

Research Article

Assessing the impact of micro-credential training in higher education: A pilot study supporting BA dissertations

Evaluación del impacto de la formación en microcredenciales en la educación superior: Un estudio piloto de apoyo a los Trabajos Final de Grado

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Abstract:

Introduction: Micro-credentials, endorsed by the European Union for enhancing lifelong learning and employability, offer targeted, flexible learning experiences. This pilot study investigates the impact of integrating micro-credential training into the BA dissertation process for English Studies students at the University of Extremadura. **Methodology:** The study involved a two-week, in-person micro-credential course, divided into modules on time management, research techniques, and writing skills, supplemented by pre- and post-training surveys to assess students' needs and the training's short-term and long-term impact. Seven fourth-year students participated in the study, providing feedback through surveys. **Results:** The training improved students' preparedness, confidence, and motivation. Key areas of development included time management, research skills, and emotional resilience. Students reported sustained benefits, applying the skills and strategies learned throughout their dissertation process. **Discussion:** Findings highlight the training's positive short-term and long-term impacts, including increased motivation and practical skill application. However, it

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identifies areas for improvement, such as more training in citation techniques and writing clarity. **Conclusions:** Micro-credential training effectively addresses gaps in traditional curricula, enhancing students' readiness for their BA dissertations. Further research with larger cohorts and diverse disciplines is recommended to generalise the findings and refine the microlearning approach.

Keywords: higher education; lifelong learning; micro-credentials; formal training; learner-centred courses; skill development; BA dissertations; English Studies.

Resumen:

Introducción: Las microcredenciales ofrecen experiencias de aprendizaje específicas y flexibles. Este estudio piloto investiga el impacto de integrar microcredenciales en el proceso del TFG para estudiantes de Estudios Ingleses en la Universidad de Extremadura. **Metodología:** El estudio involucró un curso presencial de dos semanas, dividido en módulos sobre gestión del tiempo, técnicas de investigación y habilidades de escritura, complementado con encuestas antes y después de la formación para evaluar necesidades e impacto. Siete estudiantes de cuarto año participaron, proporcionando retroalimentación. **Resultados:** La formación mejoró la preparación, confianza y motivación de los estudiantes. Las áreas clave de desarrollo incluyeron gestión del tiempo, habilidades de investigación y resiliencia emocional. Los estudiantes informaron beneficios sostenidos, aplicando las habilidades y estrategias aprendidas a lo largo de su TFG. **Discusión:** Los hallazgos destacan los impactos positivos de la formación, incluyendo mayor motivación y aplicación práctica de habilidades. Se identifican áreas de mejora, como más formación en técnicas de citación y claridad en la escritura. **Conclusiones:** Esta formación aborda eficazmente las brechas en los currículos tradicionales, mejorando la preparación de los estudiantes para sus TFG. Se recomienda futuras investigaciones con cohortes más grandes y diversas disciplinas para generalizar los hallazgos y refinar el enfoque de microaprendizaje.

Palabras clave: educación superior; aprendizaje permanente; microcredenciales; formación formal; cursos centrados en el estudiante; desarrollo de habilidades; TFG; Estudios Ingleses.

1. Introduction

In accordance with the Council of the European Union's recommendations for higher education programmes, micro-credential training is endorsed as a method to enhance lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union, 2022). These qualifications are intended to supplement formal education with short, student-focused courses, offering a flexible and specialised approach to skill development. Small learning experiences, such as short courses leading to micro-credentials, allow for the targeted acquisition of skills and competencies adapted to a fast-changing society and labour market while not replacing traditional qualifications. Their objective is to be complementary.

University micro-credentials are derived from short courses (less than 15 ECTS credits) focused on acquiring specific knowledge, skills, or competencies (Ministerio de Universidades, 2024). These flexible and adaptable formats cater to the diverse needs and availability of adult learners. Each course can stand alone or be combined into broader credentials within a personalised learning pathway. The "Plan Microcreds" aims to reconcile the capabilities of the population with new employment opportunities, promote a knowledge society, expand access to higher education, and foster social inclusion.

1.1. Microlearning in higher education

Micro-credential training, also referred to as “microlearning”, represents a contemporary educational innovation addressing the demand for ongoing and adaptable skill development in today’s rapidly evolving job market. The Council of the European Union (2022) defines micro-credentials as certifications for the learning outcomes achieved through short-term educational experiences. These experiences provide a flexible and focused way to gain the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for both personal and professional growth.

A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills, and competencies that respond to societal, personal, cultural, or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials and are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.

Micro-credentials are distinguished by their brevity and precision. Unlike traditional degree programmes, which may require years to complete, micro-credentials can be obtained in weeks or months. This makes them particularly appealing to professionals seeking to update their skills or transition to new career paths without the extended commitment required by traditional education.

These concise courses are becoming increasingly crucial in a fast-changing job market, where continuous upskilling and reskilling are essential. Employers are looking for candidates who can demonstrate up-to-date and relevant skills, and micro-credentials offer a way to validate these competencies. Additionally, micro-credentials are often stackable, meaning that multiple micro-credentials can be combined to form a more comprehensive qualification, providing a flexible route for lifelong learning.

Micro-credential training is also centered on the learner, designed to meet the specific needs of individual students. This approach enables personalised learning experiences tailored to the learner’s career objectives and interests. The flexibility of micro-credentials allows them to be pursued alongside full-time employment or other commitments, making them accessible to a wider range of learners. Furthermore, micro-credentials contribute to the democratisation of education by making learning opportunities more accessible and affordable. They offer individuals from various backgrounds the chance to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in the modern workforce.

1.2. Micro-credential training at the University of Extremadura: The EU Green Alliance

The University of Extremadura, a key member of the EU Green Alliance, is actively implementing these guidelines. In alignment with the EU Green Alliance (2019), a transnational consortium of nine European universities, the university is pioneering innovative educational strategies that support the broader lifelong learning initiative. The EU Green Alliance aims to promote sustainability, fostering empowerment, capabilities, opportunities, and cooperation for a more sustainable environment. This alliance emphasises societal responsibility, focusing on sustainable development and the equitable distribution of excellence across European regions.

The University of Extremadura's involvement in this alliance enhances learning outcomes by integrating diverse, eco-conscious learning experiences that are relevant to today's dynamic job market (Delicado et al., 2024). By embedding sustainability into education, research, and community engagement, the university prepares students for careers in the green economy. This approach not only aligns with the broader goals of lifelong learning but also equips students with the skills necessary to contribute to sustainable development and address pressing societal challenges.

The EU Green Alliance unites nine mid-sized universities from peripheral regions across Europe, advocating a holistic approach to sustainability that includes economic, societal, cultural, and environmental dimensions. This collaborative partnership focuses on education, research, innovation, and service to society, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The alliance aims to create a European hub for sustainability, employing a virtual platform to make education and research globally accessible, thus promoting inclusion and resilience. Through this partnership, the University of Extremadura is helping to distribute excellence across Europe, fostering growth in smaller cities and rural areas (EU Green Alliance, 2019).

1.3. Fostering BA dissertation training through micro-credentials

Micro-credentials, known for their flexibility and specialised content, serve as a valuable supplement to traditional education. They offer personalised learning pathways, enabling students to acquire specific skills and knowledge that directly enhance employability and professional development. The adaptability of micro-credentials makes them particularly effective in meeting the evolving demands of both the labour market and individual learners. By providing clear documentation of skills and competencies, micro-credentials bridge the gap between formal education and the specific needs of students in higher education.

In our view, BA dissertations offer an excellent opportunity to implement this innovative educational approach (Blanco-García & Martín-Gilete, in press). Undergraduate students often encounter significant challenges when working on their final degree projects, such as the need for specialised knowledge, research skills, and project management capabilities. Flexible micro-credential training can provide crucial support to undergraduates during this critical academic phase, addressing gaps that traditional coursework may not fully cover. Microlearning can be customised to meet specific needs, such as advanced research methodologies, data analysis, or project management, thereby enhancing the overall quality and impact of the students' BA dissertations.

Incorporating micro-credential training into the framework of BA dissertation support can enrich the educational experience by providing students with targeted, practical skills that are directly applicable to their research projects. This approach not only helps students complete their dissertations more effectively but also prepares them for the transition from academic study to professional practice. By equipping students with relevant and up-to-date skills, micro-credentials ensure that graduates are ready to face the challenges of a competitive job market (Martín-Gilete & Blanco-García, in press-a).

By embedding micro-credentials into the dissertation process, universities can create a more comprehensive educational environment that supports students' academic and professional development (Martín-Gilete & Blanco-García, in press-b). This integration aligns with the broader objectives of lifelong learning, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared with the competencies needed for continuous personal and professional growth in a rapidly changing world. The European Commission's vision to achieve a European Education Area by 2025 highlights the importance of such innovative educational approaches, promoting inclusivity, accessibility, and excellence in higher education.

1.4. Objectives

The main objective of this pilot study is to present a proposal for supporting BA dissertations through integrating microlearning in higher education. Specifically, we aim to assess how micro-credential training affects students' confidence and preparation for completing their dissertations and to understand how microlearning modules can be integrated into the development process to help students build a solid framework for their final degree projects.

To achieve this, we aim to:

1. Explore how students from the BA in English Studies at the University of Extremadura receive micro-credential training to support the completion of their BA dissertations and to assess their self-perceived learning needs and expectations before receiving this formal training.
2. Investigate the short-term and long-term impacts of micro-credential training on students' academic outcomes.

1.5. Article overview

This paper is divided into four additional sections. After discussing the importance of micro-credential training in higher education, specifically focusing on the benefits this educational approach offers for BA dissertations and outlining the main objectives of our pilot study, Section 2 describes the methodology employed. Section 3 presents the preliminary insights gained from the research, and Section 4 discusses these findings. Finally, Section 5 highlights the key conclusions and limitations, and suggests further areas for research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Description of the micro-credential programme

Aligned with the lifelong learning programme at the University of Extremadura and adhering to the EU's standards for micro-credential design and issuance (Council of Europe, 2022), we developed an in-person micro-credential course titled "Embarking on your BA Dissertation: A Roadmap for 'Grado en Estudios Ingleses' Students at the UEx".

The primary aim of this student-centered initiative was to supplement and enhance the existing methodological training of our students, equipping them with a diverse array of methodological skills. This preparation was intended not only to facilitate the successful completion of their final degree projects but also to foster motivation and holistic development. The short course, worth 3 credits, was conducted over two weeks during the second semester of the academic year 2023-2024. The programme was divided into six sessions across three main modules as follows.

2.1.1. Module 1: Introduction and time management

The first module, “Introduction and Time Management”, provided an in-depth understanding of the BA dissertation process, including an overview of the regulations and developmental stages involved. Additionally, this module focused on imparting essential time and emotional management skills, enabling students to effectively handle the pressures and demands associated with their dissertation work. By learning to manage their time efficiently and maintain emotional resilience, students are better equipped to overcome the various challenges they might encounter during their dissertation journey.

2.1.2. Module 2: Research and study techniques

The second module, “Research and Study Techniques”, aimed to enhance students’ abilities to search for, evaluate, and manage information. This included optimising strategies for information retrieval and evaluation, as well as effective handling of bibliography and citations. Students were taught the importance of distinguishing between proper documentation and plagiarism to ensure academic integrity in their work. Additionally, this module helped students refine their dissertation topics and employ effective study techniques, which are crucial for conducting thorough and focused research.

2.1.3. Module 3: Writing and presentation skills

The third module, “Writing and Presentation Skills”, guided students through the stages of academic writing, from drafting to final revision. This segment aimed to support students in developing coherent and structured dissertations. Moreover, students received training in presentation and defense techniques, preparing them to present and defend their research findings more confidently. This included strategies for responding to questions and presenting their projects convincingly to an academic audience.

2.1.4. Module 4: Evaluation and final project report

After the micro-credential course, students were required to submit a final project report as an evaluative tool. This report focused on personal reflection and integrating the knowledge and skills acquired during the course in preparation for their BA dissertation. The report had to include three specific components: a work schedule, a list of basic bibliographic references, and a proposed outline for their dissertation.

This final report also enabled supervisors to assess how well-prepared students were for their final degree projects. By covering these key areas, the micro-credential programme aimed to provide a comprehensive support framework for students embarking on their work, ensuring they are well-equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed.

2.2. Participants

Seven of the 45 fourth-year English Studies students at the University of Extremadura (males = 9; females = 36) enrolled in the micro-credential training, representing 15.56% of the targeted cohort. All participants were female, with an average age of 22.14 years. Table 1 below provides detailed information per participant.

Tabla 1.

Summary of 4th-year BA in English Studies students at the UEx participating in the pilot study

Participants	Sex	Age	BA dissertation area	BA dissertation topic
ST01	Female	22	Translation	Requested
ST02	Female	22	Linguistics	Given
ST03	Female	22	Translation	Requested
ST04	Female	22	Linguistics	Requested
ST05	Female	22	Linguistics	Requested
ST06	Female	22	Linguistics	Requested
ST07	Female	23	Culture	Given

Fuente: Own elaboration based on the analysis carried out in the study (2024).

The selection of BA dissertation topics varied among the participants. While 71.43% of the students chose their topics in consultation with their supervisors, 28.57% had their topics assigned by their supervisors. Most of these students (57.14%) were working on linguistics-related final degree projects, with the rest divided between translation studies (28.57%) and culture studies (14.29%).

2.3. Pre-training survey: Self-perceived students' needs

A paper-based survey was developed to assess students' self-perceived learning needs and expectations before receiving the micro-credential training. The survey comprised five open-ended questions focusing on various aspects of their academic experience and expectations. The survey responses were used to tailor the course content, ensuring it met the actual demands and preferences of the learners, thereby increasing its effectiveness and relevance. The questions included are as follows.

2.3.1. Interest in the training programme

Why did you enrol in this course?

This question aimed to understand the motivations behind the students' decision to enrol in the micro-credential training, providing insights into the perceived value and anticipated benefits of the course from the students' perspectives.

2.3.2. Prior experience with methodological training

What do you consider your strengths and weaknesses in order to complete your BA dissertation?

This question sought to identify the areas where students felt confident and where they recognised a need for improvement. Understanding these self-assessed strengths and weaknesses allowed the training to be tailored to address specific student needs effectively.

To what extent do you think the degree trains you to face this final stage in your degree?

This question evaluated the perceived effectiveness of the existing BA programme in preparing students for their dissertations. It highlighted any gaps in the current curriculum that the micro-credential training could fill.

2.3.3. Motivation to complete their final degree project

To what extent are you motivated to start with your BA dissertation?

This question assessed the students' motivation levels at the outset of their dissertation work. High or low motivation can significantly impact the success of the dissertation process, and understanding this can inform the design of motivational and support strategies within this short-term training.

What do you expect from this course?

This question aimed to capture students' expectations and concerns regarding both the micro-credential course and the dissertation process. Addressing these expectations and concerns was crucial for the success and relevance of the micro-credential training.

2.4. Post-training surveys: Short-term and long-term assessments of the micro-credential

After the micro-credential training, an online survey was administered to evaluate the short-term effectiveness of the course. It comprised 20 open-ended questions addressing overall satisfaction and expectations, specific aspects of the course experience such as dissertation topic understanding, time management, motivation, confidence, and areas needing further training. This survey was used to gather comprehensive feedback on various elements of the immediate impact and application of the course content from a short-term perspective.

Three months later, after the completion of the final degree project, a delayed post-training survey was conducted to assess the usefulness of the micro-credential training in supporting undergraduate students during the development of their final degree project. This delayed survey, including 20 open-ended questions, was designed to comprehensively assess the long-term impacts of the micro-credential course, helping to refine and improve future iterations to better meet students' needs.

Both post-training surveys included the same questions presented as follows.

2.4.1. Meeting expectations and motivations

How well did this course meet or exceed your expectations in preparing you for your BA dissertation?

This question aimed to evaluate whether the course met the students' initial expectations and to gather specific examples of its effectiveness.

To what extent did this course impact your motivation and confidence in progressing with your dissertation work?

This question evaluated the impact of the course on students' motivation and confidence levels.

Can you identify any specific elements of the course that particularly inspired or motivated you?

This question sought to identify specific elements of the course that particularly inspired or motivated the students.

2.4.2. Developing and applying skills

How did participating in this course contribute to deepening your understanding of your dissertation topic?

This question assessed how the course helped students understand their dissertation topics better.

How do you plan to integrate the feedback and insights gained from this course into your dissertation planning and execution?

This question sought to understand how students plan to use the insights gained from the course in their dissertation planning and execution.

What specific time management strategies or techniques did you learn in this course that you found most effective in managing your dissertation work?

This question aimed to determine the effectiveness of time management strategies taught in the course.

Can you discuss any challenges you faced in implementing these strategies?

This question sought to identify any challenges students faced in implementing time management strategies.

In what ways did the course prepare you to address the challenges typically encountered during the dissertation process?

This question aimed to understand how well the course prepared students to tackle common dissertation challenges.

Reflecting on your experience in this course, what do you consider your key strengths in approaching your BA dissertation?

This question aimed to identify the strengths gained from the course.

Can you provide examples of how you plan to apply the concepts or methodologies learned in this course to your BA dissertation research?

This question aimed to understand how students plan to apply the strengths gained from the course to their dissertation research.

Besides its relevance to your BA dissertation, what additional skills or insights have you gained from this course that you believe will be valuable in your future academic and professional endeavors?

This question assessed the additional skills and insights gained from the course that will be beneficial beyond the dissertation.

2.4.3. Identifying areas of improvement and suggestions

Are there any specific areas or skills that you still feel uncertain about or would like additional training in to support the dissertation process?

This question sought to identify areas where students still feel uncertain and need additional training.

How do you plan to address these areas moving forward?

This question aimed to understand how students plan to overcome these uncertainties moving forward.

How do you think this course could be enhanced to better support students embarking on their BA dissertations in the future?

This question aimed to gather suggestions for improving the course to better support future students.

Do you have any specific recommendations for improving course content, structure, or delivery?

This question sought to gather specific recommendations for improving the course content, structure, or delivery.

2.4.4. Overall experience and recommendations

In your opinion, how important is collaboration with peers during the dissertation process?

This question evaluated the importance of peer collaboration during the dissertation process.

How did this course foster or hinder collaborative efforts among students?

This question sought to assess how the course facilitated or hindered collaborative efforts among students.

Would you recommend this course to your peers who will be starting their BA dissertations?

This question aimed to determine whether students would recommend the course and their reasons for doing so.

Are you interested in participating in supplementary activities, such as study groups, workshops, or seminars focused on dissertation writing and research, beyond the scope of this course?

This question assessed students' interest in additional support activities beyond the course.

In what specific ways do you feel you have personally grown or developed as a result of participating in this course? How do you envision applying these personal growth experiences to your future academic or professional pursuits?

This question aimed to understand personal growth and how students plan to apply this growth in their future endeavors.

3. Results

3.1. Self-perceived students' needs and expectations before the micro-credential

This section outlines the qualitative insights collected from the participants before receiving the micro-credential training. The gathered data is organised into three main themes: (i) perceived advantages of the micro-credential training; (ii) motivation and topic selection; and (iii) addressing training gaps and boosting confidence. These themes capture the participants' experiences and perceptions, offering a detailed understanding of how micro-credential training influences their preparation for their BA dissertations.

3.1.1. Perceived advantages of micro-credential training

Participants identified several benefits associated with the micro-credential training. For instance, Participant ST01 remarked, "I enrolled in this course because I considered it a great opportunity to learn more about the BA dissertation subject", indicating a desire to improve writing and organisational skills. Similarly, Participant ST02 wanted to ensure she was well-equipped for the dissertation process and to start early to mitigate the fear of writing, stating, "I wanted to make sure I have all the tools available to face the BA dissertation".

These responses underscore how the training could help students feel more prepared to tackle their dissertations by breaking down the process into manageable tasks and offering practical strategies for time and emotional management. Participant ST05, who has ADHD, viewed the course as a way to compel herself to focus on the dissertation work and confront her challenges directly, noting, "I've got something called ADHD... this course will provide the opportunity of focusing on my dissertation, whether I like it or not, as a way of forcing myself to face the music".

3.1.2. Motivation and topic selection

The data suggest that motivation to complete the final degree project was high among students who enrolled in the micro-credential training. Participant ST01 expressed enthusiasm about starting her dissertation, highlighting that the ability to explore a topic of personal interest was a significant motivator: “I feel motivated and excited to start working on my BA dissertation with great enthusiasm”. Participant ST03 found motivation in agreeing upon a dissertation topic with her supervisor, emphasising that having a personally interesting topic was highly motivating: “I am starting with a BA dissertation topic agreed upon between the professor and me, so the topic motivates me more”.

Conversely, some students experienced a lack of motivation primarily due to anxiety over writing tasks. Participant ST02 expressed a lack of motivation, citing unclear ideas about her dissertation topic and anxiety about integrating her reading with her writing: “I am not very motivated. I don’t have a clear idea of my BA dissertation topic”. Participant ST05 admitted struggling with motivation due to the overwhelming nature of the tasks: “To be completely honest, I am not motivated at all right now”.

3.1.3. Addressing training gaps and boosting confidence

The feedback from students highlighted a critical issue: their self-reported insufficient training in the BA programme. Participant ST01 felt that her strengths lay in her organisational skills but recognised a significant weakness in managing the emotional aspects of dissertation work: “My strengths for facing the subject are my organisational skills... my weaknesses are feeling overwhelmed”.

Participant ST02 also pointed out her strengths in organisation but noted her perfectionism and tendency to feel blocked as significant weaknesses: “My strong point is that I am quite organised... my weak point is that I am very perfectionist.” Participant ST03 emphasised the need for help in structuring and meeting the requirements of the dissertation: “I think it can help a lot with how to approach the BA dissertation and how to structure the work”.

All participants felt that the existing BA programme did not adequately prepare them for the dissertation process. Therefore, they viewed the micro-credential training as an opportunity to fill this gap by providing targeted, practical skills that directly addressed these deficiencies. They believed that by focusing on enhancing writing and research skills, the training would help them build the confidence needed to complete their work.

3.2. Short-term impact of the micro-credential training

This section presents the qualitative insights collected from participants immediately after completing the micro-credential training. The data is organised into four main themes: (i) fulfilment of expectations and motivation; (ii) skill development and application; (iii) areas for improvement and suggestions; and (iv) overall satisfaction and recommendation. These themes highlight the immediate impact of the micro-credential training on the participants’ preparation for their BA dissertations.

3.2.1. Fulfilment of expectations and motivations

Results show that the course met and exceeded students’ expectations, providing them with essential tools and information for their BA dissertations. For example, Participant ST03 stated, “This course helped me to what I wanted at the beginning which is having motivation”.

Similarly, Participant ST08 mentioned, “It has exceeded my expectations since it has given me information about the BA dissertation that I did not know, such as the possibility of publishing it”.

The training significantly boosted motivation among students. Participant ST04 noted, “The course has motivated me a lot to be able to continue with the planning of my BA dissertation and to be able to start reading all the articles and documents that I need to read”. This reflects a clear alignment with the pre-training expectations where students sought increased motivation and preparedness for their dissertations. Overall, the training had a substantial positive impact on the students by providing practical skills and boosting motivation, fulfilling the initial objectives of the course.

3.2.2. Skill development and application

The micro-credential training equipped students with valuable skills and practical strategies. Key areas of development included time management, research techniques, and emotional resilience. For instance, Participant ST05 highlighted, “The Pomodoro technique, I have already tried it and it is working!” This shows how specific strategies taught during the course were immediately put into practice.

Additionally, students appreciated the guidance on using library resources effectively. Participant ST08 mentioned, “I will integrate many resources and tips that have been provided to me throughout the sessions of this course, such as the tips on how to make a good oral presentation and its PowerPoint or all the new things I have learned after the session on the library and its uses”.

Students also gained confidence in structuring their dissertations and dealing with writer’s block. For example, Participant ST01 remarked, “The course has helped me a lot to get confidence in myself for the development of the job and to better understand my work”.

Specific strengths gained from the training included better time management, improved research skills, and enhanced emotional resilience, all of which are critical for completing their dissertations. Moreover, the course improved their understanding of their dissertation topics, equipping them with valuable time management strategies and increasing their motivation and confidence to overcome dissertation challenges.

3.2.3. Areas for improvement and suggestions

While the course was generally well-received, participants identified areas for further improvement. Some students felt they needed more training in citation techniques and writing clarity. Participant ST06 expressed a desire for additional help with integrating AI tools and managing citations, “I have little experience with complimenting AI to write academic texts, so, probably, AI as an additional resource”.

Participants also suggested extending the course duration and focusing more on specific aspects of dissertation writing. For example, Participant ST06 recommended, “This course could be improved by having more weeks of the course to develop in-depth aspects that may have been left untouched”.

Moreover, there was a strong interest in supplementary activities such as study groups and seminars. Participant ST06 noted, “Yes, I would like to participate in courses based on study groups or seminars on dissertation writing because teamwork makes individual work much easier and helps us to improve our work with critiques from different perspectives”.

3.2.4. Overall satisfaction and recommendation

The course fostered collaboration among peers, which was appreciated by the students. All participants expressed satisfaction with the course and indicated that they would recommend it to their peers. Participant ST08 stated, “I would strongly recommend taking this course, given that it would help you to face your fears regarding your BA dissertation and you will find out that you do not know everything about writing skills that you might have seen in class”.

Overall, the micro-credential training successfully addressed the gaps identified in the pre-training survey, providing students with the tools and confidence needed to approach their BA dissertations more effectively. The positive feedback and willingness to recommend the course highlight its success in fulfilling its intended goals.

3.3. Long-term impact of the micro-credential training

This section outlines the qualitative insights collected from the participants three months after completing the micro-credential training. The gathered data is organized into four main themes: (i) fulfilment of expectations and motivation; (ii) skill development and application; (iii) areas for improvement and suggestions; and (iv) overall satisfaction and recommendation. These themes highlight the long-term impact of the micro-credential training on the participants’ preparation for their BA dissertations.

3.3.1. Fulfilment of expectations and motivations

The long-term feedback indicates that the micro-credential training fulfilled and, in some cases, exceeded students’ expectations, particularly in helping them structure and organise their dissertations. For example, Participant ST04 stated, “Thanks to the fact that I have had the concepts clear from the beginning due to the course, now the understanding I have towards my dissertation topic is much greater than before”. This shows that the foundational skills and clear guidelines provided during the training had a lasting positive impact on their dissertation work.

Similarly, Participant ST03 noted, “The course helped me understand more deeply how to deal with my topic”, highlighting that the training’s influence extended beyond initial preparation to ongoing engagement with their research topics. Participant ST07 also emphasised the practical benefits: “It has helped me to correct specific points as the bibliography”, demonstrating that the training provided valuable, specific skills that directly contributed to the quality of their dissertation work.

3.3.2. Skill development and application

Participants consistently reported that the training had a lasting impact on their skill development, particularly in organization, time management, and research techniques. For instance, Participant ST04 shared, “The course has helped me a lot in certain aspects, especially on how to organise and structure the outline of the BA dissertation and also on knowing more in depth all the necessary guidelines to make the format”. This indicates that the training provided a strong framework for their academic tasks, which they continued to apply throughout their dissertation process.

Time management emerged as a critical skill reinforced by the course. Participant ST04 described using a weekly and monthly organisational strategy, which helped balance their workload: “Many times I found difficulties especially in how to organise myself monthly because I was overwhelmed... but then I also started to organise myself weekly and I can balance everything in a better way”.

Additionally, practical research skills were significantly enhanced. Participant ST07 remarked, “The course increased my ability to analyse information and synthesise diverse viewpoints”, illustrating how the training improved their critical thinking and research capabilities. Similarly, Participant ST06 highlighted improvements in managing references and understanding research relevance: “I have corrected mistakes in my reference list and taken into account the advice of the directors of this course to consider which article is relevant for my work”.

3.3.3. Areas for improvement and suggestions

While the course was highly effective, participants suggested several areas for improvement. Participant ST04 mentioned a need for additional training in writing dissertation abstracts and analysing graphs: “I am still not quite sure how to write my BA dissertation abstract. Also for people who are going to analyse graphs it would be very useful to emphasise a little bit more on this issue”. This feedback highlights specific content areas that could enhance the course’s comprehensiveness.

Participant ST06 suggested revisiting technology skills, particularly for tools like *Microsoft Word*, which are essential for dissertation writing: “I think it would have been useful to revisit technology skills in *Word*, since we studied in the first year of our career and we may have forgotten how to any practice”. This points to the potential benefit of integrating more technical skill refreshers into the curriculum.

Additionally, the desire for more stress management resources was noted by Participant ST07, who recommended incorporating workshops focused on stress management: “Incorporating resources and workshops focused on stress management”.

3.4.4. Overall satisfaction and recommendation

Overall, the participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the course and would recommend it to their peers. Participant ST06 emphasised the psychological benefits, stating, “I would highly recommend this course to future English Philologists because it has not only helped academically, but also psychologically”. This underscores the course’s holistic approach, addressing both academic and emotional needs.

The training also fostered a strong sense of community and peer collaboration, which was highly valued. Participant ST04 noted, “The organisation skills in the reading process and the motivational encouragement... it has helped me psychologically since most of us had a similar view to the dissertation process and we could share our feelings among ourselves and feel relaxed”. This feedback indicates that the collaborative aspects of the course were instrumental in providing support and building confidence.

In conclusion, the long-term impacts of the micro-credential training were overwhelmingly positive, with participants reporting enhanced skills, increased confidence, and greater motivation to complete their dissertations. The feedback provided valuable insights for future improvements, ensuring the course continues to meet the evolving needs of students.

4. Discussion

The findings from this pilot study offer insights into the impact of micro-credential training on students preparing for their BA dissertations. This discussion section will delve into the themes identified in the results, exploring how micro-credential training addressed students' needs and expectations, its short- and long-term impacts, and areas for future improvement.

4.1. Self-perceived students' needs and expectations before the micro-credential

Before the training, participants expressed various needs and expectations, highlighting the perceived advantages of micro-credential training, their motivation levels, and the gaps in their existing methodological training. These insights provide a foundation for understanding the initial context and expectations of the students.

The initial insights gathered from the participants highlighted several perceived advantages of micro-credential training, clearly recognising its potential benefits. Students like ST01 and ST02 underscored the value of gaining organisational skills and practical strategies to mitigate dissertation-related anxieties. This suggests that micro-credentials can offer tailored support in specific areas, enhancing student preparedness and reducing academic stress.

Motivation and topic selection were crucial factors influencing student engagement with their BA dissertations. The high motivation levels among students who could explore topics of personal interest, as seen with ST01 and ST03, indicate that autonomy in topic selection can enhance academic motivation. Conversely, the lack of motivation due to anxiety and unclear dissertation topics, as expressed by ST02 and ST05, highlights the need for early and targeted support to address these issues.

Participants' feedback on the gaps in their existing training, particularly regarding emotional management and perfectionism, emphasises the importance of emotional resilience in academic success. The recognition that the current BA programme did not adequately prepare them for dissertation work underscores the necessity for complementary micro-credential training to bridge these gaps.

4.2. Short-term impact of the micro-credential training

The immediate feedback from students after completing the micro-credential training indicates substantial improvements in their preparedness and motivation. This section explores how the training met their expectations, the specific skills developed, and areas identified for further enhancement.

The micro-credential training was effective in meeting and exceeding students' expectations, providing essential tools, and boosting motivation, as highlighted by ST03 and ST08. This immediate positive impact suggests that well-structured short courses can enhance student engagement and readiness for academic tasks.

Skill development was a major benefit of the training, with students reporting improvements in time management, research techniques, and emotional resilience. The practical application of strategies like the Pomodoro technique by ST05 and the effective use of library resources by ST08 reflects the practical, hands-on nature of micro-credentials that cater to immediate student needs.

However, participants also identified areas for improvement, such as additional training in citation techniques and writing clarity. These insights highlight the ongoing need to refine and expand the scope of micro-credential courses to cover a broader range of academic skills comprehensively. The interest in supplementary activities, such as study groups and seminars, suggests that peer collaboration and extended support can further enhance the effectiveness of these training programmes.

Overall, the positive feedback and high levels of satisfaction with the course, as indicated by participants like ST08, validate the design and implementation of the micro-credential training. The willingness of students to recommend the course underscores its perceived value and relevance to their academic pursuits.

4.3. Long-term impact of the micro-credential training

Three months after the training, students provided feedback on the long-term benefits and areas for continued development. This section discusses how the skills and knowledge gained were applied over time and the lasting impacts on students' dissertation processes.

The long-term feedback confirms that the micro-credential training had a sustained positive impact on students' dissertation work. The foundational skills and clear guidelines provided during the course helped students like ST04 and ST03 to structure and organise their dissertations more effectively. This sustained benefit highlights the long-term value of targeted, skills-based training in higher education.

Skill development in areas such as time management and research techniques continued to benefit students throughout their dissertation process. Participants' ongoing use of organisational strategies and improved critical thinking, as reported by ST04 and ST07, underscores the lasting impact of the training. This indicates that effective time management and research skills are critical for academic success.

Participants also provided valuable suggestions for improvement, such as additional training in writing dissertation abstracts and analysing graphs, and revisiting technology skills in tools like *Microsoft Word*. These suggestions highlight specific areas where future course iterations could be enhanced to better meet student needs. The desire for more stress management resources also points to the importance of addressing emotional well-being alongside academic skills in micro-credential programmes.

The high levels of overall satisfaction and course recommendations by participants like ST06 and ST04 show the perceived value of the micro-credential training. The positive feedback on peer collaboration and the holistic approach of the course further reinforce its effectiveness in supporting students' academic and emotional needs during the dissertation process.

5. Conclusions

The preliminary findings from our pilot study at the University of Extremadura offer insights into incorporating micro-credentials to support BA dissertations within traditional academic settings and their potential to enhance higher education. The study highlights the need for targeted, learner-centered training to address academic skill gaps and bolster motivation while acknowledging challenges such as writer's block.

Micro-credentials present an innovative approach to higher education, offering flexible and personalised learning opportunities. However, their integration into established academic frameworks requires careful consideration to foster higher enrolment and engagement. This study suggests that micro-credential training effectively addresses the specific needs of English Studies students before embarking on their BA dissertations.

5.1. Key findings

The micro-credential improved students' preparedness and confidence in approaching their BA dissertations. It enhanced skills in time management, research techniques, and emotional resilience, increased motivation, and provided practical strategies. The training's positive impacts were sustained over time, with students continuing to apply the skills and strategies learned. The course's holistic approach, addressing both academic and emotional needs, fostered a supportive educational environment through peer collaboration.

5.2. Limitations

The study's small sample size may not be representative of the broader student population, and the short duration of the course may have limited the depth of impact observed. Reliance on self-reported data can be subject to biases and inaccuracies. Additionally, the absence of a control group limits the ability to perform comparative analysis and provide robust evidence of the training's effectiveness.

5.3. Further research

Future research should involve larger and more diverse cohorts across multiple universities to enhance the generalisability of the findings. Longitudinal studies tracking the long-term impacts of micro-credential training on academic and professional outcomes would provide valuable insights. Investigating the effectiveness of micro-credential training across different disciplines would help determine its broader applicability. Further studies should explore integrating more comprehensive and diverse micro-credential modules and incorporate objective measures such as academic performance metrics and feedback from dissertation supervisors. Conducting comparative studies between students who participated in the training and those who did not would help quantify the training's effectiveness.

The pilot study demonstrated that micro-credential training can significantly enhance students' preparation for and execution of their BA dissertations. The training addressed key gaps in the traditional curriculum by providing targeted, practical skills and fostering a supportive learning environment. It helped students navigate the complexities of their final degree projects more effectively. Integrating micro-credentials into higher education could offer substantial benefits, promoting lifelong learning and equipping students with the competencies needed to thrive in a rapidly evolving academic and professional landscape.

By understanding these aspects, we aim to identify best practices in the implementation of micro-credential training and highlight areas for improvement to refine the microlearning approach, ensuring it aligns with students' needs and the academic standards of the BA in English Studies at the University of Extremadura.

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