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# HIGHER EDUCATION MICRO MASTER'S PLANNED AND OFFERED IN COLLABORATION WITH INDUSTRY FORERUNNERS

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## Abstract

Many people have come to the realization that the university degree they achieved 10 years ago, or even less, seems irrelevant in today's world. Change in organizations, new competence and skills requirements and being stuck in their present jobs have made them wonder how they can stay relevant in dynamically shifting work environment.

The three biggest universities of applied sciences in the Helsinki Metropolitan area in Finland, namely Laurea, Haaga-Helia and Metropolia together, decided to offer part-time master's level program in the area where organizations are facing lack of skilled workforce in the substance area of digital marketing and sales. The author of this paper was involved in planning and building the program and finally acted as one of the instructors.

To ensure relevance of the learning objectives and course contents, more than twenty recognized companies were involved in the planning phase. Company input was gathered in workshops and interviews and results were analyzed by HE professionals who also continued the planning the whole program.

Adult learners, who work full-time, are motivated by the possibility to integrate challenges in their job with learning program (Olusegun, 2015). When designing courses, learning activities, instruction, and learning assignments, careful attention was paid to usefulness of them to learners' tasks in their jobs.

Furthermore, other important motivational factors for adult learners are quality of instruction, relevance and pragmatism. To achieve these measures, outside experts in relevant fields were involved in instruction together with higher education professionals to complement theoretical aspects with up-to-date practical knowledge. The learners considered this combination of instructors useful for the learning that they were able to utilize and carry into practice in their respective companies.

The program has proven to be highly useful and relevant for learners. According to learners' feedback, they have been able to use education for them and for their companies' benefit. New skills that they have acquired enable them to do their jobs better and more efficiently. Several of them have been promoted in their companies, or have been offered a new job outside of the organizations where they worked when they started the program.

Keywords: Higher education, university - industry collaboration, university of applied sciences, micro master's, microcredentials, digital marketing and sales, competence development.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In today's fast-changing world life-long learning is not an option, it is a necessity for anyone wanting to remain relevant as an employee. We need continuous re-skilling through our careers, because our first degrees become quickly obsolete. Professional capabilities acquired during first degree studies cannot hold employees through the whole working life.

Life-long learning is also acknowledged as one of the strategic objectives of governments in developed countries. However, despite of offerings of universities and private training possibilities employers complain that they do not get enough qualified applications for their job postings.

Institutions of higher education typically provide master's degrees and programs as an answer to life-long learning needs. The traditional way of offering graduate i.e. master level studies is either full day or part-time studying. Complete degrees consist of 90-120 ECTS studies, which take up to two years to accomplish.

Employees understand the need for acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competences so that they get interviews for new positions or get promotions within their existing organizations. On the other hand the big challenge with adult learners working full-time is how to combine work, studies and very

often family together. They do not want to commit themselves to master's programs that last for years, they consider them as too time-consuming, and they want smaller and quicker learning solutions.

This scene raises many questions. How can we guarantee relevance in university offerings, so that employers get competent workforce? What alternatives are there to a master's degree as a standard in gaining acknowledged competences? What are the significant issues facing adult learners?

In this paper, I discuss the requirements for continuous learning programs from perspectives of adult learners and employers. I describe one example where 22 universities of applied sciences (UAS) together planned a master level microcredential curriculum based on companies needs in the substance area of digital marketing and sales. I also describe how three of those UASes used the together developed curriculum and offered a blended 30 ECTS program in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. This paper is an initial report of the ongoing program ending in March 2019.

## **2 CONTINUOUS COMPETENCE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS AND APPROACH OF THE INSTITUTIONS TO THEM**

In recent years, knowledge and competence requirements in companies have constantly grown and changed due to rapid technological advancements that affect tasks, responsibilities, and daily routines and behaviors at home and at workplaces. Organizations do not seem to be capable to keep up with growing competence requirements through their own learning programs and on the other hand, they need more workforce with already acquired competences.

It is obvious that in the rapid pace of changes, organizations need to develop their own capability to "learn how to learn". However, there is a need for organized programs for re-skilling employees, growing request for continuous learning and urgency for accessible means for providing it.

To address the need for post bachelor education HE institutions have tradition of offering professional development (PD) programs that they typically arrange as stand-alone courses or programs. Depending on the HE institution, these PD programs can be offered only once or on regular basis. They are often seen as alternatives for private training services and they are not necessarily profiled as master level studies nor as a possible gateway to achieve a full master's degree.

Paced with developments of educational technology the offering of online learning has become a relevant option for updating one's knowledge. An especially interesting phenomenon is the global MOOC platforms, such as Coursera, eDx and Udacity. In addition to offering free online courses, they have made initiatives to offer master level studies that focus only on one particular substance area and that involve only a part of the coursework of the traditional master's degree.

These global MOOC platforms call these programs by different names. Coursera call them Specializations, eDx call them Micro Masters, and Udacity call them Nanodegrees. They are built and offered by recognized universities, such as MIT, Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley and many others. Typical of these programs is that they represent 20-30 % of the master program coursework. They are also profiled as a gateway to Master's studies and based on them learners are encouraged to apply for credit towards a completion of a Master's degree.

Microcredential programs are designed to fill the education gap experienced by corporations, while providing a convenient career advancement path for learners. From a university perspective microcredentials offer a way to upgrade university offerings and on the other hand get a pathway to attract learners to master programs after finalizing their microcredentials.

## **3 ADULTS AS LEARNERS**

The five most important motivating factors for adult learners are 1) quality of instruction, 2) quality of curriculum, 3) relevance and pragmatism, 4) interactive classrooms and effective management practices and 5) progressive assessment and timely feedback (Olusegun, 2015).

### **3.1 Quality instruction**

Quality instruction encompasses andragogical skills, which are skills related to teaching adults whereas pedagogical skills are used to describe teaching in general. Andragogical skills includes effective planning and organization of classroom or group situations with the help of modern technology, manifestation of knowledge of content i.e. professionalism and instructor's personal

attributes such as interaction, energy, empathy, enthusiasm, humor, respect and listening. (Yoo & Huang, 2013)

### **32 Quality of curriculum**

Curriculum is understood to be of high quality when the objectives of the program correspond with real-life professional standards and learner's needs. Syllabus, which further defines and concretizes curriculum, contains information about detailed schedule, goals and objectives, contents, meeting times and activities, evaluation criteria and communication with instructors.

### **33 Relevance and pragmatism**

Adult learners, who work full-time, value learning programs that they can connect with reality and their pressing needs in their jobs. They prefer problem-focused and hands-on learning activities where they can reflect and can solve their own immediate and real work-life problems.

Instructors can increase adult learner's motivation if they can find ways to connect instruction with real-life situations by using examples in their instruction. Instructors should think of ways how to encourage learners to use their own work-life challenges in the assignments and show how course content can help learners to achieve better results in their jobs.

### **34 Interactive classroom and effective classroom management**

Adult learners experience interactive activities motivating. They are able to reflect on course contents based on their own work experience and when they can use these experiences they are motivated to learn more (Svinicki, 2004).

Deriving from their own real-life experiences, adult learners prefer discussing what they know, listening to other learners and constructing further knowledge based on these interactions. It is instructor's responsibility to enforce learning objectives and expectations, cultivate group learning and encourage sharing of experiences. When instructor manages to create a sense of group learning and knowledge sharing rather than relying on only instructor to deliver information, motivation for independent learning is enhanced.

### **35 Progressive assessment and timely feedback**

For adult learners it is important to get regular feedback. They appreciate timely assessment and relevant qualitative comments from instructors (Boud and Falchikov, 2007).

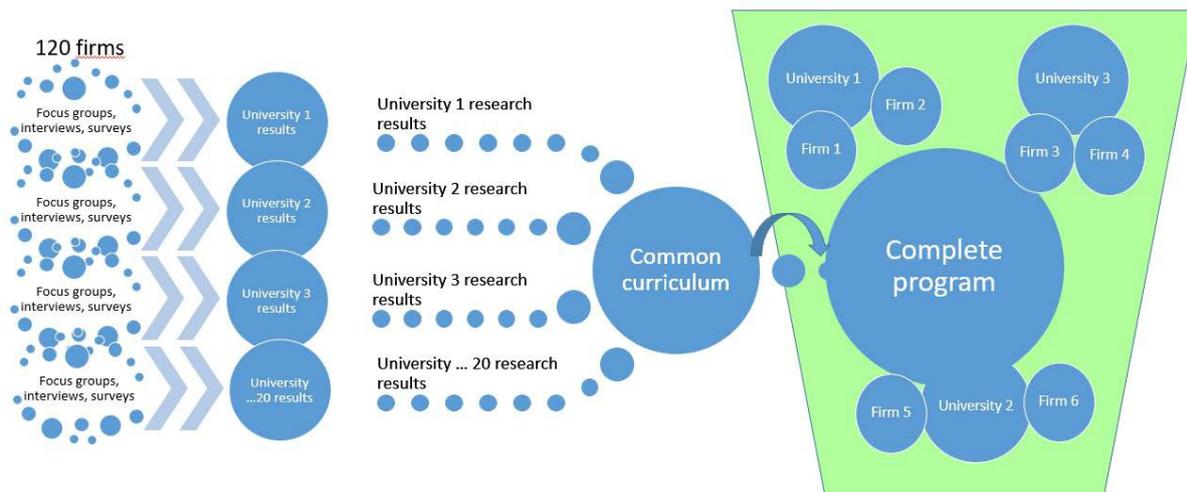
Instructors should pay attention to announcing clear expectations, evaluation criteria and way of working at the beginning of instruction. (Brookfield, 2004)

## **4 PLANNING AND ORGANIZING THE PROGRAM**

The microcredentials programs described here was planned and developed under the special initiative of the Ministry of Education in Finland to offer post bachelor studies. Although the Ministry did not have requirements for new programs to form part of the master programs or constitute a gateway to master studies, this possibility was recognized by organizing institutions. The program was decided to include six five ECTS credit courses amounting to 30 ECTS.

The most universities of applied sciences offering business education (22 universities) participated in research where employers' needs for competence development were investigated in the fast-changing area of digital marketing and sales where organizations are facing lack of skilled workforce. Hundred and twenty (120) selected companies were interviewed either in person or in group and additionally survey questionnaires were sent to them.

The common curriculum for the microcredentials program was defined based research results. Three UASes in the Helsinki metropolitan area, Laurea, Haaga-Helia and Metropolia together, transposed the common curriculum into syllabus and concrete program called Digitekijä Fast Track (free translation "Digixpert Fast Track").



Picture 1. The process of planning and organizing Digitekijä Fast Track microcredentials program

When designing courses, learning activities, instruction, and learning assignments, careful attention was paid to usefulness of them to learners' tasks in their jobs.

Furthermore, other important motivational factors for adult learners are quality of instruction, relevance and pragmatism. To achieve these measures, outside experts in relevant fields were involved in instruction together with higher education professionals to complement theoretical aspects with up-to-date practical knowledge.

Digitekijä Fast Track is organized as a blended learning program. The learners value regular face-to-face interaction with peers and instructors and they have considered this organization and combination of instructors from academia and firms useful for the learning that they are able to utilize and carry into practice in their respective companies.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

Although the Digitekijä program has proved to be successful and is receiving good interim feedback both from participants and their employers, there are several issues to be considered or solved before this program or similar programs can continue.

Firstly, a proper feedback from learners and their employers after the program is finished would shed light on adult students' learning experience. Based on the results of learner satisfaction study, corrective measures can be planned and enforced.

As Digitekijä, the program described here, was organized under the special initiative and financing of the Ministry of Education, there is no certainty this program or similar programs will continue. Due to no visibility of continuation, there are no development plans nor plans for relaunches. A strategic decision from UASes is needed to develop microcredentials and include them into regular learning programs.

Interviewing companies to find out about their relevant learning needs is a tedious process and requires contribution from many persons. If UASes decide to offer this type of programs, they need to find and develop new mechanisms to listen to companies' competence development needs on a continuous basis in order to ensure the relevance of future curricula.

In line with life-long learning, it should be considered whether admission criteria for applicants should be relaxed and prior formal education requirements removed. Should microcredential programs be treated as open university studies, is another open question.

The chosen way of organizing instruction was blended learning. If the program is organized again, one more question would be whether it would be attractive for learners on online basis only.

Interesting area of future research would be to investigate how learners are able to utilize new skills and competences acquired already during and after the program and how employers assess the value of the program for their companies.

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