

Survey of micro-credentialing practice in Australasian universities 2020

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Background

This project, supported by 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. It is anticipated that institutions may be able to use this data to help them design, implement or seek a community of practice in the new area of micro-credentialing. The authors also presented an ACODE White Paper on the state of play of Micro-credentialing in late 2019 at ACODE 80 in Wellington. This previous paper was based on data that had been collected in mid 2019. This former paper can be found at: <https://www.acode.edu.au/mod/resource/view.php?id=3049>

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated efforts in this area and so it was timely to capture and learn what this has meant for our member institutions. Not the least, with the focus by the [Australian Federal Government has placed on the rapid development of short course](#)¹ to help support the higher education (HE) sector, we were keen to understand how this may be reflected in activities undertaken in our institutions. While the recent Australian Qualifications Review (AQF) in 2019 also acknowledges the importance of micro-credentialing, universities may be unsure how to proceed with an effective framework and implementation. These factors have prompted the follow-up survey we conducted with ACODE member institutions in July 2020.

Introduction

A rapidly evolving higher education landscape is an opportunity for Australasian universities to reconsider how it offers education. In a time where knowledge and skills need to be updated constantly, a three- or four-year degree may not suit the currency required in many jobs and other work. A student's employability and entrepreneurship abilities need to be contemporary and flexible. The way to gain these continually updated skills and knowledge is immense. However, recognising them in a way that is translatable across academia and work providers is limited. This research surveys how Australasian universities approach micro-credentialing to maintain the currency of its offerings and how the sector's higher education landscape is evolving to meet this need.

As there has been no comprehensive benchmarking of micro-credentialing in Australasian higher education thus far, the importance of this work will be to initially benchmark these initiatives and to help progress work in this new field of endeavour.

The method employed in this survey was to approach Pro Vice-Chancellors (PVC) Education or equivalent in ACODE member universities, via email. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics. 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. Australian, New Zealand and Fijian universities are well-represented in ACODE with relevant staff who can direct the survey to PVCs on micro-credentialing. 47 member institutions were sent the survey with 34 institutions² responding (72%). Participants were asked a series of 17 questions to ascertain the level of micro-credentialing work being done.

Findings

When members were asked the opening question whether they indeed have a micro-credentialing policy, responses were equally split, see Figure 1. However, it is interesting to note that there is a 20% increase in institutions responding they have a micro-credentialing policy compared to 2019. Nine (9) institutions provide a link to their policies hosted on a public-facing webpage. Seven (7) members responded that their policies are either unavailable or still in development. Of interest, of the respondents who said they do not have a policy, 9 institutions are quite likely to have one within the next 12 months. So, we can conclude within the next 12 months 3 in 4 institutions may well have a micro-credentialing policy.

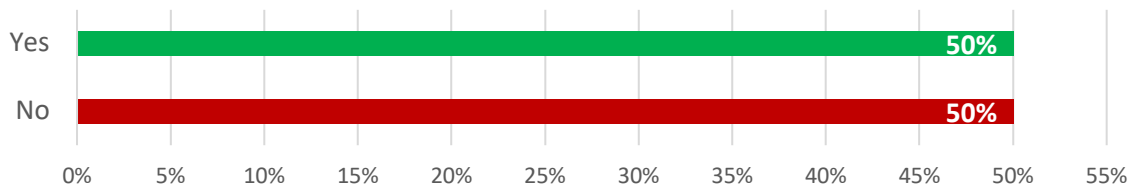


Figure 1 Institutions with a micro-credentialing policy

Figure 2 shows only 32% of respondents (11) have an approved matrix to determine the level of a credential or badge linked to the levels of learning associated with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) or similar. However, this is a significant 19% increase from the 2019 survey. This is likely to indicate the complexity of the work that needs to happen around such matrices as 7 respondents explain that they do have an existing approach which includes a recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy. Looking to the future, 10 respondents (30%) explain that their approach is under development

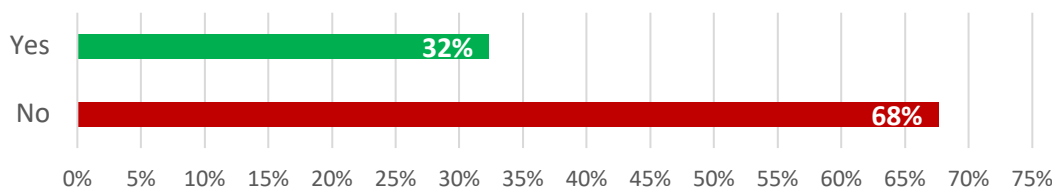


Figure 2 Institutions with an approved matrix linking credentialing and qualifications frameworks

Respondents were asked if they use a credentialing engine. While only a third of institutions (11) said yes, this is a 13% increase from 2019. Most use Credly’s Acclaim engine, followed by Accredible and finally Badgr. Another 7 respondents say that they will, or probably will, procure a credentialing engine in the next 12 months. So it is likely within the next 12 months just over 17 institutions at least will have a credentialing engine in place.

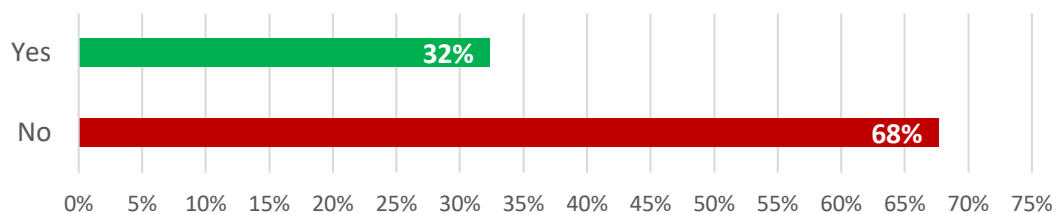


Figure 3 Universities using a credentialing engine

Respondents were asked to comment on the state of adoption of micro-credentialing at their institutions, represented in Figure 4. The adoption of micro-credentialing has progressed significantly. 88% are in various states of adoption. 3 universities have well-established adoption policies while the rest are able to articulate work being done to progress the efforts.

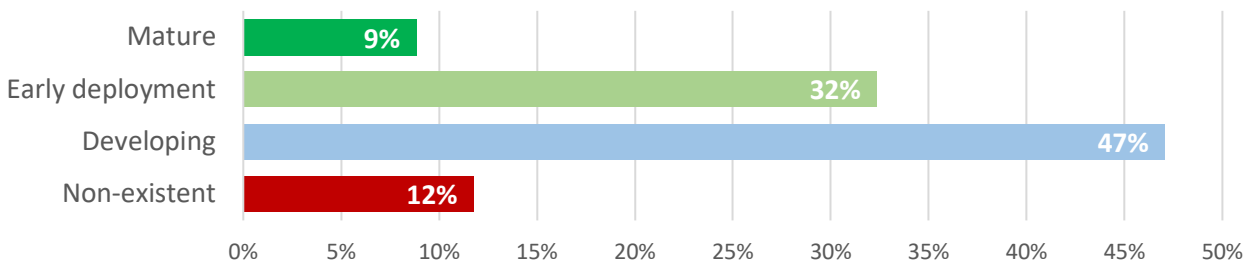


Figure 4 Status of adoption of micro-credentialing at member institutions

In the 2019 survey, most respondents indicated postgraduate units and short courses were the low-hanging fruit for micro-credentialing. Figure 5 shows that it is still the case in the current survey findings. However, of note is the seemingly clear increase in the number of respondents who are already, or plan to micro-credential undergraduate units. This is likely due to the [undergraduate certificates](#) and short courses the government has asked universities to offer to mitigate unemployment due to COVID-19 induced job losses. Another reason could be the general increase in effort to introduce micro-credentialing as seen in preceding data especially Figure 4.

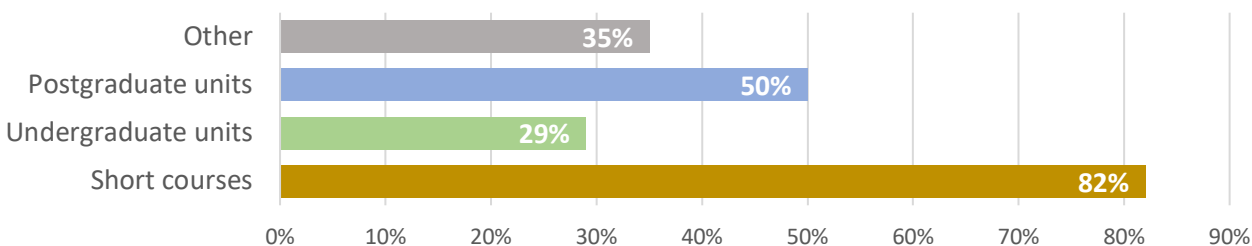


Figure 5 What institutions currently micro-credential or plan to in the future

Another question asked was whether institutions currently micro-credential for credit or not, or both, please refer to Figure 6. While generally micro-credentialing is considered for credit there are institutions which are still developing their path to credentialing. Respondents listed work in the pipeline for credentials including recognition for volunteer work, academic skills and integrity, staff training, technology competency and recognising competency and completion of external participants.

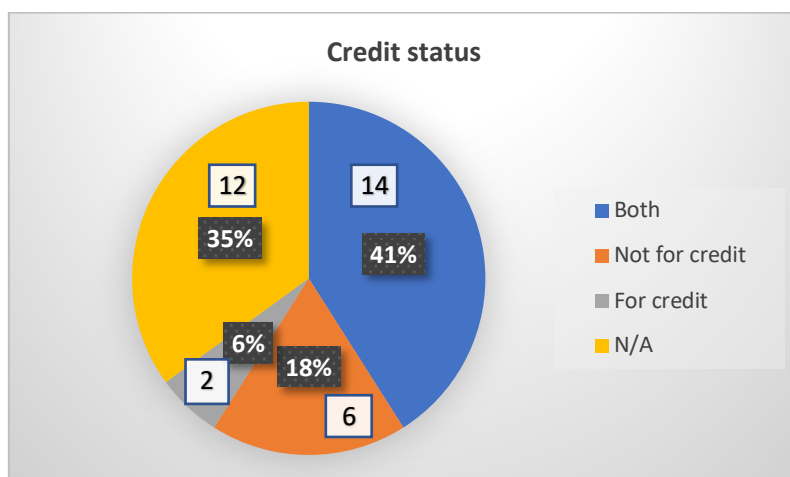


Figure 6 Whether institutions offer micro-credentials for credit or otherwise

The survey also sought to find out how much of staff professional development is micro-credentialled. Figure 7 shows only 26% of institutions do so. The professional courses include learning and teaching related training, technology, business, compliance and professional skills. 23 (68%) of respondents suggested their

existing professional development courses could be micro-credentialled, these include potential teaching and professional skills courses.

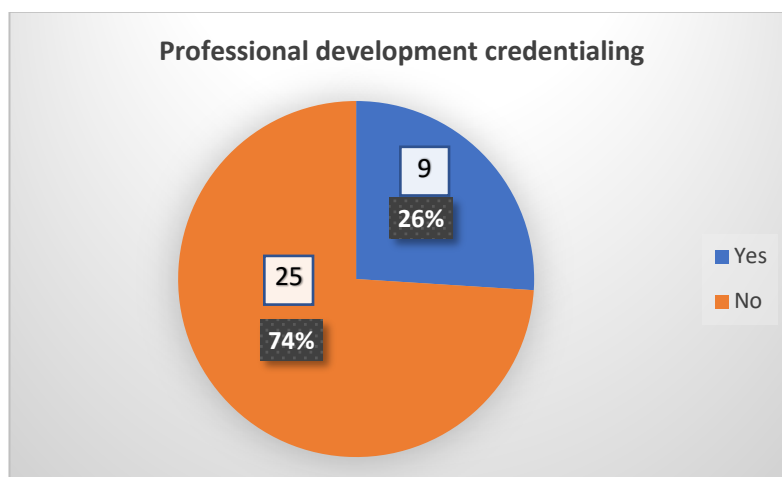


Figure 7 Percentage of institutions that credential professional development

Conclusion

Generally, the effort towards micro-credentialing has increased across most criteria since the survey in 2019. If not already well-underway, institutions are developing or seriously considering micro-credentialing strategies. Several universities are working on ways to integrate existing short course systems with participants into award course systems which consist of students. Other notable comments from respondents include planning to offer micro-credentials to businesses and government in a commercial capacity. Professional practice degrees are a new space being explored to tap into industry partnerships. There is also consideration of co-delivery with providers in Vocational Education and Training (VET).

It is emerging from the data that higher education institutions also need to rethink their operating structures to best service the offering of micro-credentials in its various permutations. To cope with the rapid move to micro-credentialing, one of the respondents is investigating the creation of a new non-degree teaching entity that will manage the design and delivery of offerings not linked to traditional degree pathways. These are all possibilities in the brave new world of higher education credentials.

ACODE will continue to monitor this important space over the next few years, or at least until this initiative starts to reach a level of maturity across the sector.

¹The Hon Dan Tehan MP. Minister for Education: Media Release. 14 May 2020. Short courses providing new skills to Australians: <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/short-courses-providing-new-skills-australians>

²**Participating institutions include:** Australian Catholic University, Central Queensland University, Charles Darwin University, Charles Sturt University, Curtin University, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Murdoch University, Kaplan Higher Education, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, University of Adelaide, University of Auckland, University of Canberra, University of Canterbury, University of Melbourne, University of Newcastle, University of New England, University of Notre Dame, University of Otago, University of Sydney, University of Tasmania, University of Technology Sydney, University of the South Pacific, University of South Australia, University of Southern Queensland, University of Waikato, Victoria University, Victoria University of Wellington, Western Sydney University