Survey of micro-credentialing practice in Australasian universities 2021
An ACODE Whitepaper – October 2021

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Background

The Australasian Council on Open Distance and eLearning (ACODE), aims to inform and benchmark universities in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji on current practices in the area of micro-credentialing. This is the third whitepaper in the series on the topic. The whitepapers from 2020 and 2019 are a result of extensive surveys on member institutions and have been well-referred to in the sector. Significant ACODE publications have also been shared internationally both on the state of implementation in Australasia and an integrative literature review outlining the implications for practice in our region.

It is anticipated that institutions may be able to use this data to help them progress the implementation and maturity of practice in the area of micro-credentialing. The previous authors also presented an ACODE White Paper on the state of play of micro-credentialing in late 2019 at the ACODE 80 workshop in Wellington, ACODE 82 hosted by Curtin University in November 2020 and at ACODE 85 in November 2021 hosted by the Australian National University, which covers the latest 2021 data.

Introduction

Since the last whitepaper, there has been significant progress in the sector at a national level. Highlights of current and recent work to provide guidance to the higher education sector in Australia include the work by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) in setting up a Micro-credential Marketplace. As a prelude to that, a working group produced a framework that will guide the establishment of the Marketplace. Universities Australia also produced a Guidance for the Portability of Australian Microcredentials. At a global level, UNESCO has produced a draft preliminary report attempting to produce a common definition of micro-credentials, in consultation with global experts. Another global effort of note is pulling together an international Taxonomy, Quality Criteria and Quality Grid by the International Council on Badges & Credentials, acknowledging the important need to move to digital micro-credentials.

The data from the 2021 ACODE survey will help institutions to contextualise local activity and effort against this larger global backdrop of work in the micro-credentialing space. The method employed in this survey is similar to previous years. ACODE members were given the link to the Qualtrics survey via the members' forum and subsequently follow-up emails were sent as reminders where needed. With participants' permission, the responses are collated and shared with ACODE members as per usual practice of knowledge sharing and wider dissemination via presentations and publications. Members who are unable to answer the survey with the information needed were encouraged to consult or ask other colleagues in the institution with expertise in the area, ideally at Pro-Vice Chancellor level, to respond to the survey.

Findings

Australian, New Zealand and Fijian universities are well-represented in ACODE. Participants were asked a series of 12 questions to ascertain the maturity of micro-credentialing work carried out at their institutions. 47 member institutions were sent the survey with 28 institutions responding, see Table 1.

Table 1: Participating institutions

| Participating institutions		
University of Sydney	Federation University	USQ
University of New England	Monash University	Macquarie University
University of Auckland	Victoria University of Wellington	University of Waikato
UniSA	La Trobe University	University of Tasmania
University of the Sunshine Coast	University of Wollongong	Western Sydney University
University of Melbourne	Charles Darwin University	University of Otago
Royal Melbourne Institute Technology	Deakin University	The University of Adelaide
Australian National University	Flinders University	Edith Cowan University
University of the Sunshine Coast	University of Newcastle	Kaplan Professional
University of Canberra		
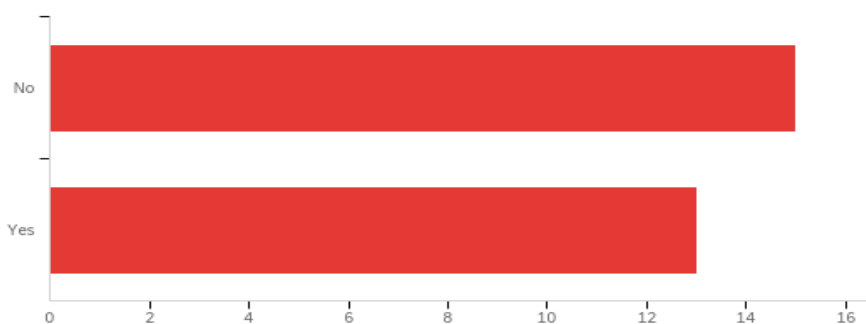
Figure 1: Whether universities have a specific micro-credentialing policy

Figure 1 shows 54% of institutions do not have a specific micro-credentialing policy, while 46% do have one. Out of those who do not have a specific micro-credentialing policy, 14 respondents say they will have some kind of formal reference to micro-credentialing or a policy within the next 12 months. This would mean almost all respondents will have a policy or similar in place next year. The main themes of the responses are captured in Table 2.

Table 2 Key response patterns for developing micro-credentials policy in the next 12 months

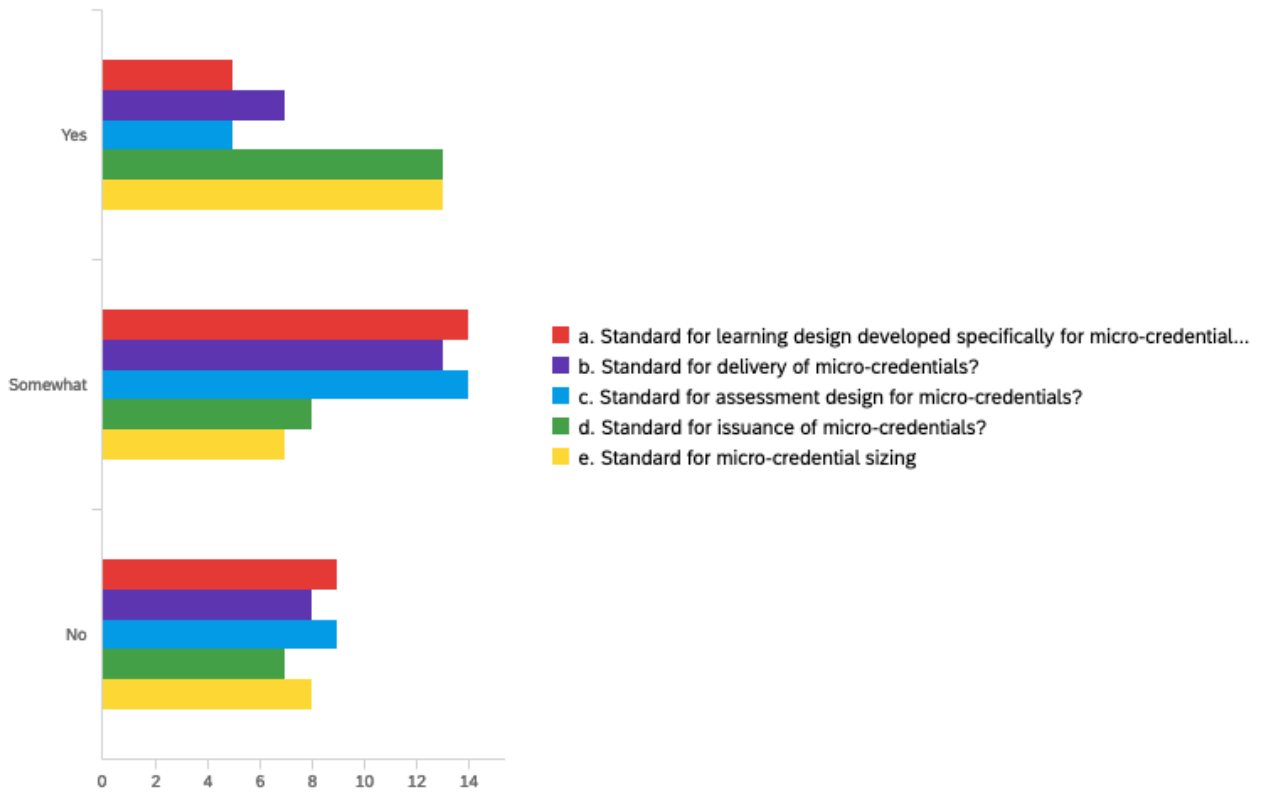|	
Credit policy	Current policy is under review
Short-form learning guidelines	Professional development education policy
Framework … for future adoption	Defined in the Award Courses Policy
Short courses as pathways.	Alternative credentials strategy
Well-developed strategy	

Figure 2: Standards for micro-credentialing

Institutions were asked if they have the relevant standards for micro-credentialing as seen in Figure 2. Almost 18% of respondents had a standard for learning design developed specifically for micro-credentials. 25% had a standard for delivery while almost 18% had a standard for assessment design. Impressively, 46% of respondents had a standard for issuance of micro-credentials and a standard for sizing.
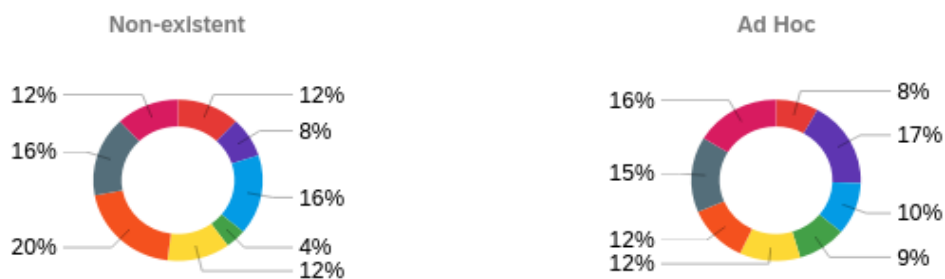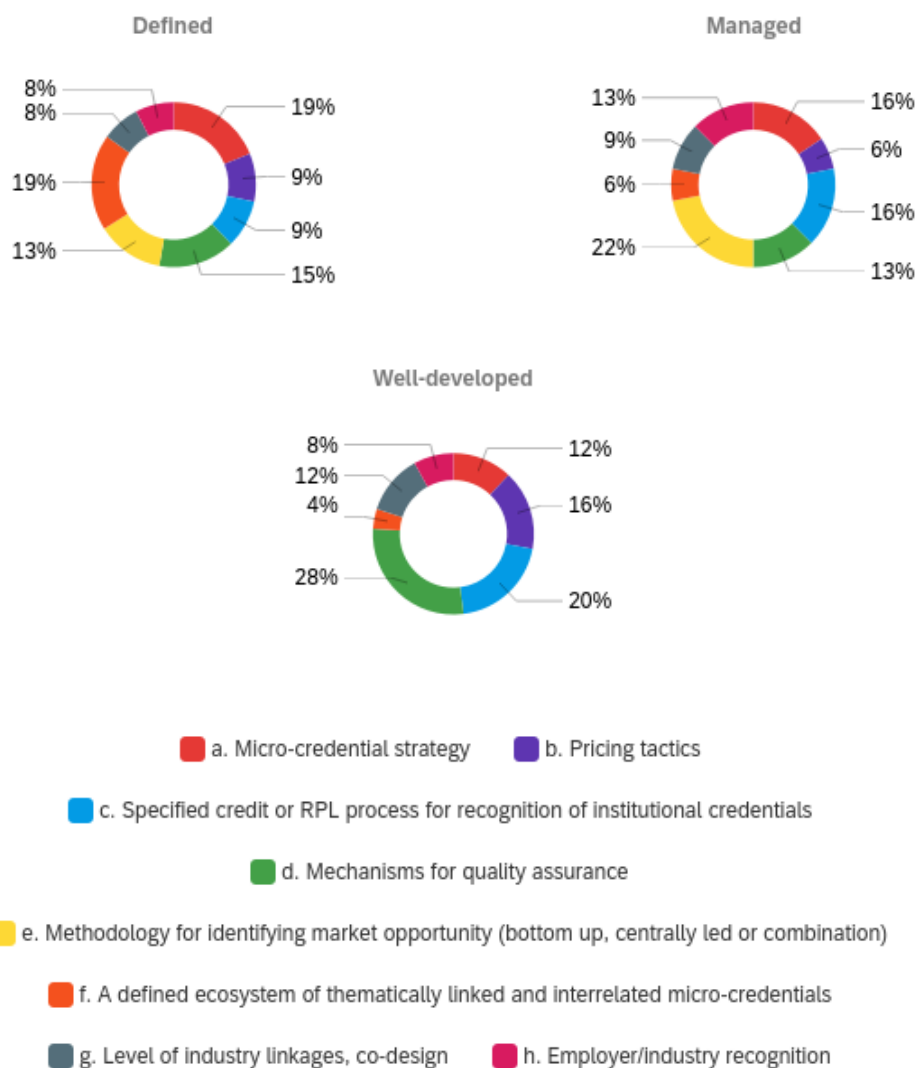
Figure 3: Maturity model for micro-credentials

Figure 3 shows the areas where institutions are mature in their micro-credentialing efforts. Across all criteria most work appears to be ad hoc. However only small numbers were non-existent in effort, indicating good news that those in the sector are working actively to progress work in this space. Almost 11% of respondents have a well-developed strategy with 14% having mature pricing tactics. Almost 18% have a specified credit or recognition of prior learning feeding into institutional credentials. 25% have well-developed mechanisms for quality assurance. However, no respondents felt they were mature in a methodology for identifying market opportunity, with most effort being ad hoc. Only about 4% had a defined ecosystem of thematically linked and interrelated micro-credentials. 11% had a high level of industry linkages and codesign though only 7% had high employer recognition of their micro-credentials.
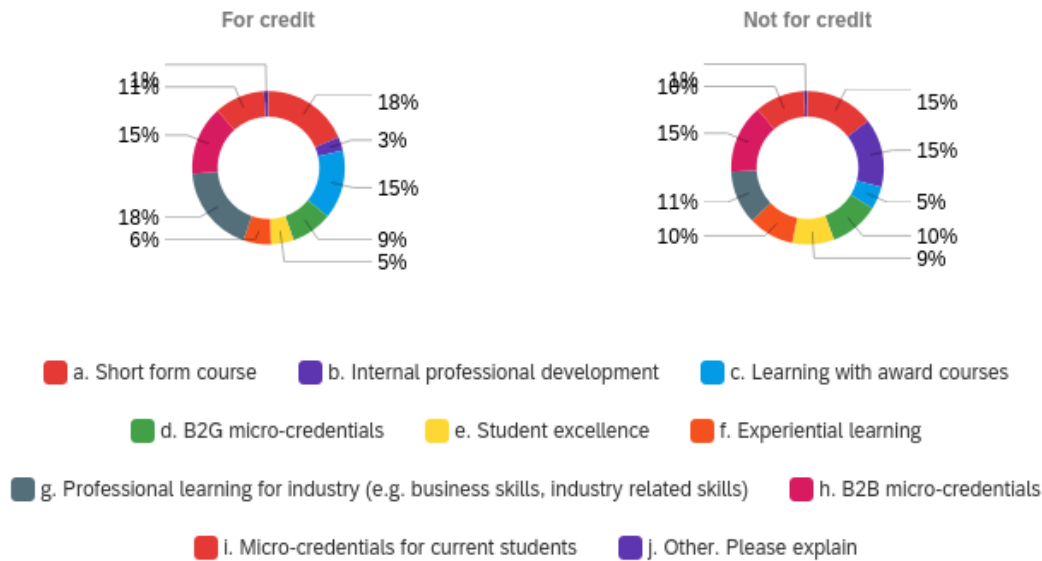
For credit

11%
1%
18%
3%
15%
15%
18%
9%
6%
5%

Not for credit

1%
1%
10%
15%
15%
15%
11%
5%
10%
10%
9%

■ a. Short form course   ■ b. Internal professional development   ■ c. Learning with award courses

■ d. B2G micro-credentials   ■ e. Student excellence   ■ f. Experiential learning

■ g. Professional learning for industry (e.g. business skills, industry related skills)   ■ h. B2B micro-credentials

■ i. Micro-credentials for current students   ■ j. Other. Please explain

Figure 4: Courses currently, or planned to be, micro-credentialed

The most prevalent type of courses that institutions plan to micro-credential for credit, or already do, are professional learning for industry. However internal professional development is a popular course type to be micro-credentialed in the not-for-credit space. Figure 4 summarises the types of courses that are micro-credentialed, or on the roadmap towards being so, and whether they are for credit or otherwise.
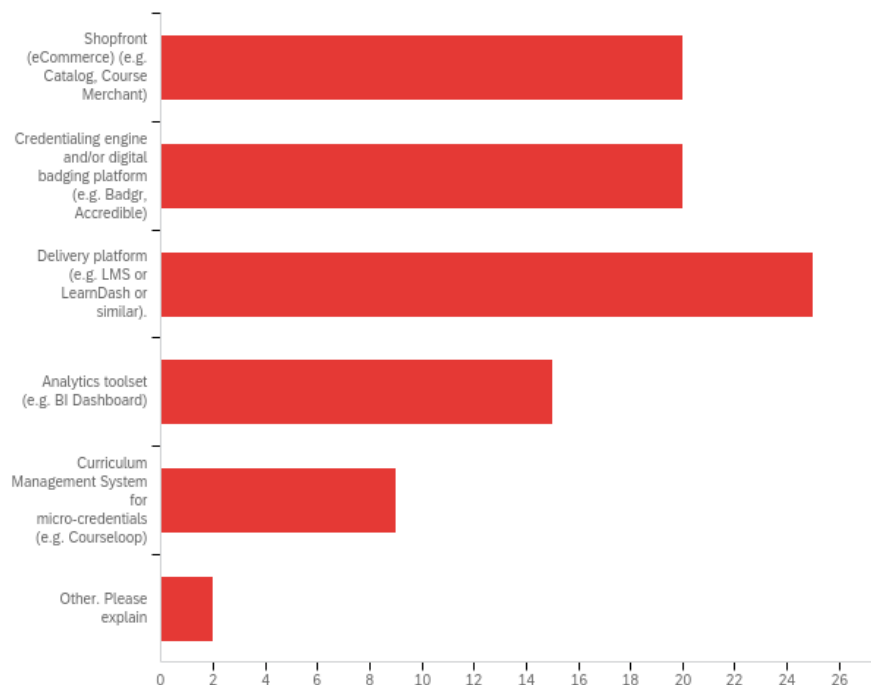

Figure 5: Technical infrastructure institutions have or plan to procure

There are two types of infrastructure that needs to be in place for micro-credentialing. They are technical (Figure 5) and academic (Figure 6). Technical infrastructure includes having a shopfront, credentialing engine, delivery platform, analytics toolset and curriculum management system. Most respondents had in place a shopfront, credentialing engine and delivery platform. Academic infrastructure includes having in place dedicated staff, framework and articulation pathways. Most institutions had up to 3 FTE staff working on micro-credentials though one institution had 15 staff working on it as a whole-of-institution project approach.
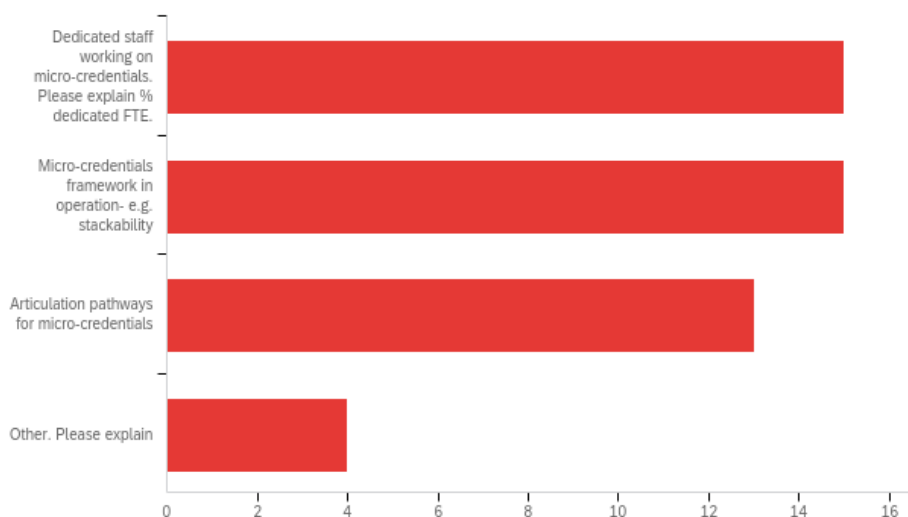

Figure 6: What academic infrastructure do you currently have in place or plan to establish?

Respondents were asked whether there was anything else worth highlighting to support their institutions' activity or plans with micro-credentials. The range of responses was wide, see Table 3. Concerns for clarity at the national level was raised as was well as the need to reconsider assessment process and practice.

Table 3: Further information to understand what institutions do or plan to do with micro-credentials

What institutions do or plan to do with micro-credentials- other information	
Clear distinction between a micro-credential that may be used for RPL or credit purposes and badges that acknowledge achievement.	In New Zealand, stackability is explicitly prohibited by the regulator
Iterative development as processes are tested	Waiting to see better clarity in the Australian Qualification Framework
Define strategic intent and supporting frameworks	Looking to the Federal Government to provide a clear definition and expectation for higher education providers in offering micro-credentials
Short courses as pathways to the University	Still in the developmental stage for the actual micro-credentials, funding streams and delivery mechanisms
Ad Hoc approach	Design to support informal and non-formal learning activities
Plan to implement curriculum mapping and management	Reconsider assessment process and practice

Conclusion

The current results of the survey on micro-credentialing cannot be easily compared with the results from 2019 and 2020 as the response rate is far lower. However, the purpose of this survey was to measure the maturity of the implementation and sought to capture the different facets of policy, process and implementation success which the previous surveys could not do, as it was still an emerging effort in Australasia. There is some obvious progress in the implementation of micro-credentials and the sustainability of it. However, it does not always reflect in the accomplishment of a clear policy or framework. The investment in staff, and other technical and academic resourcing, to work on micro-credentials also reflects the seriousness of the effort. This space remains an exciting evolution which ACODE will continue to monitor.