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The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

Beyond flexibility: Educator presence and professional community in digital microcredentials

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Digital microcredentials offer flexible, workforce-responsive learning, yet less is known about the role of human connection in shaping learner experiences. This paper reports findings from a broader mixed-methods study of 158 Australian industry learner professionals who completed university microcredentials. Survey data were analysed descriptively and qualitative responses thematically. Perceptions were highly positive, with 97.5% reporting that the microcredential met expectations, 96.8% indicating they would recommend participation to others, and 91.8% reporting moderate-to-significant professional or career impact. Two human-centred themes were prominent: educator support and care, and professional community and networking. Interpreted through the Community of Inquiry framework, the findings highlight educator support and professional community as valued dimensions of participants' digital microcredential experiences.

Keywords: microcredentials, professional learning, educator presence, human-centred learning design

Introduction

Microcredentials have become an increasingly prominent feature of higher education, providing flexible and targeted learning opportunities for professionals seeking to upskill, reskill and engage in lifelong learning. In Australia, the National Microcredentials Framework defines microcredentials as certifications of assessed learning or competency that are smaller than an Australian Qualifications Framework award qualification (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021). Universities have increasingly adopted microcredentials in response to workforce transformation, technological change and growing demand for flexible professional learning pathways (Oliver, 2019; Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2021). Existing research suggests that microcredentials may support skill development, workplace application and employability outcomes (Miller & Jorre de St Jorre, 2022). Previous work highlighted several challenges facing the Australian microcredential landscape, including quality assurance, recognition, learner experience and learning design considerations (Ngo et al., 2023). Importantly, that work identified a need for greater understanding of the learner experience and the value and impact of digital microcredentials for industry learner professionals.

The current study responds directly to that call. While microcredentials are often discussed in terms of flexibility, employability and workforce relevance, the ASCILITE 2026 conference theme invites consideration of a broader question: what role does human connection play in increasingly digital learning environments? This paper is informed by principles of human-centred learning design, which emphasise learner needs, relationships and meaningful engagement within digital learning environments (Henderson et al., 2023). To further interpret the findings, the study draws on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which proposes that meaningful online learning experiences emerge through the interaction of teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Martin et al., 2022). This paper focuses primarily on teaching presence and social presence because these constructs aligned strongly with the emergent themes, while recognising that the three CoI presences are interrelated. Accordingly, this study asks: How are educator support and professional community reflected in learners' perceptions of value within digital microcredentials? Drawing on findings from a broader mixed-methods study, this paper provides a brief empirical report that offers practical implications for

educators and learning designers seeking to foster meaningful human connection within technology-supported professional learning environments.

Method

This paper draws on data from a broader mixed-methods study investigating the value and impact of digital and online microcredentials among industry learner professionals enrolled in Australian university microcredential offerings. The broader study combined quantitative survey measures of perceived value and professional impact with qualitative responses exploring participants' experiences, enabling both patterns in learner perceptions and the experiences underpinning them to be examined. This paper reports a focused analysis of survey data relating to educator support, professional community and perceived value. Ethics approval for the broader study was obtained from the authors' institutions prior to data collection. A total of 210 survey responses were initially collected. Two respondents did not provide consent and were removed. A further 18 respondents had not completed a microcredential and were therefore outside the study scope. Of the remaining responses, 160 surveys were marked complete. Two additional cases were excluded during cleaning due to invalid or incomplete responses. The final analytical sample comprised 158 valid responses. The analytical sample therefore comprised microcredential completers who voluntarily participated in the survey; non-completers were not represented in the analysis. The microcredentials represented in the sample varied in completion time and delivery mode. Delivery was predominantly online asynchronous (62.7%), with 31.6% combining synchronous and asynchronous online delivery and 5.1% delivered synchronously online. Most participants completed their microcredential within two to four weeks; the survey did not capture whether individual microcredentials were cohort-based or fully self-paced.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling using professional networks, institutional channels and social media. The survey included demographic items and questions including "Did the microcredential meet your expectations?" "Would you recommend undertaking a microcredential to others?" "Do you anticipate that completing the microcredential will provide value to you in the future?" and "What impact has completing the microcredential had on your professional or career development?" Likert-scale learner-experience items included "Educators provided sufficient support throughout microcredential study." Open-ended questions included "Was there anything that stood out positively about your microcredential experience?" and "What could be improved about your microcredential experience?" The analysis reported in this paper draws specifically on items and responses relating to educator support, professional community and perceived value. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, involving iterative coding, categorisation and theme refinement to identify patterns across learner experiences. Initial coding was undertaken by one researcher, with themes and coding interpretations subsequently reviewed and refined through discussion among the research team. Differences in interpretation were resolved through consensus, and multiple codes could be assigned to individual responses where appropriate. However, this paper focuses specifically on the human-centred aspects of learner experience. Drawing on themes of educator support and care, and professional community and networking, the paper explores how meaningful human connection is reflected in learner perceptions of value within digital microcredentials.

The sample was predominantly female (*n* = 104, 65.8%), followed by male participants (*n* = 52, 32.9%), with a small number identifying with another gender or preferring not to disclose (*n* = 2, 1.3%). Most participants were aged between 25 and 44 years (65.8%), reflecting a cohort primarily engaged in professional development, upskilling and career advancement while balancing work and personal commitments.

Results

Overall perceptions of value and impact

Participants reported highly positive perceptions of their microcredential experience (Table 2). Overall, 97.5% indicated that the microcredential met their expectations, 96.8% reported they would recommend participation to others, 96.8% anticipated future value from participation, and 91.8% reported moderate-to-significant

professional or career impact. Across the qualitative responses, two human-centred themes were prominent: educator support and care, and professional community and networking.

Table 2.
Overall learner perceptions of value and impact (n=158)

Measure	Positive response
Microcredential met expectations	97.5%
Would recommend to others	96.8%
Anticipated future value	96.8%
Moderate-to-significant professional/career impact	91.8%

Educator support and care: beyond content delivery

Educator support emerged as one of the most prominent positive features identified by participants. Of the 157 respondents who identified positive standout features, 50 (31.8%) explicitly referenced educator or facilitator support, making it the most frequently coded positive standout feature. Participants described educators as approachable, responsive, caring and invested in learner success. One participant noted: “The educator was amazing, professional and caring. A great collegial support network from the student cohort.” Another explained: “The support from the teaching team made a significant difference. They were approachable, responsive and genuinely interested in helping us succeed.” Participants frequently linked educator support to confidence, motivation and persistence, particularly when balancing study alongside professional and personal commitments. Consistent with these qualitative findings, 92.9% of respondents agreed that educators provided sufficient support throughout their microcredential study. While educator support was highly valued, some participants expressed a desire for more personalised feedback and additional opportunities for live interaction with teaching staff.

Professional community and networking: learning through connection

The second prominent human-centred theme related to professional community and networking opportunities. Of the 157 respondents who identified positive standout features, 32 (20.4%) explicitly referenced networking, peer learning or professional community as valuable aspects of their microcredential experience. Participants valued opportunities to engage with peers from different industries, share workplace experiences and discuss professional challenges. One participant commented: “The networking opportunities were just as valuable as the content. It was great connecting with like-minded professionals.” Another noted: “Hearing how others were applying the concepts in different industries broadened my perspective and helped me think differently about my own practice.” Requests for increased networking opportunities, live sessions, personalised feedback and peer interaction were among the most common suggestions for improvement. Consistent with these findings, 88.6% of respondents identified career networking or enrichment events as highly or extremely important design features.

Discussion

The findings indicate that perceived value within digital microcredentials was not associated solely with flexibility or access. Rather, the integration of quantitative and qualitative findings highlights a relational dimension of the learner experience. Alongside highly positive overall perceptions of value and impact, participants identified educator support and professional community as prominent aspects of their experiences. This suggests that, while flexibility may enable participation in digital microcredentials, meaningful human connection may contribute to how learners experience and perceive the value of that participation. This is particularly relevant in increasingly digital educational environments, where scalability, efficiency and automation may be prioritised (Henderson et al., 2023).

The CoI framework provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. Educator support and care can be interpreted in relation to teaching presence, which emphasises the role of educators in designing, guiding and

facilitating meaningful learning experiences (Garrison et al., 2000). The convergence between the quantitative finding that 92.9% of respondents perceived educator support as sufficient and qualitative accounts describing educators as approachable, responsive and caring suggests that participants valued both the functional and relational dimensions of educator presence. In this context, teaching presence extended beyond content delivery to include responsiveness, encouragement and personalised support, which participants associated with confidence, motivation and persistence. Similarly, professional community and networking can be interpreted in relation to social presence. The qualitative finding that participants valued peer learning, professional conversations and networking, together with the finding that 88.6% rated career networking or enrichment events as highly or extremely important design features, indicates that opportunities for connection were valued alongside course content. Participants' accounts of sharing workplace experiences and learning how others applied concepts across industries suggest that these interactions supported collaboration, reflection and knowledge exchange. This is consistent with research highlighting the importance of contextualised professional learning and employability-oriented assessment (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018).

Although cognitive presence did not emerge as a distinct theme in the inductive analysis, participants described applying learning to workplace contexts, reflecting on professional practice, and learning from how peers applied concepts across industries. These accounts may reflect elements of cognitive presence, but the survey was not designed to measure the CoI constructs directly. Cognitive presence therefore warrants further investigation rather than being inferred from the present findings.

Taken together, these findings suggest that flexibility and human connection may perform complementary rather than competing functions within digital microcredentials. Flexibility can reduce barriers to participation for working professionals, while educator presence and professional community may enrich the quality of the learning experience once learners participate. Viewed through the CoI framework, the findings therefore suggest that teaching and social presence were particularly salient within these condensed professional learning environments, while cognitive presence warrants further investigation. For learning designers, designing for connection can include purposeful educator interaction, responsive feedback and structured peer exchange, incorporated selectively to complement flexible asynchronous learning.

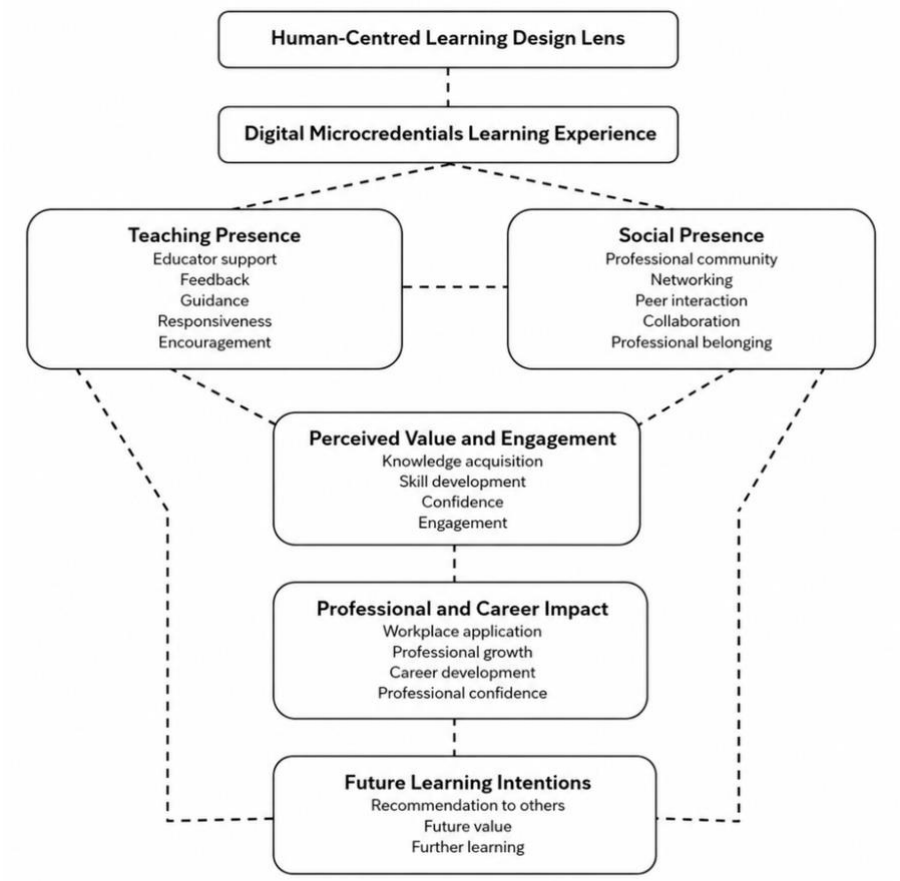


Figure 1. *Proposed heuristic model of human-centred value in digital microcredentials*

Figure 1 presents a study-derived heuristic model that synthesises the findings through a CoI lens. The model illustrates the proposed relationships between educator presence, professional community, perceived value and engagement, and professional outcomes and future learning intentions. These relationships are interpretive rather than causal and are proposed for further investigation.

Limitations and future research

The study relied on self-reported perceptions from microcredential completers who voluntarily participated in the survey. Non-completers were not represented, and self-selection may have contributed to the highly positive perceptions reported. The percentages should therefore be interpreted as the perceptions of participating completers rather than as representative of all microcredential learners. The study also cannot establish causal relationships between educator presence, community engagement and learner outcomes, and the findings may not be transferable beyond the Australian higher education context. Future research could explore whether these findings transfer across different microcredential designs, disciplines and international contexts.

Conclusion

This study contributes learner-centred evidence that human connection remains an important dimension of perceived value within digital microcredentials. Interpreted through the CoI framework, educator support and professional community highlight the continuing relevance of teaching and social presence within condensed professional learning environments. For higher education providers, the findings point to practical opportunities to complement flexible delivery with purposeful educator interaction, responsive feedback and structured opportunities for peer and professional exchange. Designing for connection may therefore be an important complement to designing for flexibility in digital microcredentials.

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