw many challenges across the planet as the population sought to try to comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications for our lives at home and work. Amidst this period of uncertainty and challenge, Abertay University, a small Scottish University, decided that it could not just maintain the curriculum status quo and needed to react to better support new students who may be coming to university with different questions and challenges to previous cohorts. This chapter will out-line the principles behind the design of the microcredentials, explain how students and staff embraced the opportunity, before revealing the positive impact it had on student retention. It will also hint at the longer-term implications of the student decisions in selecting microcredentials and how the university is seeking to replicate this challenge and guidance through higher level microcredentials that build upon the first year experience, but move to a focus on student personal and professional development.

CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY FOR MICROCREDENTIALS

Abertay University is a Scottish university based in Dundee with approximately 4,500 students across 3 academic schools that deliver science, design, technology, and business focused programs. Abertay has a social inclusion mission and attracts many students from challenging socio-economic profiles, whilst also offering contextual admissions to some students who do not achieve the standard admissions grades. This makes for a diverse and enthusiastic student population that reflects the community of the region.

In 2019, Abertay chose to replace a 20-credit elective module in years 1 and 2 that was identified through student and staff evaluations as not working well for either party. The elective module initiative had aimed to broaden the curriculum within first and second year of an Abertay undergraduate degree program by making it mandatory for students to take a 20-credit elective in first year and a different 20 credit elective in second year. Part of that challenge was that student choice was limited as the same modules were on offer across each year and student numbers were capped so often students could not access what they wanted. Students also found it difficult to see how the content of the electives was relevant to their own degrees leading to disengagement with these modules.

At the same time, the institution was starting to become concerned by its retention data. Abertay is proud of its social inclusion mission and welcomes a diverse range of students. However, retention of first year entry students was not where it should be, fluctuating around 83-87%, and regularly saw the institution in the lower quarter of Scottish Universities for retention rates. This could not continue and there was the potential for this to get worse through the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on student motivations and behaviors.

As the Covid-19 pandemic developed, the learning journey of our future students also changed. At Abertay, the challenge was to rethink our approach to student transitions whilst responding to the changing nature of our students' needs through a personalized curriculum. Drawing upon the key first year and transition literature from the Lizzio and Wilson (2010) student lifecycle model to the transition pedagogy work of Kift et al (2010) and the relationship rich education work of Felten and Lambert (2020), Abertay developed a suite of credit bearing microcredentials that were mandatory for all first-year students.

There was a belief that an emphasis on supporting our first-year entry transitioning students could be designed in through curriculum and microcredentials were seen as an agile, responsive, student-focused way of achieving these ambitions. As Felten et al (2016) commented the aim was to set the tone and culture of community with new students and staff through being explicit around the university's expectations and how students could best achieve successful outcomes.

The concept was for these microcredentials to be fully online as part of realizing the university's ambitions in increasing the amount of online learning and teaching and providing flexibility for students. This was felt to be important to ensure our pedagogic offer was up-to-date and relevant and to give students the skills to learn online which would mirror much of the CPD evident in the workplace. As it happened, the advent of the pandemic cemented that aspect of microcredential delivery quicker than initially anticipated.

PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN THE MICROCREDENTIALS

The microcredentials were designed and are delivered from all areas of the university. This included academics, professional services (drawn from employability, learner development, library, student coun-

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