

Survey on Micro-Credentials

Small learning units at German universities

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MICRO-CREDENTIALS AT GERMAN UNIVERSITIES

A relevant topic – also with regard to internationalisation

NA DAAD SHORT SURVEY

Discussion of micro-credentials has steadily gained momentum at the European level over the past year. In Germany, certain higher education institutions are already looking closely at the potential and challenges of implementing these small learning units – both in the context of lifelong learning and in connection with internationalisation.

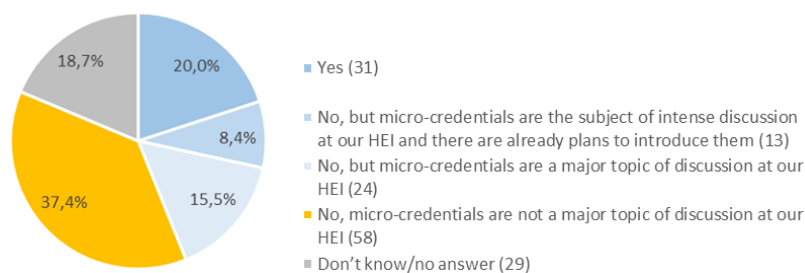
In December 2021, the European Commission presented a Council Recommendation on Micro-Credentials, which is due to be discussed by member states in spring 2022. The DAAD's Erasmus+ National Agency "Higher Education" took this as an opportunity to conduct a survey among the heads of International Offices at German higher education institutions (HEIs) to find out how the issue of micro-credentials was viewed in general and determine the extent to which German HEIs are already using small learning units as an instrument for internationalisation.

The figures presented here are based on the short survey conducted between 10 and 24 February 2022 among 271 higher education institutions that the DAAD usually surveys in the context of internationalisation. 155 universities (response rate: 57 %) took part in the survey.

MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS

- A **significant share of** the German higher education institutions participating in the survey **have begun to look into the issue of micro-credentials.**

Fig. 1 Does your university offer micro-credentials?

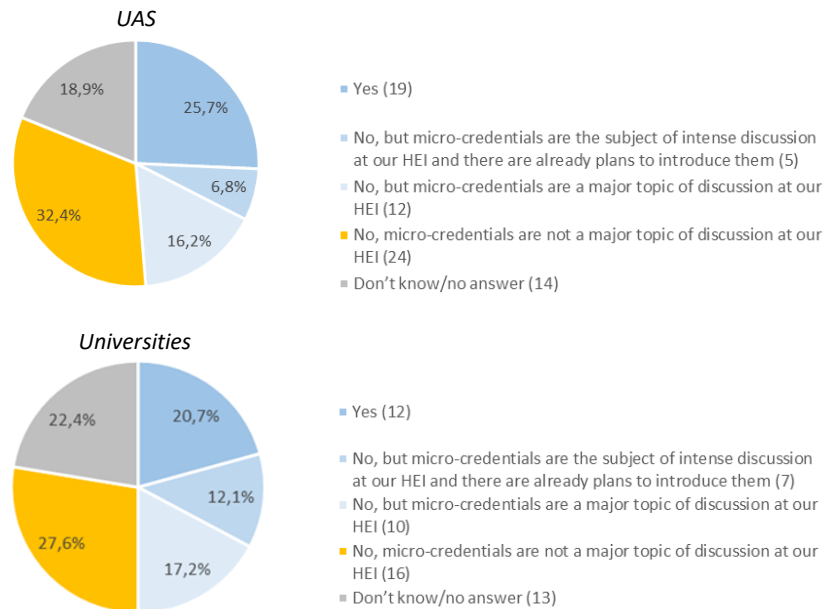


These include higher education institutions that already offer such learning units (20%), those where they are the subject of intense discussion and where there are concrete plans to introduce them (8.4%), and those where micro-credentials are at least said to be a major

topic of discussion at the institution (15.5%). All in all this is not a majority, but at 43.9 % of respondents it is still a noteworthy figure.

- The **share of higher education institutions offering micro-credentials is relatively balanced between universities of applied sciences (UAS) and universities**. In the UAS group, just under 26% of respondents said that their HEI offers this type of small learning unit, while the figure for universities was almost 21%. The lower figure of 20 % for all types of higher education institutions results from the fact that micro-credentials are not offered at art and music colleges. The overall balance between universities and UAS is also reflected in the answers to questions about whether HEIs have concrete plans to introduce such learning units and those who say that micro-credentials are a major topic of discussion at the institution.

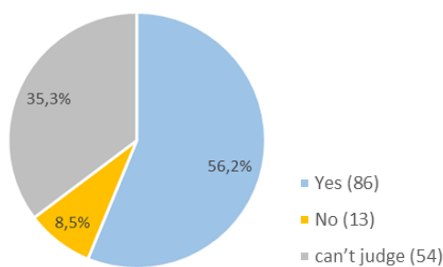
Fig. 2 Does your university offer micro-credentials? (broken down by UAS and universities)



- From the universities' point of view, the **key areas of application** for micro-credentials are **continuing academic education, lifelong learning and internationalisation**. Among the HEIs that already offer micro-credentials, their use in the context of continuing academic education and lifelong learning receives the most mentions (21). When asked how useful micro-credentials are considered to be in this area, a high mean value of 4.24 was obtained on a scale of 1 ("not useful at all") to 5 ("very useful"). This is in line with the Council Recommendation on the European approach to micro-credentials.

But the area of **internationalisation** – which is less prominent in the Council Recommendation – is also seen by HEIs as an **important field of application**. Among the HEIs that already offer micro-credentials, their use in the context of internationalisation and to promote mobility receives the second most mentions (19). In addition, a majority of all respondents (56.2 %) see micro-credentials as a useful accompanying instrument for internationalisation.

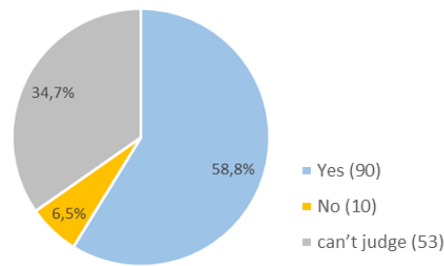
Fig. 3 Do you consider micro-credentials to be a useful accompanying instrument for internationalisation or to promote mobility?



- The **core concern of the Council Recommendation** – to achieve a better understanding based on a common definition and standardised elements for the description of micro-credentials – is **confirmed** by the HEIs in the survey. When asked about the need for regulation

in different areas, proponents of European regulation most frequently mentioned a uniform understanding of micro-credentials within the European Higher Education Area (74). And when it came to the specific question of whether the Council Recommendation was considered worthwhile, there was also a high level of agreement.

Fig. 4 Do you consider the European Commission's proposal for the Council Recommendation on the "European approach to micro-credentials" to strengthen transparency, acceptance and quality assurance to be worthwhile?

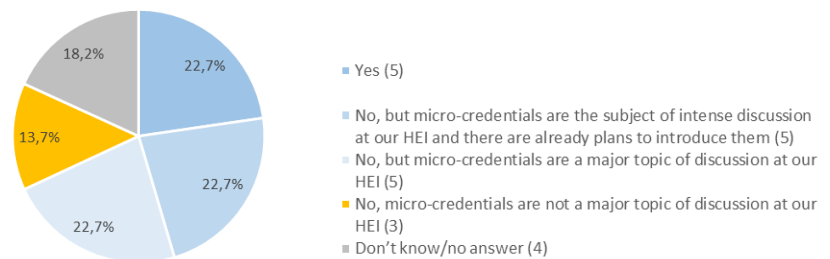


The open-ended responses show that some supporters hope the Council Recommendation will improve the recognition and crediting of micro-credentials in particular. However, some concerns are expressed with regard to the possibility of excessive regulation.

FURTHER INSIGHTS

- At the European level, the pioneering role of the **European University Networks (EUN)** is often referred to when it comes to micro-credentials – and rightly so. Of the 35 German HEIs participating in the European alliances, 22 took part in the survey. As such their participation rate approximately reflects the overall response rate, but their activities in the field are more pronounced. Many already offer micro-credentials (22.7%), are seeing intense discussion of the issue and have concrete plans to introduce such learning units (22.7%) or at least say that micro-credentials are a major topic of discussion at their university (22.7%). In total, 68.1% of the German EUN HEIs are addressing the topic, as compared to 43.9% of respondents in total.

Fig. 5 Does your university offer micro-credentials? (only German EUN HEIs)

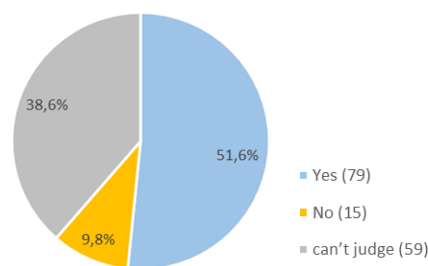


- Among those who see micro-credentials as a useful accompanying instrument for **internationalisation**, there is a largely uniform pattern in terms of the assessment of various **fields of application**. On a scale of 1 ("not at all useful") to 5 ("very useful"), the usefulness of micro-credentials in the outgoing context as a digital form of study abroad to increase participation among geographically bound students through virtual mobility formats is rated at a mean value of 3.94. As a preparatory tool for orientation and the initiation of physical mobility in connection with "blended mobility", its usefulness is rated at an average of 3.90. In the incoming context, the benefit of micro-credentials as an additional instrument for recruiting international students is rated on average at 3.89. As an offering for international students to convey curricular content and skills that cannot be acquired in the learner's local environment, the usefulness of micro-credentials is rated at 4.05.

Additional fields of application in the area of internationalisation that were mentioned several times in the open-ended responses include further training for lecturers and staff (staff mobility), cooperation with international partner universities (e.g. cooperative curricula, initiation of joint degrees), summer schools, teaching of intercultural competence and other skills, promotion of student engagement and offerings for alumni.

- While assessment of the individual fields of application in the area of internationalisation was only directed at those who consider the use of micro-credentials in this field worthwhile anyway, questions regarding **additional fields of application** were addressed to all respondents. Here, too, a scale of 1 (“not at all useful”) to 5 (“very useful”) was applied. As described earlier, the area of continuing academic education and lifelong learning clearly stands out with a mean value of 4.24. By contrast, the benefit of micro-credentials during the introductory/orientation phase of academic study was rated on average at 3.12; use in connection with regular degree programmes was rated at 3.22.
- Overall, there still seems to be a certain **need for clarification in terms of the understanding of micro-credentials** among the target group of heads of international offices surveyed here. This emerges from some of the open-ended comments in the survey, but is also reflected in the comparatively large number of those who were unable to give any specific feedback on individual questions. This applies, for example, to the question of whether the respondent’s own HEI offers micro-credentials (18.7% “don’t know” or no answer), the question of the need for regulation (38.6% “can’t judge”) and the question of how the Council Recommendation was viewed (34.7% “can’t judge”).
- 51.6% of respondents affirmed that there is a particular **need for regulation at European level** when it comes to micro-credentials. 9.8% answer in the negative, while 38.6% do not feel able to make an assessment.

Fig. 6 In your view, is there a particular need for regulation at European level in connection with micro-credentials?



As described above, proponents clearly stated as a priority (74 mentions) that a uniform understanding of micro-credentials was required within the European Higher Education Area with regard to definition and workload (in ECTS credits). This was followed by the issues of recognition and portability (66 mentions) and quality assurance (60 mentions). In comparison, the need for regulation is seen as less relevant to a cross-sectoral understanding of micro-credentials between higher education, vocational education and training institutions and the labour market (52 mentions). This also applies to questions concerning the accumulation of micro-credentials (47 mentions) and inclusion in qualification frameworks (44 mentions).

Among the open-ended responses, a uniform enrolment status for micro-credentials students was also named several times as an issue that was in particular need of regulation.