# Micro-credentials

# Practice in the Higher Education Sector in Wales

**December 2023**

# Contents

# Introduction

1      In the grant letter for 2022-23, HEFCW asked QAA Cymru to explore current practice in the higher education sector in relation to micro-credentials, building on the case studies that HEFCW had already developed.[1] This project was to include current use of the QAA [Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement](#) (published May 2022) and a webinar to share practice.

2      Work began on this project in March 2023. A survey was shared with participating providers and the responses were used to inform tailored conversations with each provider.[2] The conversations provided an opportunity to explore some of the approaches in more detail; any challenges and ways in which they were being addressed; the use of the Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement and whether any revisions to it would be helpful at this stage; and any other areas that might be valuable for the sector to explore to enhance practice.

3      Two webinars also took place. The first, on 24 May 2023, considered quality assurance processes; and the second, on 7 June 2023, reflected on the practicalities of delivery. Both took the form of presentations from two different providers followed by a panel discussion which responded to questions submitted by attendees. QAA Cymru is extremely grateful to the speakers who generously gave their time and were willing to share their experiences, learning and thoughts.

4      Although the extent of engagement with micro-credentials varies across the sector, several themes emerged from the work and these are explored in more detail in this summary. Overall, there was confirmation that the Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement is considered a useful resource, neither obstructing innovation and developments, nor presenting significant gaps. Practices in micro-credentials and short courses are likely to continue to evolve, however, and there are several challenges that the sector may usefully address collectively in the future.

# Micro-credentials in Wales: Facts and figures

5      Of the 11 providers engaged in this project, six are currently offering micro-credentials, three are planning to develop micro-credentials in the next 12 months, and two have no plans to develop micro-credentials in the near future. It is worth noting, however, that many providers run short courses and have a long and well-established track record in this type of provision, including some of those who indicated that they did not currently plan to develop micro-credentials. The follow-up interviews revealed that the way providers classify provision as micro-credentials varies and the volume of micro-credential activity currently taking place in Wales might not be as easy to quantify as expected.

6      Micro-credentials in Wales are predominantly being offered in the region of 5-20 credits. One provider sits outside this, offering some micro-credentials that are 40 credits alongside a suite that sits primarily in the 10-15 credit bracket. In further discussion, this was explained as being industry-driven, and that these larger courses are ones that have been run for over 20 years on behalf of the health services. The learners are qualified practitioners and the content and complexity of what is required is driving the credit volume. Overall, providers took the view that large micro-credentials were not usually in the interests of the learner. Considerations included the speed with which a skill or knowledge was sought, the

---

[1] These were published on the HEFCW website on 14 December 2022 and can be accessed at:
[www.hefcw.ac.uk/en/blog/developing-micro-credentials](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk/en/blog/developing-micro-credentials)
[2] The list of participating providers is included at the end of this report. Meetings took place with all but one provider who was unable to take part in that stage of the project.

amount of time that a learner might have available to engage in learning alongside other responsibilities or employment, and variable prior learning experience. Furthermore, a 30-credit micro-credential is 300 learning hours, which is considered too large a volume of study to ask of someone who may have limited previous educational experience or who has had a significant gap in education.

7       Most of the providers offering micro-credentials, or who intend to, have developed provision across Levels 4-7. One provider is currently concentrating on Levels 5 and 7, and another plans to introduce micro-credentials at Level 7 only in the first instance. In the case of the former, consultation with businesses determined the levels and subjects in which micro-credentials would be developed. For the latter, the micro-credential was being developed as a pilot and plans for expansion will be determined based on the learning from this.

8       Mode of delivery varies, with some micro-credentials being offered as online learning only (which is sometimes, but not always, through a third-party platform), through a blended approach which might include an element of work-based learning, or via on-campus delivery. As one would expect from variable modes of delivery, the extent of flexibility that the learner has when they engage also varies. In some cases, this has implications around how the provider classifies the provision (that is, whether as a micro-credential or simply a short course). This breadth of approach reflects the diversity of learners' needs, and the focus and intentions of the micro-credential.

## Use of sector guidance, including the QAA Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement

9        All providers confirmed familiarity with the QAA Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement, and some individuals involved in this project had been part of the original Advisory Group that oversaw its development. The Characteristics Statement was being used in a range of ways. For example, it had been used by some providers to structure internal conversations about micro-credentials and short courses, and one noted that it emphasised the importance of ensuring a high-quality student experience, irrespective of the length of a course. Some providers noted that they had not used it in the development of their micro-credential provision because they were already delivering substantial portfolios by the time it was available. However, having reviewed their approaches against the Characteristics Statement, members of those providers were satisfied there was nothing in it that presented difficulties and they provided some examples of how it had been useful - for example, as a resource for colleagues who had not been as involved with micro-credentials to date. All providers who had developed provision since its publication, or who were in the process of doing so, confirmed that it had been valuable.

10      There was a suggestion that the observation in the Characteristics Statement about short credit-bearing courses not being a new phenomenon could have been more prominent, and this might be an area to consider in the review of the Statement. Another suggestion was to develop examples of practice to augment the guidance as a supporting resource.

11      Other guidance that providers had used included: the European MOOC Consortium Common Microcredential Framework; pedagogic papers around how to design, deliver and assess very small courses (<5 credits) successfully; and guidance produced by third-party platform providers where higher education providers had elected to deliver this way. Other guidance resulting from work such as the Microbol project in Europe - and the recommendations made to the European Commission as a consequence of those - had also been referenced. Beyond Europe, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority framework for micro-credentials has been considered.

# Academic frameworks and quality management processes

12    For the most part, providers have not needed to make significant changes to academic frameworks and associated regulations to enable the delivery of micro-credentials. Many already had sufficiently flexible frameworks or have developed micro-credentials that reflect current credit frameworks in use.

13    Some providers noted the use of existing 'Associate Student' regulations[3] and that the application of these regulations to micro-credential learners had provided a useful opportunity for review and updating.

14    One difference in regulations noted by a provider related to extenuating circumstances. In this case, it was because the micro-credential was designed so that the learner could choose when to submit for assessment. As extenuating circumstances would normally only be used to negotiate an extension, this would not be applicable for micro-credential learners.

15    Resubmission in the event of a failed assessment is not always an option, either, for micro-credentials at some providers. This could partly be associated with resource implications. However, a reasonable proportion of learners in some disciplines are less concerned about achieving academic credit and primarily interested in the learning, skills and/or knowledge that they achieve by participating in the course. Because of this, some providers offer a short course with an option to receive confirmation of participation (for example, a provider certificate or digital badge) or, alternatively, submit for assessment to be considered for the award of academic credit (that is, the micro-credential iteration). Although registration for the two options is managed to differentiate between learner intentions, delivery is to the single group. As a learner who has failed an assignment would still be eligible in these circumstances to receive some form of confirmation of their engagement and learning, achieving the academic credit is, potentially, less of an issue, particularly if engagement was primarily to enhance performance at work.

16    Many providers reported quality management processes that were already sufficiently flexible to accommodate multiple start dates and assessment points, and monitoring and evaluation processes that enabled timely review.

17    One of the most significant challenges noted in the area of quality management was around application and enrolment processes. Some frustration was voiced around the extent of the data that had to be reported at a sector level which negated any provider attempts to streamline processes and resulted in a process that seemed burdensome, particularly when working with cohorts from a single employer.

18    There was evidence that the current micro-credential provision across providers in Wales has been developed with, and in response to, industry. While some providers noted the internal resource challenges in designing and approving a micro-credential, overall they were able to respond quickly and effectively to industry need.

---

[3] An associate student is a student registered to study single modules of a study programme without enrolling on the full programme (for instance, a certificate, diploma or degree). It can provide opportunity for the student to demonstrate they can study at this level and to then progress to the full programme.

## Student support (including access to facilities)

19      Student support - including the access that is extended for academic and pastoral support and whether this is physical, virtual or both - varies across providers. Some providers are very clear that the learners on micro-credentials have the same access and are treated the same as any other student. In some cases, this is because the nature of the micro-credential means that the learners are coming onto campus to access specialist facilities or equipment. Moreover, many providers have developed their online provision and their support services accordingly, which enables micro-credential learners to access the same support as full-time or part-time students, irrespective of their mode of study.

20      A small number of providers noted that they restrict access to student support and facilities, instead aiming to embed all necessary academic support and resources within the micro-credential itself and not extending access to the wider services that students enrolled on full degree programmes can use (for example, counselling or central careers advice). An acknowledged challenge of this was, however, that where a micro-credential has learners with very different levels of previous educational experience enrolled on it, some then find the embedded academic support and skills superfluous, while others still feel out of their depth with that aspect of the course.

21      One provider noted that, while they do offer exactly the same support to learners on micro-credentials as any other enrolled student (for example, disability assessments), in reality, the period of engagement in a micro-credential can limit the extent to which that support can have an impact.

## Student engagement

22      Opportunities for student engagement are primarily limited to end-of-course evaluations, sometimes complemented by informal mid-course opportunities for feedback. Although some providers noted that they do extend invitations to learners on micro-credentials to engage in other activities such as staff-student liaison committees or to take on representative roles, the reality is that the learners' period with them is generally for so short a period that, often, the activities do not take place during the duration of a particular micro-credential.

23      Overall, the approach to student engagement across the sector for micro-credentials is best characterised as pragmatic. This is an area that the sector takes very seriously and there was clear evidence throughout the project that this was no different for micro-credentials, with some very thoughtful responses. There was acknowledgement overall that the approach must adapt to the learners and mode of micro-credential and there can be no single solution. Not offering any opportunity, however, was not countenanced.

## Main challenges

24      Several challenges were identified by providers. One significant challenge was that micro-credentials are comparatively more resource intensive than macro-credentials.[4] Despite efforts to streamline processes, providers observed that there is a minimum amount

---

[4] Macro-credentials are qualifications awarded on the basis of successful study of, and assessment in, a particular subject, with defined overarching learning outcomes in the case of taught qualifications. There will be minimum and maximum enrolment periods within which successful completion must take place, usually a minimum of one-year full-time study (for example, for a certificate of higher education) through to several years (for example, for a part-time doctorate). *Micro-credentials Characteristics Statement (2022)*

that must be done irrespective of the credit volume or number of learners. Some of the efficiencies that exist in macro-credentials are absent in micro-credentials. Examples of resource implications were listed for virtually every stage of quality management - from the original concept for a micro-credential, through its design, approval and marketing, to applications, on-course experience and any follow-up activity.

25   Although some providers noted challenges around fitting with current academic frameworks or the different pedagogical approaches required for a course of, for example, 5 credits, these were considered less of an issue overall.

26   More significantly, learners can come with very different backgrounds on to a single micro-credential, and that can be difficult to accommodate in a way that ensures some are not bored while others feel overwhelmed. A range of approaches was also used by institutions to consider the practical challenges faced by a learner who is trying to navigate different academic, resource and support areas of the provider to find information and assistance.

27   Recognition of Prior Learning in relation to credit awarded by another degree-awarding body or accrediting organisation, was considered a significant challenge by many, despite the commitment across the sector to Qualifications Frameworks, Subject Benchmark Statements and the principle of a Credit Accumulation and Transfer System. In discussion, it was evident that some providers are continuing to conceptualise micro-credentials as a linear, coherent experience designed by the provider, rather than a learner-led approach that integrates with skills, knowledge and experience that they have acquired through work and other non-formal and informal opportunities. This then proved particularly challenging when the matter of 'stackability' arose. In reality, when a learner is aiming to combine micro-credentials into a recognised qualification, the greater issue is most likely identifying where there is duplication (or double counting) rather than gaps. There was less nervousness about consortium approaches in which a group of providers might agree to 'pool' a collection of micro-credentials and recognise each other's, and at least one example of that working successfully already exists in Wales.[5] Overall, however, this is revealing about the different levels of confidence and understanding of micro-credentials, and perceptions of their primary aims.

## Reflections to inform further work

28   There is certainly a question around nomenclature and whether variable practices are currently obscuring the extent of provision in this area. In some instances, providers appear to be offering short courses which, to all intents and purposes, fit the definition of micro-credentials but which the provider did not classify as such. In contrast, a more inclusive approach to the categorisation of short course opportunities is used by other providers. The follow-up interviews were very useful in understanding some of this detail. These variable classification approaches also mean that there are opportunities for sharing practices and challenges that have not yet been explored.

29   While some of the existing short course provision might technically not meet the definition of micro-credentials as set out in the QAA Characteristics Statement, there are many features in common and there is the opportunity for applying similar approaches and practices, both in quality assurance and supporting the learner experience. Thus, there is merit in exploring practices and learning from extensive short course provision that could

---

[5] An example of this is the Technocamps initiative which has been working effectively across all Welsh universities to support digital upskilling across Wales.

support the expansion and development of practices around micro-credentials.

30    Questions related to funding could not be ignored. While the approach to this project has been to focus on providers' strategy, policy and practice, the point was made that government intentions have implications for those providers' strategy, policy and practice. For example, if there is an expectation that learners will be self-funding, or particular parameters are placed around how a learner might qualify for funding, that has implications for a provider's ambitions and strategy.

31    The subject of employer perceptions of micro-credentials was also raised in discussions. In some cases, there are close and effective relationships between providers and particular industries or employers that have led to micro-credentials and short courses being developed for a particular purpose. While there are clear indications that other employers want micro-credentials to be available, there is limited sense of the extent to which they value and understand micro-credentials, or how micro-credentials might relate to CPD points. A further project to explore this, involving employers, was advocated as a key opportunity to help inform policy and approach.

32    An interesting question was raised around what 'success' looks like for micro-credentials. There can be some reluctance to base it on achievement of academic credit since, as noted above, many learners are less concerned about that opportunity from a course. Some providers consider repeat business to be an indication that a particular micro-credential is holding value, particularly when new enrolments are the result of a recommendation by a previous learner. Other providers have posited that continued recruitment might simply be attributed to a good marketing strategy.

33    Another consideration is the primary role and purpose of micro-credentials. Some providers are confident in their approach to micro-credentials, recognising that they have operated this form of learning (albeit under a different term) for a long time. Others risk developing an approach that could result in them creating what is essentially a traditional degree but with all aspects of quality management replicated at module level instead of programme level.

34    This also indicates an opportunity for the sector to reconsider modes of part-time study and greater use of qualifications currently considered to be exit awards. More innovative, imaginative and flexible approaches to part-time study might be a better option for some learners than amassing micro-credentials, particularly if the aim at the outset is to achieve a recognised qualification rather than achieve an immediate and targeted upskilling opportunity.

# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following who contributed to this project through completion of the survey, participation in a follow-up interview and/or a webinar contribution:

**Aberystwyth University**
- Professor Andrew Thomas

**Bangor University**
- Dr Myfanwy Davies
- Lois McGrath

**Cardiff Metropolitan University**
- Chris George
- Steven Osborne

**Cardiff University**
- Owain Huw
- Tony Lancaster
- Sarah Lethbridge

**Grŵp Llandrillo Menai**
- Paul Flanagan
- Joanne Owen

**Neath Port Talbot College Group**
- Professor Richard Tong

**Open University in Wales**
- Rhys Daniels
- Caitlin Harvey
- Dr Scott McKenzie

**Swansea University**
- Phil Brophy
- Professor Laura Roberts

**University of South Wales**
- Kathryn Gomm
- Nicola Poole

**University of Wales Trinity Saint David**
- Gary Clifford
- Professor Kyle Erickson
- Professor Mirjam Plantinga

**Wrexham University**
- Dr Neil Pickles

+44 (0)1452 557 000
www.qaa.ac.uk