Micro-Credentials, Employability Skills, and Lifelong Learning in ODL Contexts: Practical Insights

Prof. Dorothy Ofoha[1]

Regional Training & Research Institute for
Distance and Open Learning (RETRIDOL)
National Open University of Nigeria
dofoha@noun.edu.ng

Abstract

The transition from tertiary education to the workforce is becoming increasingly challenging for many graduates, as the job market demands specific employability skills that academic degree programmes often fail to address, resulting in a significant skills gap. This gap leaves graduates underprepared for employment, posing a considerable challenge for education providers, particularly open and distance learning (ODL) institutions, which are noted for their flexibility and inclusivity in serving students' diverse learning needs. Micro-credentials, increasingly recognised as valuable tools for targeted skill development, have the potential to bridge this gap by offering modular, industry-relevant credentials that learners can earn in specific skill areas. However, the integration of micro-credentials within ODL systems, especially in the African context, remains underexplored. Through a descriptive and exploratory research approach, this paper examines how micro-credentials can be leveraged within ODL to enhance employability and support lifelong learning. Using practical examples, it demonstrates how micro-credential courses can be effectively designed, delivered, and integrated within ODL frameworks to maximise their impact on learners. The paper also addresses key challenges associated with the adoption of micro-credentials in ODL, including issues of awareness, standardisation, recognition, and quality assurance. To overcome these challenges, the paper proposes the MODE Framework to guide effective implementation, ensuring better alignment between education and employment. The paper concludes by emphasising the need for higher education institutions to balance academic learning with practical employability skills, thereby offering students a more comprehensive and

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[1] https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3965-7953

well-rounded educational experience that prepares them for career success and contributes to sustainable development in Africa.

Keywords: Micro-credentials,   lifelong   learning,   skills   gap,
                  employability, ODL

Introduction

The 21st century has ushered in a wave of profound transformations, reshaping the way we live, work, and interact with the world. Consequently, the higher education system is expected to evolve in tandem with these changes to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic world. As a driver of knowledge production and human capital development, higher education plays a pivotal role in the socio-economic and technological advancement of nations (UNESCO, 2024). As societies navigate rapid technological advancements and global challenges, higher education institutions are increasingly recognised as essential in equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to drive sustainable human development. In the context of the world of work, education plays a critical role in preparing people for employment, fostering innovation, and promoting inclusive economic growth (World Bank, 2019). Within this context, visionary academic leadership becomes critical for fostering innovation and ensuring institutional responsiveness to emerging societal needs. In this regard, the contributions of the Vice-Chancellor of the National Open University of Nigeria, Prof. Olufemi Peters, have been instrumental in championing initiatives that align higher education with the realities of the modern workforce. This paper, prepared as part of a special issue in his honour, builds on this spirit of innovation by exploring strategies to enhance the relevance of open and distance learning (ODL) through the integration of micro-credentials.

In the past, education primarily focused on imparting knowledge and information. However, the advent of technology, globalisation, and the evolving dynamics of the job market have disrupted this traditional model. As a result, the skills required for success in the modern world have undergone a rapid transformation, now demanding much more

than academic expertise. Today's workforce requires individuals equipped with a diverse set of competencies, commonly known as employability skills - a combination of technical abilities and soft skills that are essential for a successful transition from education to employment. Graduates are now expected to possess not only academic knowledge but also a broad range of employability skills. While content knowledge remains important, it is the integration of this knowledge with employability skills that truly empowers individuals to thrive in the modern workforce. The World Economic Forum (2020) emphasizes that soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and emotional intelligence are critical for career success across all sectors. These capabilities are crucial for navigating an increasingly complex and fast-paced professional environment. Whether in teaching, healthcare, management, or technology, professionals must cultivate these competencies to succeed in an ever-changing work environment. Research indicates that employers increasingly value candidates who not only possess technical expertise but also demonstrate the ability to navigate complex challenges, think critically, collaborate effectively, work within diverse teams, and adapt to continuous change (World Economic Forum, 2020).

While the importance of employability has been widely acknowledged, there are gaps in how higher education systems prepare students for the demands of the workforce. Most African higher education systems, while providing valuable academic knowledge through degree programmes, often fall short in equipping students with essential employability skills, resulting in a significant skills gap (Damoah, Peprah, & Osei, 2021). Consequently, many graduates enter the workforce underprepared for the realities of the modern job market, struggling to meet employer expectations (Aliyu & Joseph, 2021). This mismatch between university education and labour market demands has contributed to rising levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment, as many degree holders lack the practical competencies required to succeed in today's competitive environment. As a result, higher education institutions are under increasing pressure from stakeholders to embed employability skills into their curricula to better prepare students for the workforce (Suleman, 2018).

Unfortunately, many of these institutions lack a clear framework or understanding of how to effectively implement this integration (Jackson, 2016).

This dual challenge of skills gap and integration is particularly evident in open and distance learning (ODL) programmes, which are tasked with not only accommodating diverse learner needs but also addressing critical skills deficits. ODL institutions often serve non-traditional students, including adult learners and working professionals, making the alignment of academic content with industry-relevant competencies even more urgent. Also, without a clear, contextually relevant framework to guide the integration of employability skills, many ODL curricula will remain disconnected from labour market realities. This underscores the pressing need for strategic frameworks tailored to the unique conditions of ODL in the African context.

One promising approach to addressing this issue is the adoption of micro-credentials. Micro-credentials are short, focused learning pathways that enable individuals to acquire specific skills or competencies in targeted areas (Oliver, 2019; UNESCO, 2022). They are typically awarded upon completion of a course or training programme and are often aligned with industry needs. They can offer ODL students a valuable way to demonstrate specific, job-relevant skills to potential employers, thereby enhancing their competitiveness in the job market. Designed to be flexible and stackable, micro-credentials provide recognition for skills that may not be adequately addressed in traditional degree programmes (European Commission, 2020; Brown et al., 2021). For example, educators can earn micro-credentials in innovative teaching strategies or emerging pedagogical techniques, allowing them to remain current and enhance their professional value. These credentials are especially effective in bridging the gap between academic knowledge and industry-relevant skills (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Despite their potential to bridge skills gaps and improve workforce readiness, the integration of micro-credentials into ODL systems, particularly in the African context, remains largely underexplored. This is likely due to limited awareness of their relevance, value, and

implementation strategies. There is, therefore, a critical need for a deeper understanding of how micro-credentials can be effectively integrated into ODL frameworks to support the development of employability skills and align academic offerings with labour market demands. Without such integration, ODL may lose its relevance and fall short in preparing learners with the practical and transferable skills necessary for career progression. To maximise its impact and continue serving diverse learner populations effectively, ODL must embrace and leverage the micro-credential ecosystem. This paper provides practical insights into how that goal can be achieved.

To that end, this study explores how micro-credentials can be leveraged within ODL to enhance employability and support lifelong learning. It examines the interconnection between these three concepts, highlighting how micro-credentials promote continuous learning and equip individuals with the skills needed to thrive in the modern workforce. Additionally, the paper offers practical guidance and examples on how micro-credential courses can be effectively designed, delivered, and integrated into ODL curricula to maximise their impact on learners. It also addresses key challenges associated with micro-credential adoption and proposes the MODE Framework (*Micro-credentials in ODL for Developing Employability*) to guide its effective implementation, tailored to the African context. The significance of this study lies in its practical contribution to bridging the gap between academic instruction and employability-focused education in ODL environments.

To guide this investigation, the following research questions will be addressed:
1.   How can micro-credentials be integrated into ODL to enhance employability and support lifelong learning?
2.   How can micro-credential courses be effectively designed, delivered and embedded within ODL frameworks to ensure the development of practical employability skills among learners?
3.   What are the key barriers and challenges associated with the integration of micro-credentials in ODL?
4.   What conceptual frameworks can guide the effective implementation and integration of micro-credentials into ODL

systems, ensuring alignment with the evolving demands of the
workforce?

Methodology

Given the conceptual nature of this paper, a descriptive and exploratory
research design was adopted. Conceptual research does not rely on
empirical data collection but instead generates new insights through
critical analysis, synthesis of existing literature, and theoretical
reasoning. This approach is particularly well-suited for addressing
emerging or underexplored areas, such as the integration of micro-
credentials into African ODL systems. The outcome of this inquiry is
the development of a contextually relevant framework to guide the
effective design, delivery, and integration of micro-credentials into
ODL systems across Africa.

Conceptual Clarification

Micro-credentials
The dynamic nature of today's workforce demands that individuals
continuously update their skills to remain competitive and adaptable.
Micro-credentials support this process by enabling individuals to
upskill or reskill in response to evolving job roles and emerging career
opportunities (Oliver, 2019). This is particularly important in sectors
such as education, healthcare, and technology, where continuous
professional development is essential. For this study, micro-credentials
are defined as short, targeted learning modules that certify the
acquisition of specific industry-relevant skills or competencies,
designed to complement academic programmes and enhance
employability outcomes. In the context of ODL, micro-credentials are
especially valuable. Many ODL learners are working professionals
seeking career advancement or skill enhancement. Micro-credentials
thus play a transformative role in equipping learners with relevant
employability skills and addressing identified skills gaps.

Lifelong learning
Lifelong learning refers to the continuous acquisition of knowledge and
skills throughout an individual's life, enabling them to adapt to

evolving job demands. It encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal learning activities and is essential in today's rapidly changing world, where new skills and competencies are constantly required (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022; OECD, 2021). Lifelong learning fosters adaptability, personal growth, and active citizenship, and is strongly supported by educational policies worldwide as a means to promote sustainable development and social inclusion (OECD, 2021).

Employability
Employability refers to the ability of an individual to gain and maintain employment, as well as progress within their chosen profession. In the context of a dynamic labour market, employability is not only about initial job acquisition but also about maintaining and enhancing skills to remain competitive (Yorke, 2006; OECD, 2021).

In today's changing world, employability skills have become essential for career success. These skills are broadly conceptualised into two categories: soft skills and specialised technical skills (Hussein, 2024).

Soft skills: These are skills that enhance a person's ability to function effectively and thrive in any job, regardless of the industry. These include communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, adaptability, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, which are applicable in virtually all professions. Employers highly value these skills as they are crucial for navigating workplace dynamics and handling complex tasks. However, these skills are often not explicitly integrated into most academic programmes, leading to a skills gap.

Technical skills: These refer to job-specific competencies such as proficiency in specific tools, techniques, or processes that are crucial for performing the tasks required in each role. These are job-specific competencies that graduates need to perform effectively in their roles. For instance, in the field of education, technical skills may include classroom management strategies, authentic assessment design. These skills equip graduates to perform effectively in their professional contexts. However, it has been found that these skills are missing in many higher education curricula, resulting in a mismatch between

graduate capabilities and the expectations of employers in the labour market (Succi, 2019).

The Interrelationship of Lifelong Learning, Employability Skills, and Micro-Credentials

The dynamic nature of today's workforce demands that individuals continuously update their skills to remain competitive and adaptable. Micro-credentials support this process by enabling individuals to upskill or reskill in response to evolving job roles and emerging career opportunities (Oliver, 2019). This is particularly important in sectors such as education, healthcare, and technology, where continuous professional development is essential. For lifelong learners, micro-credentials offer a structured pathway for personal and professional growth, facilitating career transitions and mobility in response to changing industry demands. From an employability perspective, micro-credentials serve as tangible evidence of specific skills, thereby enhancing learners' job readiness and appeal to potential employers (European Commission, 2020). Whether focused on soft skills or technical skills, micro-credentials allow learners to gain practical, relevant skills in a structured, self-paced manner, thereby enhancing their employability and adaptability in a rapidly evolving job market.

The three components are symbiotic and mutually reinforcing, with each component playing a crucial role in enhancing students' career prospects and preparing them for the workforce. For ODL learners, this combination is particularly empowering, enabling them to acquire new skills, update existing ones, and adapt to evolving industry demands throughout their careers. By integrating micro-credentials into their educational frameworks, ODL institutions can enhance student employability and remain responsive to the shifting demands of the global workforce. The conceptual mapping of the relationship among employability skills, lifelong learning, and micro-credentials is illustrated in Figure 1.
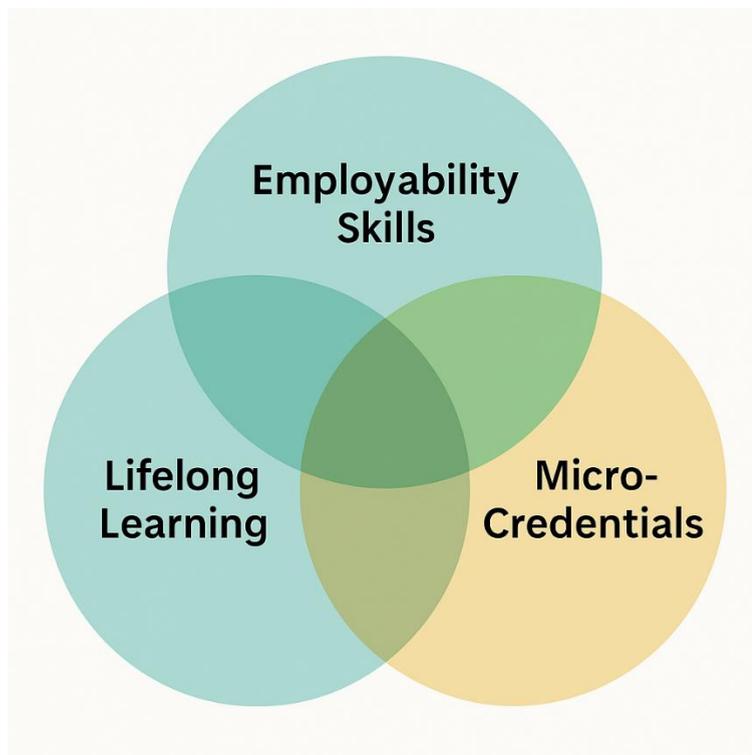
Figure 1: Conceptual mapping of the interconnection between the three constructs
Source: OpenAI. (2025) AI-generated image

The Venn diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the synergy among the three core elements - micro-credentials, lifelong learning, and employability skills. At the centre, where these elements intersect, lies the strategic integration of all three. This synergy leads to enhanced job prospects, improved career mobility, and personal growth, enabling individuals to remain competitive and adaptable in an ever-evolving labour market.

Micro-Credentials in an ODL Context

How micro-credentials can be leveraged within ODL to enhance employability and support lifelong learning

Micro-credentials can be strategically embedded into academic programmes in ODL higher education through several mechanisms, including the following:

1.   Curricular Integration

Micro-credentials can be embedded into existing academic curricula in two primary ways:

a.   *Embedded within courses*

Micro-credentials can be integrated into existing courses or degree programmes. Learners can earn digital badges or certificates upon demonstrating mastery of specific competencies or skills. This allows students to build a portfolio of verified skills while working toward their degrees.

b.   *Standalone Modules*

Micro-credentials may also be offered as elective or supplementary modules that students can take alongside their main programme. These modules are designed to focus on high-demand skills and can be tailored to specific industries or professional roles. Offering micro-credentials in this way helps students remain competitive in the job market (Gallagher, 2016).

2.   Modularisation of Courses

Many ODL institutions already offer courses or programmes in specific subject areas. Micro-credentials can be integrated by modularising existing content into smaller, more focused units that certify specific skills i.e. by redesigning the courses into **modular units**. This allows students to gain micro-credentials for completing these smaller units, which can count toward a larger qualification or stand alone as certifications

3.   Recognition of Informal and Non-formal Learning

Micro-credentials can also validate skills gained through informal or non-formal learning, such as:

- Internships and apprenticeships
- Online courses and MOOCs
- Workshops, seminars, and hackathons

By integrating micro-credentials into ODL programmes, institutions can better equip learners with essential employability skills while fostering a culture of lifelong learning. This approach not only

enhances career prospects but also strengthens the relevance of ODL in today's evolving education landscape.

How Micro-Credential Courses Can Be Effectively Designed, Delivered, and Integrated into ODL Curricula

Micro-credential Integration in ODL
ODL offers an ideal environment for the integration and development of micro-credentials. Its inherent flexibility, accessibility, and technology-enabled infrastructure make it well-suited for the delivery, assessment, and recognition of micro-credentials. Many ODL programmes already utilise learning management systems, online assessment tools, and digital content delivery, making it easier to incorporate micro-credentials within existing structures (UNESCO, 2022; Oliver, 2019). For instance, the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), a leading ODL institution in Nigeria, leverages such technological tools to deliver online content and support student engagement. As such, integrating micro-credentials into NOUN's programmes would not present significant challenges.

Micro-credential Course Design
Micro-credential courses are specifically designed to address the skills gaps that often exist between academic education and the practical demands of the workplace. Using practical examples, we can illustrate how micro-credential courses can be effectively designed in both soft skills and technical areas to meet specific needs. For example, a micro-credential course in a soft skill area, such as emotional intelligence, and one in a technical area, such as classroom behaviour management in education, serve distinct yet complementary purposes in enhancing learners' competencies for the workforce. However, both types of courses follow the same structured design approach, aligned with established instructional design principles. This approach can be practically illustrated through the design of a sample micro-credential course on emotional intelligence - one of the top 10 soft skills identified by the World Economic Forum (2020) as being increasingly in demand by employers.

**(a)   Example: Designing a micro-credential course on emotional
            intelligence**

Course title: **Emotional Intelligence for Workplace Success**

This micro-credential course is designed to help students develop the
key competencies of emotional intelligence and equip them with
practical tools to apply emotional intelligence in the workplace.
Learners will focus on improving interpersonal relationships, conflict
resolution, and overall workplace performance. By understanding and
practicing emotional intelligence, learners will be better prepared to
navigate challenging work situations, manage stress, and build stronger
relationships with colleagues and clients.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, learners will be able to:
1.   Define and explain the components of emotional intelligence
        (self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and
        social skills).
2.   Identify and manage their own emotions effectively in various
        workplace contexts.
3.   Demonstrate empathy and improve communication with
        colleagues and clients.
4.   Apply emotional intelligence to manage conflicts and reduce
        stress in the workplace.

Course Structure

The course is divided into seven modules, each focusing on a key
component of emotional intelligence. Assessment exercises follow
each module. The course spans 4-6 weeks, requiring a commitment of
3-4 hours per week. The course structure is outlined in Table 1:

Table 1: Course structure for micro-credential on Emotional Intelligence for Workplace Success

Module	Title	Description	Learning Activities
Module 1	Introduction to emotional intelligence	Understand the concept, components, and importance of emotional intelligence in personal and professional settings.	Short multiple-choice quiz to test understanding of basic concepts
Module 2	Self-awareness and emotional recognition	Learn how to recognise and understand your own emotions and their impact on thoughts and behaviour	Reflective journal activity, self-assessment quiz
Module 3	Self-management and emotional regulation	Develop strategies to manage emotions effectively, especially in high-stress situations.	Case study analysis, discussion forum
Module 4	Social awareness and empathy	Explore how to recognise and understand the emotions of others, and the role of empathy in workplace success.	Role-playing exercise
Module 5	Applying emotional intelligence at work	Apply emotional intelligence principles to real-world workplace scenarios, including leadership, teamwork, and client relations.	Simulation activity
Module 6	Final project & certification	Consolidate learning through a final reflective essay and practical assessment.	Final exams, submission of project, and feedback

Mode of Delivery

The course will be delivered online, combining asynchronous learning activities (such as recorded video lessons, reading materials, and discussion forums) with synchronous sessions (live virtual classes, real-time discussions, and interactive workshops). It can be embedded within existing academic curricula (integrated into relevant courses) or offered as a standalone course to allow for focused, specialised skill development.

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Assessment Methods

Assessment in the micro-credential course will prioritise practical application over traditional examinations, enabling learners to demonstrate their understanding of emotional intelligence through real-world scenarios. This approach aligns with the outcome-based nature of micro-credentials and ensures that emotional intelligence is assessed in a meaningful, context-specific manner. A variety of assessment methods will be employed, including short quizzes at the end of each module, written assignments, case study analyses, and a final project. Particular emphasis will be placed on scenario-based assessments, in which learners apply their emotional intelligence skills to realistic workplace interactions.

Below are sample scenarios illustrating how emotional intelligence can be assessed through authentic real-world applications, focusing on the learner's ability to recognise, manage, and respond appropriately to emotional cues in various contexts:

- **Scenario 1**: You are working with a colleague named James, who feels his contributions to a team project are being overlooked. During a meeting, James raises his voice, interrupts others, and appears visibly upset. How would you apply your emotional intelligence to understand his emotions, manage your own response, and help de-escalate the situation?
- **Scenario 2**: Your colleague, Amina, is visibly stressed and frustrated after being assigned multiple tasks with tight deadlines. During a planning session, she snaps at a team member and withdraws from the discussion. How would you respond using emotional intelligence to support Amina while maintaining a positive team dynamic?
- **Scenario 3**: You are discussing your political beliefs with a colleague. You notice a tone of anger in her voice as she expresses her opinions. How would you use your emotional intelligence to recognise and respond thoughtfully to her emotions, maintain respect for her perspective, and help defuse the tension in the conversation? How would you respond differently if you had low emotional intelligence?

To illustrate how learners might respond to the third scenario, consider the following analysis, which highlights how individuals with high and low emotional intelligence might approach the situation differently:

> When your colleague shares her political views with a tone of anger, your emotional intelligence enables you to recognise that this is likely a sensitive topic for her. Rather than reacting defensively, you remain calm and acknowledge her perspective with respect. This does not necessarily mean you agree with her, but you validate her right to express her views. By showing empathy and regulating your own emotional response, you help to de-escalate the tension and maintain a respectful conversation. This leads to a more constructive and balanced dialogue.

In contrast, if you had low emotional intelligence, you might fail to notice or misinterpret the emotional cues. You could judge your colleague as irrational or become defensive, viewing her tone as a personal attack. This may prompt you to respond with anger, causing the conversation to escalate into a heated exchange and leading to strained relations.

This type of scenario-based assessment demonstrates how emotional intelligence can be evaluated through real-life application, encouraging learners to reflect on their responses and apply emotional awareness in practical, meaningful contexts.

Certification and Recognition
Upon successful completion of the course and its assessments, learners will receive a digital micro-credential or badge recognising their competence in emotional intelligence. This serves as verifiable evidence of their ability to manage emotions, communicate effectively, and foster healthy interpersonal relationships in the workplace. The digital credential can be shared on professional networking platforms such as *LinkedIn* or included in résumés and electronic portfolios, enhancing learners' employability and visibility to potential employers.

In addition to soft skills, the same design approach can be effectively applied to specialised technical areas, as illustrated in the following example:

(b)   Designing a Micro-credential Course in a Specialised Technical Area

In various professional fields, there are industry-relevant skills that are often underrepresented or absent in traditional academic degree programmes. Micro-credential courses targeting specialised technical areas help bridge these gaps, ensuring that learners acquire the specific competencies needed for the workforce. Designing such courses enables students to develop focused, market-driven skills that align with real-world demands. In the field of education, for instance, 'classroom behaviour management' is a critical skill that is frequently overlooked in teacher education programmes, especially in African higher education institutions. For example, it appears none of the education programmes at the National Open University of Nigeria, and most other Nigerian universities, offer this as a dedicated course. While students typically receive training in subject content and pedagogical theories, they may lack practical strategies needed to effectively manage classroom behaviour. A micro-credential course focused on this area can address the gap by equipping future educators with targeted, actionable skills. In fact, in 2022, while reviewing a postgraduate education course material, the author of this paper identified this gap and took the initiative to dedicate a module section titled *Behaviour Modification in the Classroom*, which highlighted practical strategies teachers can use to manage classroom behaviour. It is worth noting that this intervention occurred before she became familiar with the concept of micro-credentials. This early recognition of a critical skills gap in teacher education programmes highlights the potential value of micro-credentials in addressing such omissions - an approach that should also be considered in other specialised technical fields.

Example: Designing a micro-credential course on Classroom Behaviour Management

Course Title: Classroom Behaviour Management

This micro-credential course is designed to equip learners with the strategies, tools, and practical techniques necessary for effective classroom behaviour management. Through modules that explore preventative measures, responsive interventions, and evidence-based behaviour modification strategies, student teachers will develop the competence to foster an organised, inclusive, and supportive learning environment.

Learning Outcomes

Clearly define the expected outcomes of the micro-credential. These should be specific, measurable outcomes that learners can achieve by the end of the micro-credential course. Some examples of learning outcomes could be:

- Identify common classroom behaviour challenges and their root causes.
- Apply effective strategies for handling disruptive behaviour.
- Use positive reinforcement techniques to encourage desired behaviours.
- Apply behaviour modification techniques using real-world scenarios and case studies.
- Reflect on and assess their own classroom management style and areas for improvement.

Course Structure

The course is divided into seven modules, each addressing a core aspect of managing classroom behaviour. Assessment exercises are included after each module to reinforce learning. The course spans 4-6 weeks, requiring a commitment of 3-4 hours per week. The course structure is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Course structure for micro-credential on Management of Classroom Behaviour

Module	Title	Description	Learning Activities
Module 1	Introduction to classroom behaviour management	Explore the importance of managing classroom behaviour and its impact on learning outcomes.	Video lecture, reading assignment, short introductory quiz.
Module 2	Understanding student behaviour	Examine factors influencing student behaviour, including developmental, psychological, and environmental aspects.	Case study analysis, self-assessment quiz.
Module 3	Preventative strategies for disruptive behaviour	Learn proactive techniques to prevent disruptions and encourage positive behaviour	Practical activity: Design a classroom management plan, discussion forum
Module 4	Responding to misbehaviour	Develop effective strategies for addressing challenging behaviours while maintaining a positive classroom environment.	Scenario-based role-play exercises, reflection journal.
Module 5	Building positive teacher-student relationships	Understand the role of trust, respect, and communication in managing classroom behaviour.	Group discussion, peer feedback exercise
Module 6	Behaviour modification techniques	Apply behaviourist principles such as reinforcement, consequences, and reward systems to modify student behaviour.	Create a behaviour intervention plan for a case study student.
Module 7	Final project & certification	Consolidate learning through a final reflective essay and practical assessment	Final exams, submission of project

To avoid repetition, this course follows the same delivery approach, assessment strategies, and certification process as presented in the emotional intelligence course.

By designing and embedding micro-credential content into ODL curricula, institutions can better equip learners with essential employability skills. This approach not only enhances career prospects but also strengthens the relevance and credibility of ODL.

## Key Challenges Associated with Micro-Credentials Adoption in African ODL Systems

While micro-credentials offer numerous advantages and have gained popularity in developed countries, where they complement formal qualifications, their adoption in Africa faces significant challenges. Limited awareness remains a major barrier, as many stakeholders in African ODL systems are unfamiliar with the value and purpose of micro-credentials, hindering their acceptance (Çevik, Derman & Ulucan, 2024). The absence of standardised frameworks reduces credibility and complicates recognition (Selvaratnam & Sankey, 2020). Technological constraints, including poor internet access and low digital literacy, further restrict participation. Additionally, most countries lack clear policies and regulatory frameworks for the development and accreditation of micro-credentials, leading to uncertainty in their implementation (Ahsan, Akbar, Kam & Abdulrahman, 2023). Concerns over recognition and quality assurance also persist. Moreover, financial and capacity limitations in ODL institutions make it difficult to design, deliver, and sustain high-quality micro-credential programmes. To address these challenges, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to guide the effective integration of micro-credentials into ODL programmes.

A Conceptual Framework for Integrating Micro-Credentials into ODL Programmes

The MODE Framework

This study proposes the MODE Framework (Micro-credentials in ODL for Developing Employability) as a conceptual model to guide the integration and implementation of micro-credentials into ODL systems within African higher education institutions. This framework illustrates the key components and processes involved in integrating micro-credentials to enhance employability skills and support lifelong

learning. It is structured around four components: contextual enablers, core integration processes, impact areas (expected outcomes), and a feedback mechanism. Together, these components provide a strategic approach to embedding micro-credentials into ODL systems in fostering continuous learning and improving employability outcomes. The conceptual mapping of the Framework is presented in Figure 2:
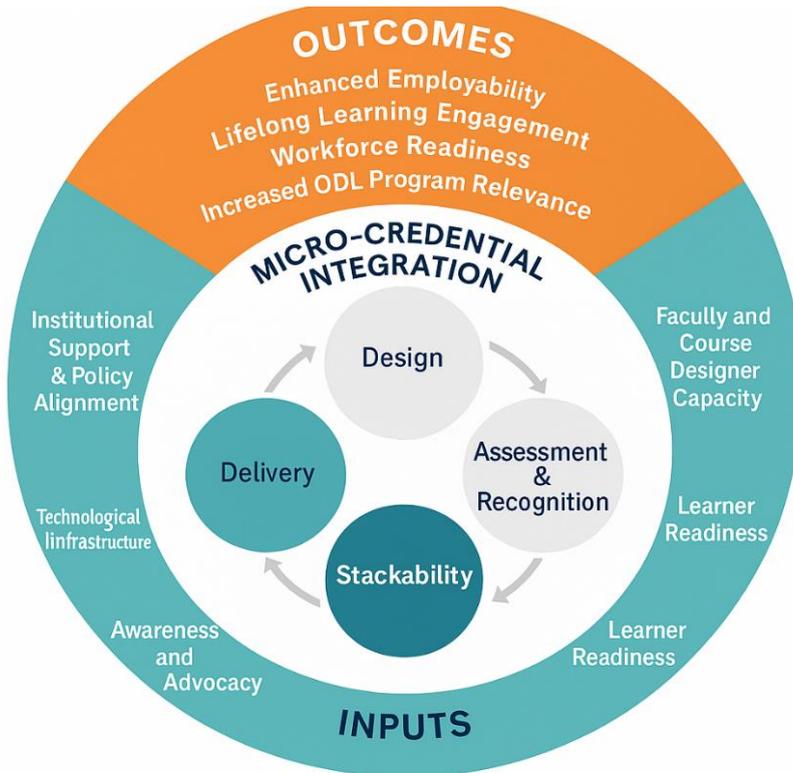
Figure 2: MODE framework for integrating micro-credentials into ODL
Source: OpenAI. (2025) AI-generated image

The MODE Framework is tailored to the realities of ODL in Africa, where diverse challenges hinder the adoption of micro-credentials. Each component of the Framework directly addresses the key challenges associated with integrating micro-credentials into ODL programmes.

Contextual Enablers (Inputs)

These are the environmental conditions required to support successful integration. It ensures that enabling conditions are firmly established to support and sustain integration efforts. Key enablers include developing clear national or regional policy frameworks for accreditation, quality assurance, and recognition of micro-credentials; fostering stakeholder awareness and advocacy; strengthening institutional capacity with skilled faculty, robust technological infrastructure, and sustainable financial resources; learner digital readiness; and building strong industry partnerships to ensure micro-credentials are aligned with current labour market demands and recognised by employers. These Contextual Enablers are not standalone pillars but form an integrated ecosystem. Policy frameworks set the direction; stakeholder awareness fosters understanding and buy-in; institutional capacity ensures functionality by translating policy into practice; and industry partnerships ensure that the skills taught through micro-credentials remain relevant and aligned with labour market needs. Their synergy is essential for achieving impactful and sustainable micro-credential integration in ODL

Micro-credential Integration Processes

This component represents the core of the framework, outlining the mechanisms by which micro-credentials are designed, delivered, and systematically embedded within ODL systems.

It involves developing modular, competency-based, and industry-aligned courses; delivering them in short, flexible formats accessible to remote and underserved learners; and employing practical, skills-based assessments that lead to verifiable digital badges or certificates. Additionally, micro-credentials should be designed to ensure stackability, enabling them to contribute toward larger qualifications. To maintain relevance to current labour market demands, micro-credentials must be developed in close collaboration with industry partners. Institutions should work with employers to identify the skills that are in high demand and align micro-credential offerings with these needs. This alignment ensures that students are gaining relevant, marketable skills that enhance their employability and career progression.

Core Integration Processes focus on the design, delivery, and recognition of micro-credentials within ODL systems. This involves creating modular, competency-based, and industry-aligned courses; delivering them in short, flexible formats accessible to remote and underserved learners; employing practical, skills-based assessments that lead to verifiable digital badges or certificates; and ensuring stackability so micro-credentials can contribute toward larger qualifications. This component represents the operational core of the framework.

Impact Areas (Outcomes)

The integration of micro-credentials in ODL can generate several positive outcomes. This component highlights the expected outcomes of successful micro-credential integration. These include enhanced employability, improved workforce readiness, increased relevance of ODL programmes, and support for lifelong learning. Collectively, these outcomes contribute to the long-term impact of sustainable economic and social development, achieved by bridging the education–employment gap and producing a skilled, adaptable workforce.

Feedback Mechanism

To ensure continuous improvement, robust feedback mechanisms are essential. ODL systems should systematically collect and incorporate input from learners, faculty, employers, and labour market trends to refine and improve micro-credential offerings, ensuring ongoing relevance and impact.

How Contextual Enablers (Inputs) Could Drive and Sustain Core Processes of Micro-Credential Implementation in ODL

As mentioned earlier, Contextual Enablers (Inputs) function as critical drivers that shape the conditions under which the core processes of micro-credential implementation can take root in ODL. Without this foundation, the core processes cannot effectively operate or achieve sustainable integration, especially in the African ODL system. The synergistic interplay between Contextual Enablers and Core Integration Processes is illustrated in Figure 2.
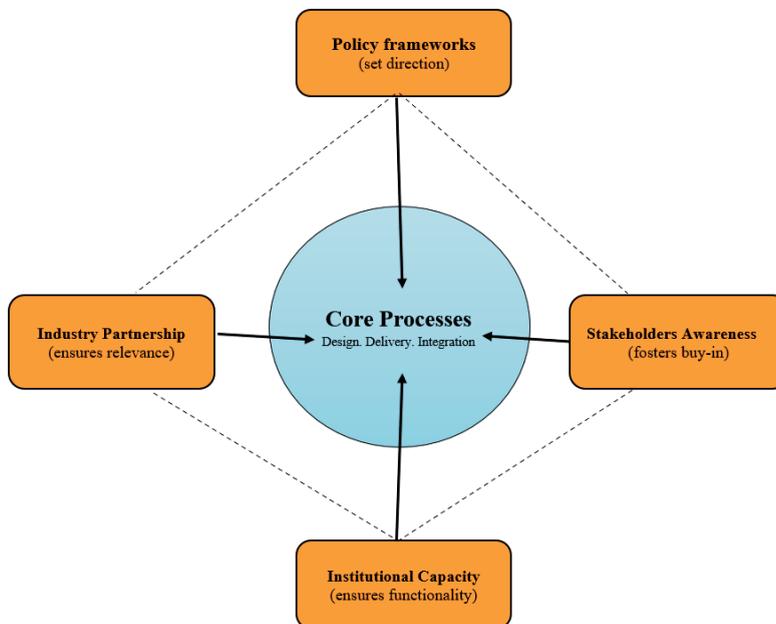
Figure 3: The synergistic interplay between Contextual Enablers and Core Integration Processes
Source: Authors' conceptualisation

Building on the relationships depicted in Figure 3, the points below elaborate on the key contextual enablers and how each contributes to driving and sustaining the core processes of micro-credential implementation within ODL systems.

- **Policy Frameworks** set the direction by establishing standards and regulations that guide the design and delivery of micro-credentials.
- **Stakeholder Awareness and Advocacy** builds understanding, buy-in, and acceptance of micro-credentials.
- **Institutional Capacity and Support** ensures functionality by translating policy into practice and strengthening systems and tools required for effective micro-credential development and delivery.
- **Industry Partnerships** ensure that micro-credential courses remain relevant and aligned with labour market needs.

By implementing this MODE model, ODL systems can become more dynamic, relevant, and responsive to the needs of the job market and individual learners, thereby ensuring that ODL not only remains viable but also serves as a catalyst for economic and social development.

Conclusion

The integration of micro-credentials into ODL systems represents an important step toward closing the gap between education and employability. Considering that micro-credentials are still in their early stages in most African countries, this is a critical time for higher education institutions, particularly those offering ODL, to respond to emerging challenges and reimagine how competencies and skills are delivered. By leveraging the flexibility and reach of ODL, African higher education institutions can position micro-credentials as a strategic tool to equip learners with the relevant skills needed to thrive in the evolving global workforce. In doing so, they contribute to the development of a skilled labour force capable of driving sustainable socio-economic progress across the continent.

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