

Benefits of Earning Alternative Credentials: One-Year Follow-up

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Introduction

This brief summarizes findings from the third and final survey in a longitudinal study of the benefits and costs to learners of participating in MOOC-based alternative credentials. The surveys were completed by participants who engaged in MicroMasters or Specializations offered by 3 US universities between 2017 and 2022. The initial survey was completed by almost 26,000 learners in one of 8 programs as they embarked on their first course in the program. Results were reported in [2018](#) and [2023](#). The second survey was completed by almost 2,300 learners as they completed the series of courses in their program. Results were reported in [2019](#), [2023a](#), and [2023b](#). The final survey targeted the subset of learners responding to either or both of the first two surveys who had completed their programs at least one year prior to Spring 2023. The goal of the last survey was to identify longer-term benefits to learners who earned the credentials. We received very few responses which limits our ability to generalize about trends across time and about the population of learners earning these credentials.

Methods

Between March and April 2023, we emailed 1,140 learners who had responded to the end-of-program surveys at least one year earlier. Emails were sent 2-3 times to each of these respondents. In addition, due to the low response rate, we sent 1-2 emails to over 15,000 learners who had responded to beginning-of-program surveys at least 18 months earlier. At the beginning of this 1-year+ follow-up survey questionnaire, we asked respondents to confirm they had completed their MicroMasters or Specialization program at least one year ago. We also asked respondents to provide the month and date of completion so we could verify the date given was at least one year before the response date. Respondents who acknowledged that they had not completed their program exited the survey. We manually eliminated any responses where the date of completion suggested that a full year had not passed. The remaining sample was very small, consisting of 45 learners who had completed one of two MicroMasters and 22 learners who had completed one of three Specializations, totaling 67 respondents. The programs were offered by 3 universities in the US, two public and one private.

Findings

Demographics and other characteristics

As shown in Table 1, respondents to the 1-year+ follow-up survey were mostly male and White or Asian, with an average age of 43. Almost all had already earned a BA or higher degree and were fluent or very good in English. 56 of the 67 respondents worked full-time or part-time for an employer or ran their own business. 55 of these indicated the sector in which they worked: 18% science, technology, engineering and mathematics; 11% healthcare; and 11% information technology. Median income reported (n=46) was \$90,000. 42% of the respondents indicated having an advanced or expert level of knowledge in the content area of the program. Only 10% claimed to be beginners in the area and 48% claimed to have an intermediate level of knowledge.

Benefits to learners from earning the credentials

Benefits reported by respondents a year or more after earning a MicroMasters or Specialization (see Table 2) were similar to those reported in surveys completed by learners as they ended their programs. Learning something new was the most commonly indicated benefit followed by improving job performance. Almost 1 in 5 learners indicated that earning the credential had improved their applications to a different employer from the one they had previously been working for.

Table 1. Demographics and Other Characteristics of Respondents to 1 Year+ Follow up Survey

Characteristic	Percentage of respondents (n=59-62)
Female	28%
Male	70%
Average age (years)	43
Youngest (years)	23
Oldest (years)	76
Hispanic*	8%
White	62%
Asian	23%
Black/African American	5%
Multiracial	5%
Number of countries in which participants lived	28
Most common countries of abode	U.S. (23%) Canada (8%) Germany (6%)
English proficiency: fluent or very good	98%
Had already earned a graduate degree	66%
Had already earned a BA or higher degree	90%
Had already earned an Associate's Degree	5%
Currently a part-time student*	12%
Employed full-time	69 %
Business owner	21%
Unemployed and looking for a job	6%

*None of the respondents were full-time students.

**Respondents were asked to report Hispanic/Non-Hispanic ethnicity separate from race.

Table 2. Benefits Reported by Learners Who Completed a MicroMasters or Specializations Program at Least One Year Prior to Response

Reported benefit	% of respondents (n = 67)
Learned something new	94%
Improved my performance in my current job	33%
Improved my application to a different employer from the one I was working for	19%
Improved my English language skills relevant to the program I studied	16%
Networked with other professionals	16%
Improved my application for my first job	15%
Supplemented what I am already learning in a formal degree program	13%
Helped me recover from the professional consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic	13%
Improved my application for a degree program	10%
Helped me start my own business	7%
The courses were an important factor for my employer in moving me to a different job	6%
Received a job promotion in my current organization	4%
The courses were an important factor for my employer in getting my first job	3%
Offered a raise in pay	3%
Received an extra bonus	3%
Received additional employee benefits	3%

Respondents who indicated that their job performance improved were asked to identify ways in which their performance had improved. All 22 of these respondents selected between one and seven of the options shown in Table 3, averaging 3.7 each.

Table 3. Ways in Which Learners' Job Performance Improved

Ways in which job performance has improved	Percentage of respondents (n=22)
My knowledge of relevant topics improved	30%
Quality of the work I do	25%
Efficiency (e.g., able to identify the most important priorities to focus on)	16%
I learned new places to look for useful resources and information	16%
Speed with which I complete tasks	12%
I communicate better with my co-workers or clients	12%
Consistency of the work I do	7%
I improved specific skills that I need for my job	3%

Further education

After earning the credential, none of the 67 respondents enrolled in a formal degree program at any of the three universities offering the MicroMasters and Specializations. Two respondents who had earned a MicroMasters enrolled in a Master's program at a different university that was accepting the MicroMasters as partial credit towards a Master's degree. Nine of the 67 respondents enrolled in a degree program at a university unrelated to the MicroMasters or Specialization program they had completed. Six of these enrolled in a Master's program, one in a bachelor's program, and two in a professional degree.

Respondents were also asked whether, since completing the MicroMasters or Specialization program, they had participated in any other alternative credentials. Among the 67 respondents, 23 (34%) had engaged in 1-3 additional alternative credentials: 13 indicated that they had participated in a Professional Certificate, 8 in a Specialization, 5 in a MicroMasters, 2 in an XSeries program, 1 in a MasterTrack program, 1 in a Nanodegree, and 1 in a Certificate of Advanced Study. Eight of these 23 learners (35%) received one or more forms of support from their employers towards their participation in these programs: contribution to course fees, paid time for study, unpaid time off, a promotion, a bonus, or a pay raise.

Key Takeaways

A year or more after earning a MicroMasters or Specialization:

- 33% of learners claimed their job performance had improved as a result of earning the credential
 - Among this subset of learners, 30% indicated that this improvement was due to improvement in their knowledge of relevant topics
 - 25% indicated that the quality of their work had improved
- 19% of learners claimed the credential improved their applications to different employers from those for whom they were working
- 15% claimed the credential improved their application to a first job
- While none of the respondents enrolled in a degree program at the universities offering the credentials, almost one in six enrolled in a program at a different university
- Over one third of the respondents went on to participate in a variety of additional alternative credentials
 - Over a third of this subset of learners received some form of support from their employers towards their participation in the programs

