Matt Offord, lecturer in the Adam Smith Business School

# Transcript of audio

(John Kerr) Welcome to the Learning Innovation Unit podcast. This series of podcasts are designed to share staff experiences across a range of areas relating to learning and teaching. It is my pleasure to welcome today's speaker, Doctor Matt Offord lecture from the Adam Smith Business School. Matt, can you just spend a moment and introduce yourself to everyone listening to the podcast?

(Matt Offord) Thanks very much. John, yeah, as you said, my name is Matt Offord I'm a leadership scholar at the Adam Smith Business School and I'm also a digital educator. I have a background in industry, so I'm a second career academic. Just recently coming across after I had a career in the Royal Navy as a naval officer and then run my own business is a little while for a little while as a leadership. consultant and I've been with Adam Smith Business School now for about 2 1/2 years developing online online courses mostly in management and leadership. Excellent thank you Mark. So the purpose of today's podcast and the focus of this podcast is on your experiences of designing and soon to be delivering a microcredential house on the futureLearn platform and it commences in September 2021.

(John Kerr) So first of all Matt. Can you just tell us about why you wanted to launch this micro credential in Future learn and just briefly tell us a little bit about the course and its entirty

(Matt Offord) O.K. Yeah, so I was keen from the point of joining the school really to do something in leadership. So I was very so that's I guess the first point when you're looking at the the topic is to is to offer that leadership kind of courses and share my experience of leadership and also the research that. I've done over the years, so that was that was my kind of primary focus. If you like and then as a as somebody who was employed by the school to to teach online and to sort of lead online. So I do do some face to face as well, but you know that being my main focus, Futurelearn was a fairly, I suppose, instinctive choice to make or yes to say if you like when when that option was offered I you know. So I was looking for for opportunities and this opportunity came along so. That sort of ticked both boxes for me. I think that. Leadership is something that everybody seems to know about, but everybody certainly has an opinion about, so it has very wide appeal and I think that a platform like Futurelearn can get out to that wider, wider audience. So it's it's an area where online education, I think, really appeals. We will diversifying the portfolio offering from the Business School and and using your own courses and leadership to offer a data driven leadership skills. Microcredential. Yeah, that's that. That's exactly right. Yes, and that's a good point actually. Because it was sort of beyond leadership. If you like in the sense that I have a really specific interest, something I'm quite passionate about and that is how leadership responds to the age of data and how data, AI, algorithms. And all that kind of thing really impacts on leadership, so I wanted to create a course most data kind of want to say data based courses without sort of talking about databases, but your data based courses tend to be about programming program technical skills. I didn't, I didn't want that I wanted. Of course that was for data savvy leaders, people who know about data who understand technology and how it impacts. Modern decision making without necessarily being a data scientist, so that's particularly what I wanted, and I didn't really see anything like that. So as you say, it's a chance to add that to the Adam Smith Business School portfolio, but and also to engage in something, which I think adds value current. Currently, I think a lot of in my in my career as a as a consultant, I notice a lot of people who are just a lot of leaders who are just swamped with data, you know. This data inundacion they don't know what to do about it, so they don't want to become data scientists, but they can't afford to ignore the data either, so that that's where I wanted to come in. Yeah, fantastic. It's a good overview and it stayed with me.

(John Kerr) On to my  next question, so I've had the pleasure of helping you, but the course design and and the rest of the team Innovation Support Unit who have helped you with. Mapping out your ten credit course. As you know, Matt we use a very learner centered approach to course design and we have an online tool to creatively help you map out that learner journey through each week of of your course. So from from your approach can you tell us a lot about your experiences of using that course design framework and where you felt there was really the benefits of using that approach? Or equally if there was any. Some drawbacks or negatives that you found of using this quite unique approach.

(Matt Offord) Yeah, well, I think the first thing I will say is that it's really been a pleasure to work with that team and I think that's really worth bringing that out. 'cause for me, what I find is that in academia there's quite a lot of work which is done in isolation, and I'm not necessarily well suited to that type of work. I'm I'm much more used to working within teams, so I actually found this Futurelearn course and working with with the Learning Innovation Unit as well. It was particularly enjoyable for me because you've got that team around you and you just I just personally feel a lot more comfortable when I've got a team that I'm working with. Apart from anything else, you're just bouncing ideas off of people, so you've got this idea of whether, if you have an idea about leadership and it maybe it's a bit tenuous or something you know, I mean, leadership again, is one of those subjects. It's quite good because because everybody has an opinion about it, so you can. You can pitch an idea, and if you don't get that kind of Oh yeah, that's gonna work. Type of response. You realize that either that's a bad idea or that idea needs a bit of work in order to make the connection. So in a way, you're Rd testing everything before you go. You've also got access to all that experience and expertise. Various elements of putting that platform together. Course design pedagogy, different ways of engaging with your audience, so that's all for me. That's always going to be better, so I really enjoy that. I know that not everybody would enjoy working in in that way. I'm also quite an iterative kind of worker, if you like, so I'd like to. I'd like to get a prototype up and running and then iterate from there and I'm quite happy to make mistakes in the way I'm quite happy to publicly make mistakes as well, and again I I do appreciate that other people might not. Not everyone is going to go for that, so some people would prefer to work something up to near perfection. Kind of, you know, in isolation somewhere and then bring it out so it's just there are different ways of working, but for me this way works really well. I really like it. I like the fact that the platform is quite clean in the sense that it's not overloaded with information. It's quite structured. I think when when I think of the audience that we're trying to reach with this micro credential, these are probably busy people who probably don't have time to learn to navigate their way through a complex learning journey. So this platform really kind of says, you know, week one, do this week two do that is quite straightforward, so you know, I I actually really have enjoyed that. I'm trying. I'm trying to think of something negative to say because. It doesn't sound very intelligent if you just say everything's great, can't really think of of any of any negatives. To be honest, though, I've greatly enjoyed it.

(John Kerr) That's really good to hear. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but obviously there's a time commitment to to spending the amount of time and effort you put into the the course mapping stage and working with the learner innovation unit. So would you say that potential that time was up a barrier that you had to give up so many hours to to really unpack the course at that at that granular level? Or yeah, where you want the learners to go at each step in their learning journey? Within each week.

(Matt Offord) Well, yes, I mean I do agree. But then on the other hand have to say, you know it takes time to build any course. Online courses in particular 'cause if you want. If you want a student or or learner to be, you know an independent learner then you you kind of have to. You have to put some signposting in you know. Whereas certainly like face to face you can you can dispense with some of that 'cause you can just deliver what you've got. And then you can take questions and it's a it's a little bit easier around that particular sort of interface online learning. You really do need to put the time in to sign post it. So there is this there. Is this bigger upfront commitment anyway, so this doesn't differ in that sense. Yeah, I did spend a lot of time building that course and yeah, it it. It is a bit all consuming. I'll sort of say that, but then I think that I think once you've been through it once, it's going to get easier. I mean, the. The the novelty for me was using so the future learn without getting too technical. The Future Learn platform uses markdown language and I've never used Markdown language before and you so that was that was really interesting. So I I know markup languages, but I never use markdown languages so so that was like and you knew skill if you like to learn. I don't want to over egg this because it it didn't take long to learn it. I mean the whole point of the markdown language is it's it's. It's basically a series of shortcuts. So once you've learned it. It's actually considerably easier than doing a sort of click and drag type of website type of design, so there's a bit of an investment in learning how to use the platform itself, and that tends to take up a bit of time, and I think once you've become accomplished at that then actually it becomes quite a lot easier.

(John Kerr) Yeah, I think you're right with with any new platform approach that is not front commitment and your time and just for for everyone who's listening as we've recorded this in May I know just for arguments sake that futurelearn. Now working on simplifying their their design of of how to add content. So will become much more of a Word editor base rather than the language you you mentioned them now, but it's very important to know that there is a time investment with any new platform. And yeah, any. Any new approach and let me just say cycle back to the design element of your course in the effort that you put in and we will add links to the design mapping framework that anyone can look at and use and there for everyone to adopt if they wish. That design framework has been has been designed to be platform agnostic, so we have a version for Future Learn. We have a version for moodle and we have a version that's it's Coursara. The the approach in the platforms can be covered within the within the framework and the and the approach itself. So now you've been through this experience once. Do you? Do you think that you use this again for you know moodle based courses whether they be face to face, blended or. Maybe some of your online MSc courses?

(Matt Offord) Yeah, absolutely. 'cause I think what that framework does, is it it? It forces you to think about all the different aspects of that of that learning. I sorry to use this sort of cliched, but this learning journey so it's quite easy, particularly when you're teaching something that you're passionate about to go into digressions or to spend some. A lot of time on those aspects that you find particularly exciting, and you might. It's easy to forget to build a framework that the learners themselves are going to use to. To move to that point where you're trying to deliver the learning. So what the framework does is it it breaks that journey down into those into those steps you know you can call it the scaffolding if you like. So I I think that's really useful as a kind of checklist. It's useful, I think that. You know there is. There is there is a problem with people. Take it, sort of two literally, and you know insist that they have to have all the steps which might not be appropriate in all the different courses. So it has to be a guideline, but I do find it useful guideline for me in particular because I can I can digress so it keeps me, keeps me on track, the Futurelearn kind of platform itself and the philosophy keeps you on track. It's quite, it's quite focused and value sort of oriented, so that's so all of that works together. And then to answer your other question about whether I would use it, yeah, I do use it. Actually we're using the same framework on on another project that I'm doing across across Scottish universities for to run the entrepreneurial program they they use the same. They use the same, exactly the same framework, so it's quite. It's quite useful to be to be familiar with it, and it's actually there are hints of that framework in our response to the covid. Crisis as well. We we built a framework for remote teaching and there are. It's not sort of front and center, but there are a number of sort of links out to to that design framework as well. Learning design planners and and what have you, which used the same same approach, excellent, I Just want to go back to touch on one thing you said there was the framework wasn't isn't really designed to be. Once you've designed it, then that's exactly how it ends up on the on the chosen platform, but the whole purpose of it is for you to get a solid outline of that of that course that learner journey. The signposting levels from one topic to another or one resource. To the other and allows for digretion and as in when course involves you know. And it happens right up until possibly the day before the course goes live with you. You feel like adding, adding content and removing content so it's not supposed to be prescriptive.

(John Kerr) Yeah, in that manner, but it's good that it provides a focus, and as are what I have certainly found it to be helpful for some members of staff, as as more of a work tracker as well so they know that there's x amount content. And an X amount of style of delivery, whether it be visual mode or audio. Or you know something else and it acts as a work tracker for people to tick off. What's what's being done in and where it is yeah, yeah, which is which is quite interesting to hear that side of it as well.

(Matt Offord) Yeah, I think as well if I could just add there. I've seen different staff use that framework in different ways, so to take a sort of. Extreme opposite of what I'm like, I've I know a colleague who took that framework and sort of created a template for a whole course. A whole 10 credit course with all the acquisition and different phases that are in there and laid it all out in a table is a very very complex table that was literally a sort of blow by blow account of what the whole course was going to look like that had all of the different you know, have reflective sections you know acquisition. As I said before, all the different. Things in between and really mapped out the whole journey on there, and they found that really, really useful. Whereas what I would tend to do is kind of throw something up there as a prototype and This is why I found the Miro boards really, really useful as a visual interpretation and just throw a few post-its at a wall literally and then kind of go back to it and say, right, have we got the balance of acquisition, which could be quite passive and reflection, collaboration and so on. If we got all of that in there and then, I'll sort of notice that there's a lot of I'll use colour, so you know there will be a lot of blue post-its there, and not very many green ones, so I'll sort of like chop things around and do it in that iterative style. But both styles kind of work using that framework, so yeah, I think that's a very important point is you can use it, depending on how it suits your needs and what your what. Your personal style is to course design, so that's a very good point.

(John Kerr) So, Matt in closing, do you have any key takeaway messages for the staff listening to this podcast you know and that you may be not. touched upon and about of course design or any lessons learned that you wish to share. That may be a good takeaway point for staff. Just before we conclude.

(Matt Offord) Yeah, I think the thing that I've learned over this last 15 months. I'm not just talking about the pivot online that we've done. Adam Smith. Also, the work that I've done through future learn because. And also this work that I'm doing with this entrepreneurial program as well is that you put. I mean what I really like. It's two things. I think. Really, one is I really think the team based approach works for online. So even if that's not your thing. No, I think it's it's worth noting that it's it is particularly appropriate to this online side of it because you've got you've got technology for one thing, so it helps to have people on the team that understand that particular technology. It's a different type of pedagogy as well. I mean, a lot of people will kind of say, well, teaching is teaching, you know, so it doesn't really matter. I think maybe if you're a kind of rock star lecturer that could just hold an audience and just, you know, captivate people, then, then then that's great. If you're one of those people, and perhaps teaching is teaching, but I think for most of us mere mortals, I think that that that online environment represents particular challenges. Getting that message across. So I think having a team around you really really helps because they can kind of say, well, I've looked at your platform and you know what? I just don't get where we're going with this. I'm just not quite seeing it and that really. That really does help, so so that the there's there's that team based kind of approach, and I think also what I found is quite easy in the online environment to throw a lot of content at it, and kind of because it's it's a bit like. I think there's this sort of massive gap when we did when we did. In face to face teaching and it hasn't gone completely, almost almost mourning face to face teaching. That course it will come back in some form, but when we when we face to face teach, sorry for the English there. Basically we kind of give maybe 10% or 20% of the content of a course. So if it's a 10 credit course, we might teach for 20 hours, but we expect learners to spend about 100 hours studying. What happens to those other 80 hours? Well, in a face to face like in face to face course, we didn't really think very much about those other 80 hours, so we give them some signposts and generally say look you know you need to read around this subject and here's some recommendations. And here's a reading list, but we sort of left it at that and in for some reason that I don't fully understand. When we went online we started mapping that whole 100 hours out and adding the 100 hours worth of content. And the effect of that on and on and on and on. Essentially a web page is quite overwhelming, I think for some students. So I think in the online environment, the other thing I've learned is that sometimes less is more and we need to actually kind of blend those two approaches that the face to face kind of allowing students to find out things for their for themselves. Versus the temptation. Or maybe it's just me to sort of structure everything online and we have to sort of, you know, throttle back on on that sort of temptation a little bit.

(John Kerr) Yeah, I think that's a fantastic point to conclude on there, because it leaves a lot of good food for thought for staff. And I'm sure a lot of people will be listening to this podcast, and nodding thier heads. In agreement. So Matt, can I just say a big thank you to you for spending the time to talk with me today and sharing your experiences with staff  listening? I hope it's been beneficial to everyone who is listening to the podcast and we will be releasing more podcasts like this and in the near future. If you'd like to be part of one of these podcast series is, please get in touch with any member of the learning Innovation support unit. Once again, thank you.

(Matt Offord) Thank you John. It's been a real pleasure. Thanks for the opportunity.