Practitioner Perspectives Survey - Micro-credentials in Scotland

Introduction

As part of the Resilient Learning Communities Enhancement Theme, QAA Scotland (QAAS) is leading on two complementary projects in 2021-22: Understanding micro-credentials and small qualifications in Scotland and Valuing and recognising prior learning and experience. To help inform these projects, QAAS undertook a survey of college and higher education institution (HEI) practitioners to get their perspectives on the provision of micro-credentials and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

In terms of micro-credentials, the aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of the provision of micro-credentials and small qualifications in Scotland including: their size, academic level, broad subject areas and transferability; awareness and perceptions of the language used for micro-credentials and small qualifications across institutions; as well as practitioner perspectives on the benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications.

The survey questions were shared with the 19 HEIs in Scotland by QAAS and the 26 colleges by the College Development Network (CDN) between November 2021 and January 2022. The majority of questions are common to both audiences; a few minor differences exist between the two surveys which are reflected in the analysis.

This report provides a summary of the responses to the questions on micro-credentials and small qualifications.

1   Respondents

In total, there were 35 respondents representing staff from 24 different Scottish institutions - 12 HEIs (15 respondents) and 12 colleges (20 respondents).

Figure 1: Respondents' roles
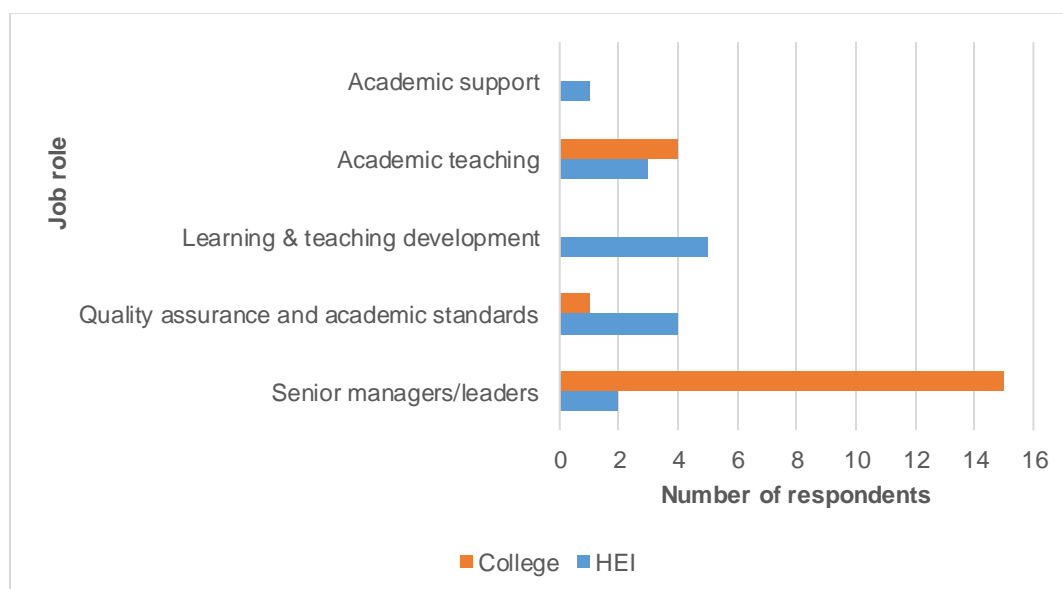
Responses to questions were from staff in a variety of academic and professional support roles across the institutions: 17 senior managers/leaders; 7 academic teaching staff; 5 staff from learning and teaching development; 5 from quality assurance and academic standards; and 1 from academic support (see Figure 1).

2 Terms used to refer to micro-credentials or small qualifications by institutions

Many respondents indicated that multiple terms were used in their institutions for micro-credentials or small qualifications. 23 respondents indicated that the term 'short courses' is used in their institutions and 15 indicated that they use the term 'micro-credentials' - which is used more commonly in HEIs than colleges. In contrast, the term 'bespoke courses' (where a partner organisation dictates the content of the course and it is delivered by the institution) is used more frequently in colleges (11 respondents) than HEIs (3 respondents). Of the five respondents who indicated that they use other terms, 'continuing professional development (CPD) awards', 'standalone modules' and 'skills boost' were identified.

Figure 2: Terms used by institution
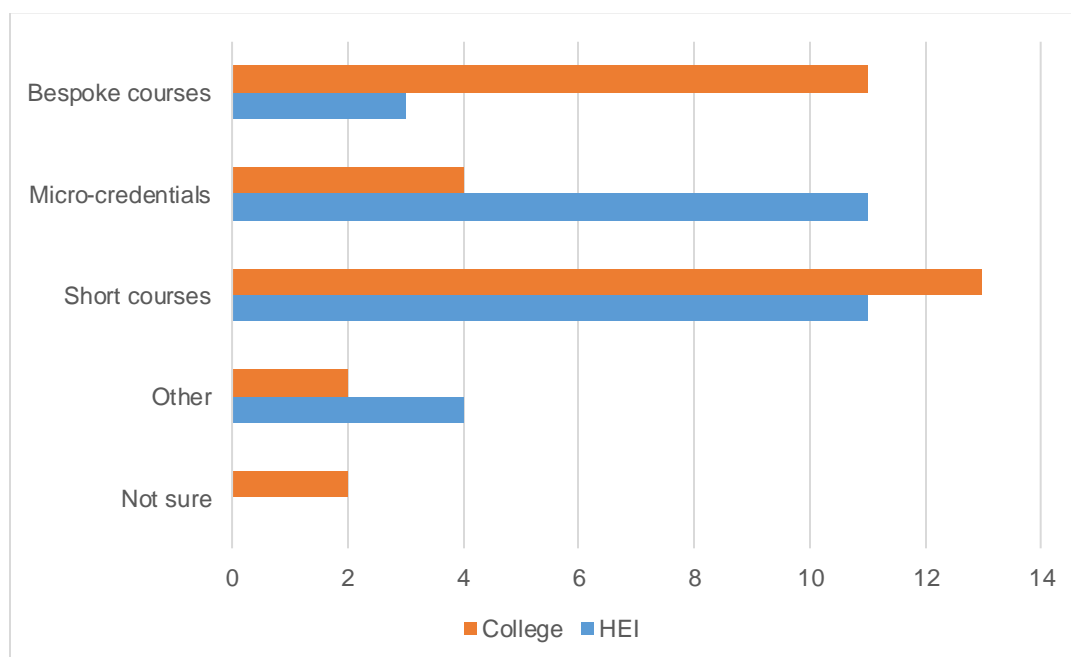
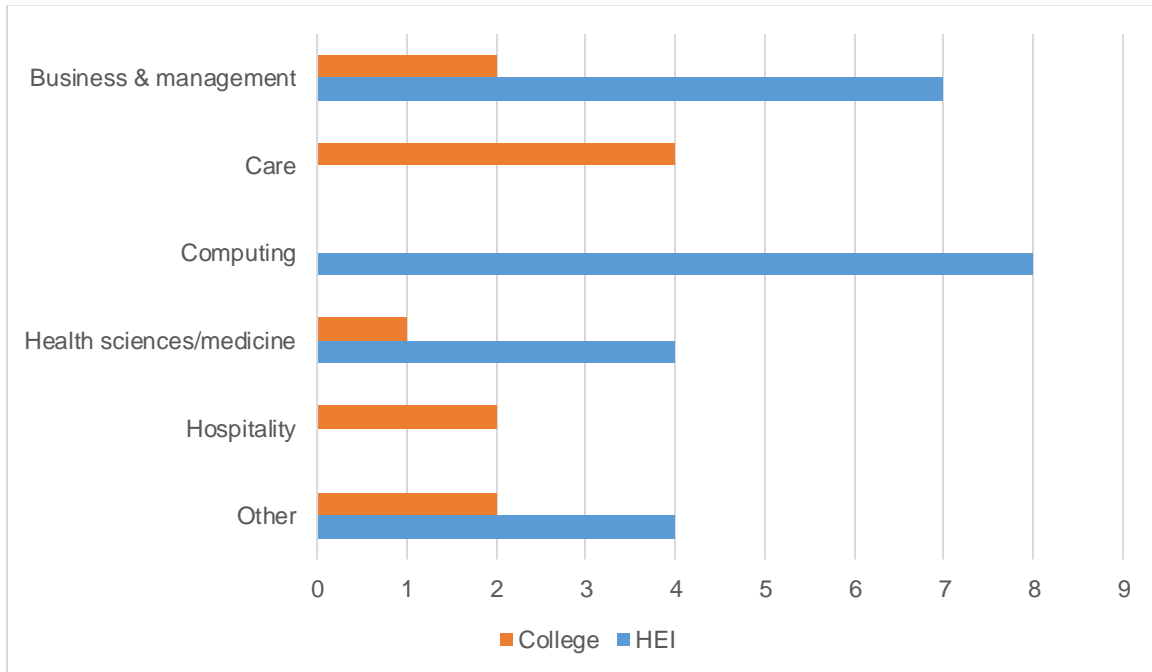## 3 SFC funding of micro-credentials or small qualifications for HEIs

The Scottish Funding Council (SFC) provided additional funding to universities in 2020-21 via the Upskilling Fund to develop the capacity of universities to offer short, flexible provision to allow people to upskill or reskill. Respondents from 11 out of the 12 HEIs who offer micro-credentials or small qualifications indicated that they had used this SFC funding for micro-credentials in 2020-21.

4 Subject areas delivering most micro-credentials or small qualifications

In terms of which subject area delivers the most micro-credentials or small qualifications, responses indicate that business and management (9 institutions) and computing (8) are

most common. These are followed by health sciences/medicine (5 institutions), care (4), education/teaching (4) and hospitality (2). Sustainability, land-based, engineering, veterinary sciences, health and safety, and creative/cultural industries had one mention each.
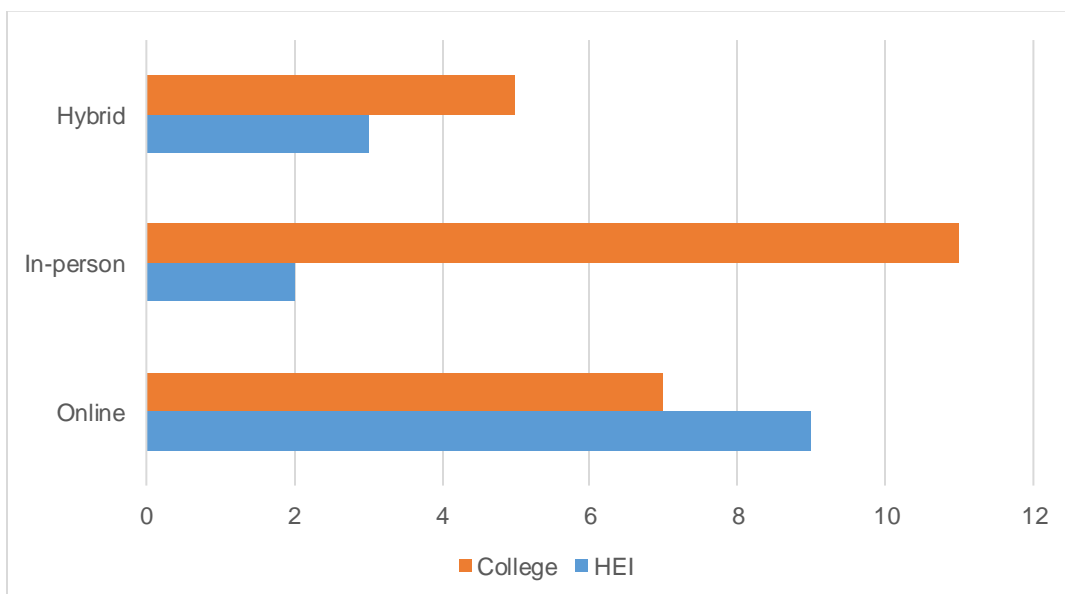
Figure 3: Most common subjects of small qualifications

5 Most common methods of delivering micro-credentials or small qualifications

The most common method for delivering small qualifications identified by respondents was online (67% of institutions), followed by a hybrid approach using online and face-to-face methods (33%).

Figure 4: Method of delivery

Additionally, respondents from all but one of the colleges (11 out of the 12 institutions) indicate that in-person delivery at their institution is currently used and 10 of these colleges also support delivery at the student's workplace (not necessarily both locations for each course delivered in-person). Respondents from seven colleges and two HEIs identified that they use a third-party provider for online delivery. One respondent explained that COVID-19 restrictions had necessitated moving their micro-credential provision online.

6   Level of micro-credentials

Colleges were asked at what level(s) they currently deliver, or plan to deliver, micro-credentials. Respondents indicated a wide spread of levels from Level 4 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) to Level 9+.

Figure 5: SCQF level
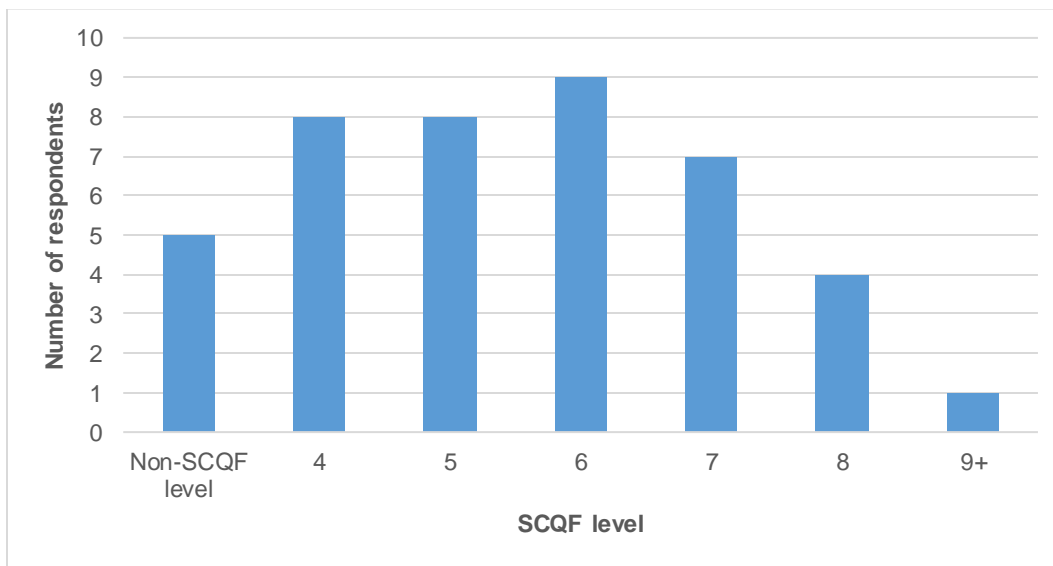
7   The duration of micro-credentials or small qualifications

The duration options offered to respondents varied depending on their type of institution. College responses based on the options provided are: less than 10 hours (5 institutions); 10-20 hours (3); 20-30 hours (1); 30+ hours (4); or not fixed but must be completed within a specified time frame (4) - there are some colleges represented more than once based on different choices by multiple respondents. HEI responses based on the options provided are: 1-2 hours (0 institutions); 3-8 hours (1); 2+ days (8); or not fixed but must be completed within a specified time frame (8). Some HEI respondents chose multiple options - 2+ days and not fixed. The responses have been grouped for illustrative purposes.

Figure 6: Duration
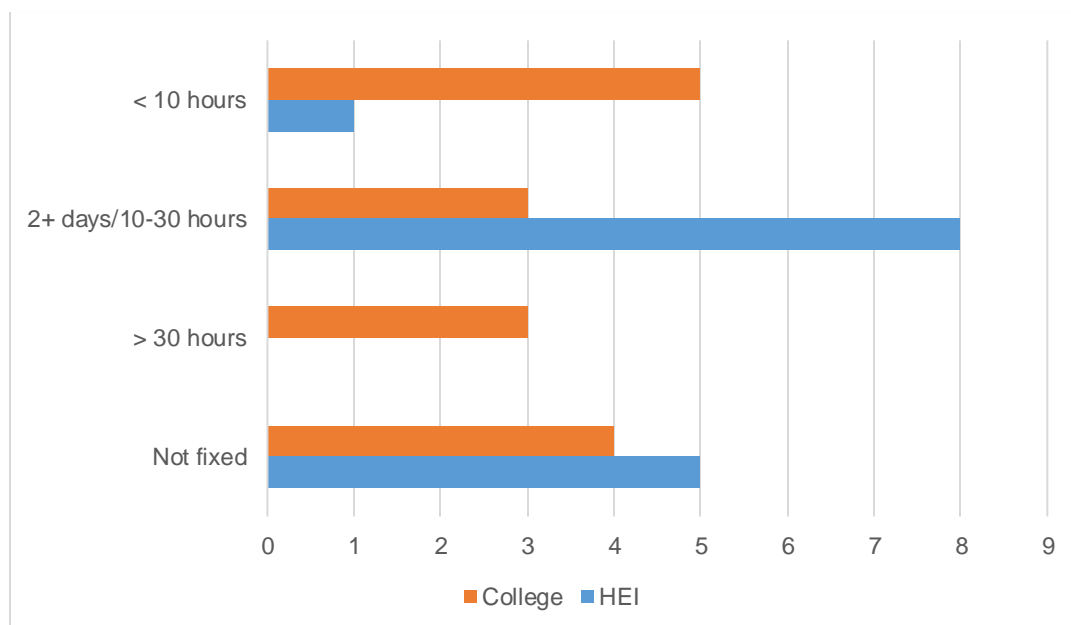
Where respondents indicated that the timescale was not fixed but courses must be completed within a given time period, examples provided include 3 weeks, 6-10 weeks, a trimester and a year.

Comments on the timescales of delivery identified credit volume as important in determining duration, such as '10 credits (100 hours) or 15 credits (150 hours)' based on the premise that 1 credit equates to 10 hours of notional learning. This was further illustrated by one respondent:

> 'The majority of our micro-credentials are either 10 or 20 credits. This equates to 100 or 200 hours of study, and so they would normally be delivered over 10 to 15 weeks. However, in terms of synchronous contact time, this tends to be in the region of 2 to 4 days depending on the credit size of the micro-credential.'

One respondent noted that duration would be negotiated to suit the partner organisation if they were working with an employer.

8   Ways of recognising micro-credentials or small qualifications by institutions

In response to the question 'How are the micro-credentials recognised at your institution?' only one respondent indicated that some kind of formal certification and/or a transcript detailing their achievement would not be provided but that successful completion would be recognised through entry to a higher-level qualification.

Respondents from all other institutions indicated that certificates and/or transcripts are provided listing a wide range of information from course/module title (11 institutions) and dates (4) to credits (6), SCQF level (6) and awarding body information (4).

Figure 7: Certificate/transcript information
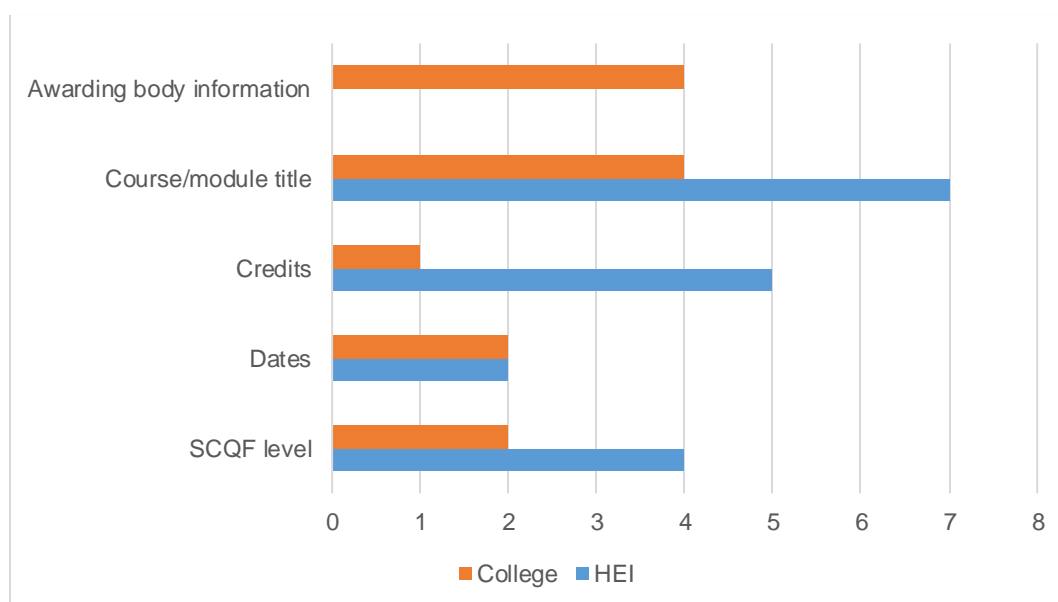
Two respondents indicated different information was provided depending on whether it was a certificate for attendance or completion/achievement. The approaches taken by institutions are illustrated in these two examples:

> *'On successful completion students will receive a transcript listing the module (short course) and credits awarded. For one of our other short courses students who successfully complete will receive a Certificate of Higher Education in a named award together with transcript listing the seven modules completed accumulating 120 credits at SCQF Level 7.'*

> *'The certificate states certificate of study (if credit bearing) or certificate of attendance (if non credit bearing) and then the title of the micro-credential. The transcript details the title of the micro-credential, the mark achieved for the course, the diet in which the module was passed, and the SCQF level of the module.'*

9 Transferability of micro-credentials and small qualifications

Respondents were asked to comment on whether a completed micro-credential or small qualification at their institution is usually a 'transferable' qualification (see Figure 8). Respondents from 63% of institutions (15) confirmed that they thought the qualification would be transferable internally and externally. One (HEI) respondent indicated that the qualification would only be transferable within their own institution. Respondents from four institutions indicated that the qualification would not be transferable internally or externally; the other respondents were not sure.

Figure 8: Transferability
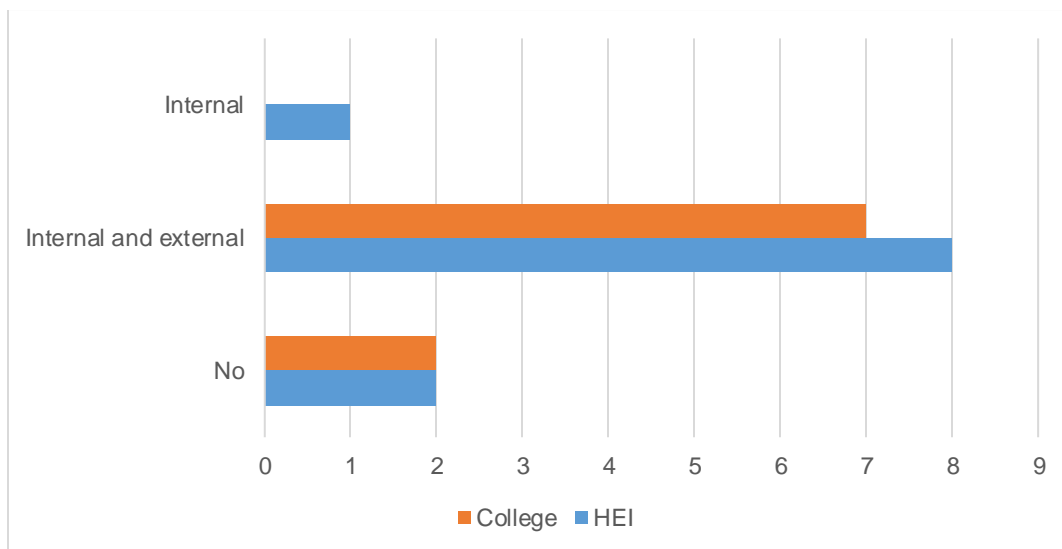
10   Stackability of micro-credentials and small qualifications

Respondents were asked to indicate whether students who complete small qualifications are able to 'stack' or build an award to recognise their learning via multiple micro-credentials or small qualifications. Respondents from 46% of institutions (11) indicated that students were able to 'stack' small qualifications to build toward an award. Of these, respondents from eight institutions indicated the qualifications may only be 'stacked' internally. Three college respondents indicated stackability was possible both internally and externally

Respondents from 11 institutions indicated that students would not be able to 'stack' their qualifications and two respondents were not sure.

Figure 9: Stackability
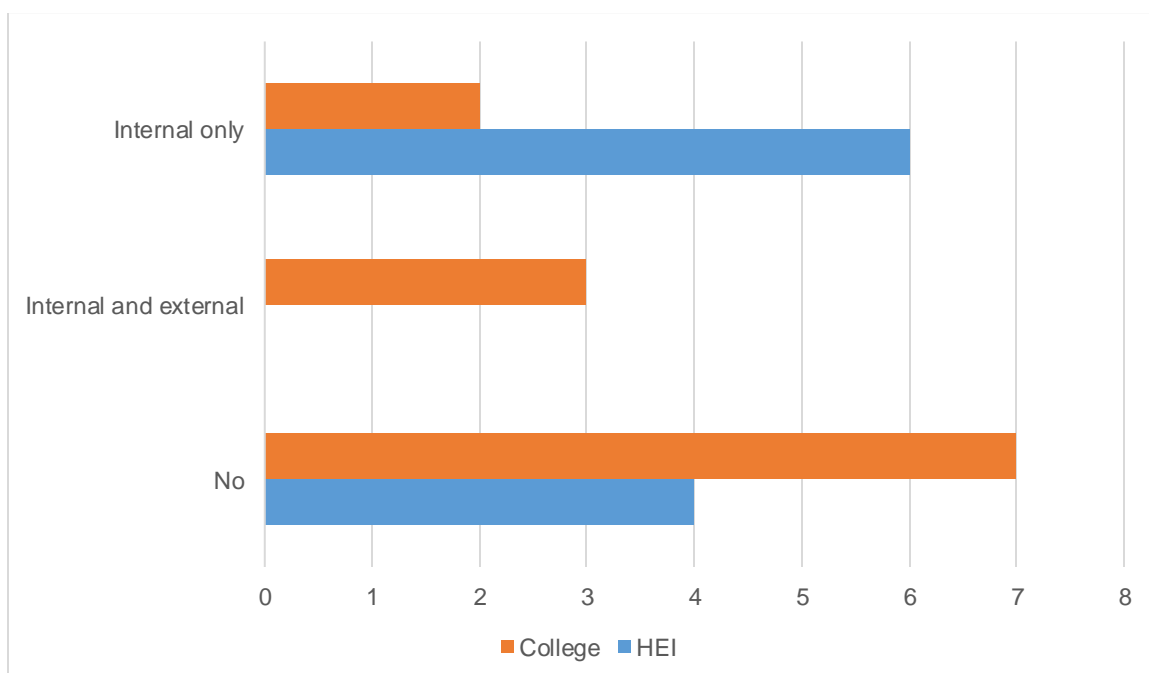
Only college respondents chose to provide more information about the model of 'stackability' within their institutions:

> *'We use national qualifications wherever we can. Where we don't (due to employer request for example) they aren't transferable.'*

> *'Using SCQF allows qualifications to be recognised nationally.'*

> *'Institute of the Motor Industry certification [is] internationally recognised.'*

> *'There are short courses for SAGE Accounting and Payroll that can be taken independently but students can then undertake both plus one additional unit to achieve a Professional award in Book-keeping.'*

> *'It really depends on the qualification. If it is built upon individual units, that could be built up internally or externally.'*

It is of interest to consider the finding from above, that respondents from 12% of institutions felt their small qualifications would be 'stackable' internally and externally compared to responses to the previous question which indicates that respondents from 63% of institutions felt that micro-credentials or small qualifications would be transferable externally. This may reflect a lack of understanding or consensus about the term 'stackability'.

11   Delivering micro-credentials and small qualifications in partnership

The majority of respondents (representing 14 institutions) indicated that they delivered small qualifications in partnership with other organisations. Partnership with an employer was the most frequently cited example of partnership working (11 institutions); followed by partnership with a professional, statutory or regulatory body (PSRB) (6); as part of a consortium (5); and/or partnership with a college or HEI (3). Many institutions have multiple types of partnership.

Figure 10: Partnerships
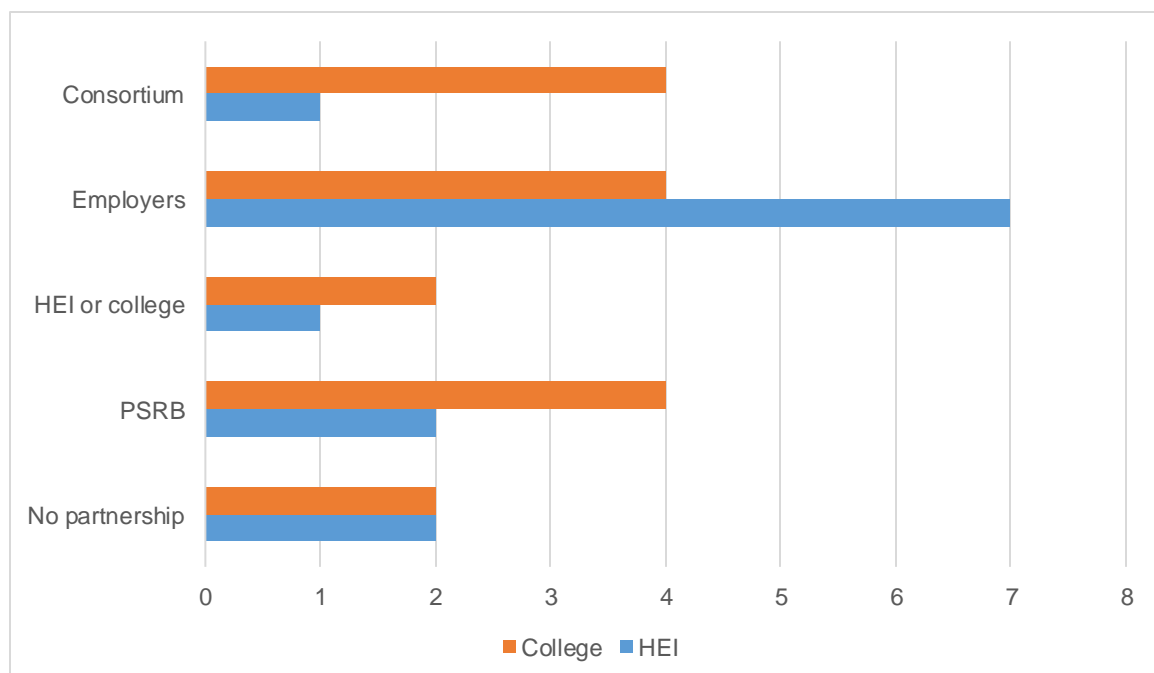
Six respondents (3 HEI, 3 college) confirmed that qualifications offered in partnership with employers carried industrial or professional body accreditation.

Respondents from four institutions indicated they do not work in partnership to deliver their micro-credentials and small qualifications.

12 How the price of micro-credentials and small qualifications are determined

The responses indicate that a range of factors are taken into account when determining the cost to students to study small qualifications. Factors identified include:

- market analysis and staff time, especially in relation to CPD
- credit volume, level and duration
- whether it is a bespoke course and/or delivered externally
- any costs associated with awarding body certification
- industry accreditation.

The following examples illustrate the approaches used by two institutions:

> 'In general, we price based on number of credits. However, there are exceptions when we would take other factors into account. These could include bespoke activity developed for an external partner; additional industry recognised accreditation; significant amount of consumables/field trips etc. being part of the programme delivery.'

> 'Our micro-credentials are priced on a competitive basis based upon the credit volume (which also determines the duration) the level (undergraduate or postgraduate) and factors such as industry accreditation.'

13 Course development and approval processes for micro-credentials and small qualifications

Respondents from 42% of institutions (10) indicated that they had a 'streamlined' approach to course development and approval processes, while 58% (14) indicated that they did not. Duplicate respondents (2) contradicted colleagues from their institutions and respondents from four institutions were not sure about the relevant development and approval processes.

Three HEI-based respondents indicated that courses go through a school-level Academic and/or Quality Assurance Committee. Respondents from four other institutions provided examples of practice indicating arrangements for the development, approval and quality assurance of small qualifications:

> 'It is different for credit and non-credit bearing…credit-bearing goes through standard QA processes.'

> 'Proposed modules are put to the 'flexED Working Group' from each faculty and are reviewed by the Chair of that working group along with support from Strategy & Policy colleagues who manage SFC funding. Modules are approved through existing faculty processes for course approval to have module codes etc generated.'

> 'We currently have an Academic Standards Committee which approves all new programmes.'

'Internal process agreed with the Quality Team.'

14   Perceptions of staff understanding of the term 'micro-credential'

83% of respondents (29) felt that the term 'micro-credential' was not well understood by staff in their institution. Four respondents (two in academic/teaching roles, one in academic support and one a senior leader) noted that they had 'not heard' of the term before they started this survey or were 'not aware of what the term meant'. Respondents' further comments on lack of understanding of the term 'micro-credential' include the following observations:

- it means different things to different people/institutions/academic areas
- not currently defined within the sector, nor internally
- most people…think in terms of traditional degrees
- most staff would recognise the term 'short course' rather than micro-credential
- … it feels a bit like a fashionable word to drop into conversations rather than a well-understood, strategic shift in education
- understanding is improving greatly but there is still some uncertainty.

The uncertainty among staff with regard to understanding was articulated by three respondents as follows:

'I think that the lack of understanding amongst staff replicates a general lack of understanding of the term more widely. We also know that it is not a well searched term online, so in terms of public facing communication we would call these short courses. However, internally we are trying to refer to them as micro-credentials to align with the general trend in the sector. This can lead staff to be confused as to whether there is a difference.'

'Micro-credentials is a term that really took precedence in the SFC Sustainability report and I would say that, within FE, it was not a commonly used term. Now it suffers from a lack of clear definition and is used to refer to many different courses and methods of delivery in further education (FE) (similar to the terms blended and hybrid in relation to learning over the course of the pandemic).'

'I don't think the term micro credential is understood by anyone, I've actually never had it clarified by SFC, Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) or anyone in the sector. I assume they mean smaller stand-alone pieces of learning which may or may not come with formal certification and can be used for CPD or upskilling purposes. Universities usually take it to mean a single credit of their larger undergraduate degrees and I have taken such courses myself to learn a specific thing, like data analytics, for example. In FE it could simply mean any short course such as an Higher National unit or a bespoke piece of commercial delivery. For colleges that already do a lot of commercial delivery it's less meaningful as a term. It's just business as usual.'

15   Understanding of the term micro-credential among students

The overwhelming majority of respondents (33 of 35) felt that students do not understand the term 'micro-credential'. Explanations of the lack of understanding include the following observations:

- *'The term is not used in marketing or headline messages to students'*
- *'It is not a term currently used with students'*
- *'CPD or short course are still the terms most used by learners'*

- *'The term is not used across all institutions in the same way, so it is hard to build a coherent view of what it means'*
- *'The term is not confidently used by staff, so students are not clear on what it really means'.*

These findings reflect comments by student representatives and student engagement officers at the National Education Officers' Network (NEON) meeting held in December 2021. NEON is a network for student officers in colleges and HEIs across Scotland supported by Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) and provides an opportunity to discuss and work on key sector issues. The group felt that micro-credentials are an important part of the commitment for more lifelong learning in Scotland and also noted that:

'"Micro-credentials" is often a familiar term for staff but not so much for students.'

One survey respondent felt that students did not need to know the meaning of the term:

'It isn't necessary for them to understand the term. They need to understand what level and quantity of credits it contains. The term "micro-credential" is simply an administrative one within the Uni to describe a smaller size of module than we would normally provide, such as 5 or 10 credits.'

Several survey respondents drew attention to the lack of understanding of the difference between types of micro-credentials and how micro-credentials relate to other types of higher education awards. For example:

'People generally understand it to mean 'small', but how it works within a degree or as a contribution to a pathway isn't well understood yet. The SFC initiative [Upskilling Fund 2021-22] has been very helpful in building understanding though.'

'…this is still not a term that prospective or current students are using very much at all. Employers are also not using the term. Short course is the much more commonly used phrase. There is also some confusion amongst some prospective and current students regarding what the difference is between a credited micro-credential offered by an HEI and something uncredited and available for free online, also called a micro-credential.'

'There needs to be clarity on what a micro-credential is before students can be expected to understand. If the institutions offering these have different criteria and ideas about what constitutes a micro-credential, then we can't expect students to understand what this means.'

16   The potential impact of micro-credentials on the way institutions think about and deliver higher education in Scotland

The survey shared with HEIs asked: 'Will micro-credentials change how we think about and deliver higher education in Scotland?' Accordingly, this section refers only to comments made by HEI respondents.

The majority of HEI respondents felt that micro-credentials would have some effect on how institutions think about and deliver higher education, although there were differences in the perceived extent of the impact. Most respondents identified a range of beneficial effects of the development of micro-credentials for the sector as a whole and for HEIs (also see sections 17 and 18 below):

- opportunities presented by stacking credit and working collaboratively across institutions

- facilitating innovations in learning
- developing flexible provision to meet the needs of students
- contributing to widening access and student diversity
- giving students greater control over the pace of their learning
- students contributing to the design of their own awards
- finding a real solution to meeting the needs of the economy and business.

In evaluating the likely impact of micro-credentials, the importance of recognising the wider historical and contemporary context of micro-credentials was pointed out by a few respondents, sometimes resulting in a more cautious and less positive view of their impact on the sector. For example:

'CPD that is credit rated has always existed. Within undergraduate or postgraduate provision they tend to be too small to make a meaningful contribution to the depth of student learning when stacked.'

'HEIs have been delivering short courses over many years. Wider recognition, acceptance and funding mechanisms may raise awareness and use.'

'I think rather than change HE, it will expand HE. We have to get away from higher education being about accumulation of credits. It is so much more than that.'

'They have a place, but alone won't transform higher education. They complement core provision.'

17 The benefits of micro-credentials or small qualifications including to Scottish higher education

87% of HEI respondents and 75% of college respondents identified a range of benefits in delivering micro-credentials or small qualifications. The most frequently-mentioned gains were the impact of small qualifications on widening access to higher education (HE), increasing the diversity of students, encouraging partnership working between institutions and with employers, and contributing to meeting the needs of the economy through workforce development. Respondents' comments contained specific reference to the following:

- upskilling; workforce development; supporting the economy to respond to economic change
- employer engagement; forming better links with industry
- collaboration across institutions
- widening participation; students can use micro-credentials for RPL entry to HE; a manageable introduction to HE for CPD students
- creating a more diverse study body
- innovation in programme content, design and delivery.

Student representatives and student engagement officers at the December 2021 NEON meeting 'felt that micro-credentials are an important part of the commitment for more lifelong learning in Scotland'. Additionally, a representative from one institution noted that:

'Micro-credentials were seen as a potential benefit for the region - they want more people from outside of the region to take...courses and this could be one way to do this.'

One survey respondent felt that the development of micro-credentials was not necessarily beneficial to the sector:

'Administratively burdensome for what are often "one off" courses; learners have to be given particular/bespoke support; and assessment is burdensome for people who mainly want to enhance skills.'

18   The benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications for institutions

The most often cited benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications to institutions relate to: potential business and reputational gains (11 mentions); widening access to higher education (10 mentions); contributing to economic and workforce development through reskilling/upskilling (8 mentions); flexibility and responsiveness (6); contributing to meeting national policy objectives (4); enhancing institutions' civic role (2 HEIs); as well as encouraging partnership working between institutions (1) and employers (1).

Figure 11: Benefits
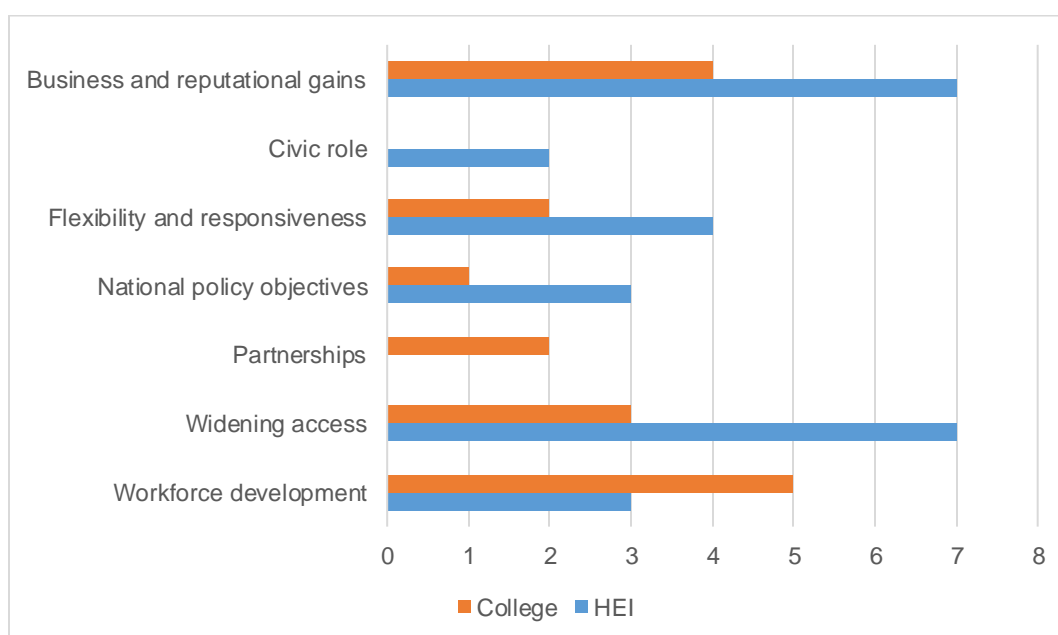
A sample of respondents' comments are:

- *'Opens opportunities for the communities we serve; opportunities to build civic role by increasing relevance; meeting our social mission'*
- *'Support the Scottish government's ambition in relation to skills and economic recovery'*
- *'Promote links with industry; more employer relevance'*
- *'Facilitates responsiveness/flexibility to training and skills development; provides for flexibility in programme design'*
- *'Expand the reputation of HE; opportunity to build on institutional strengths and grow reputation'*
- *'Widen access to HE; introduce the University to a wider range of students'*
- *'Open new markets; increase student numbers; new routes to contribute to income generation'*
- *'Opportunity to develop into new areas without committing to a whole degree; opportunities for staff to develop areas of interest'*
- *'Improve student engagement'.*

## 19 The benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications for students

The main benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications for students identified by respondents were similar to those provided for institutions and the sector:

- *'Support for personal and professional development needs; upskilling; enhancing employability'*
- *'A more manageable and achievable way of participating in higher education'*
- *'Students can build their qualification in stages'*
- *'Short courses, less commitment therefore more accessible; a more accessible provision which might appeal to a wider group of students'*
- *'A taster of higher education before committing to further study'*
- *'Flexible learning pathways'*
- *'Opportunity to experience different institutions and take advantage of their respective strengths'*
- *'Provides students with a more personalised experience'*
- *'Recognition of skills'.*

20 Barriers to delivering micro-credentials or small qualifications

The most commonly identified barrier to delivering micro-credentials or small qualifications is: lack of advice within the sector on micro-credentials' quality and standards (14 respondents); followed by expense (12); the process of getting micro-credentials approved (11); lack of understanding by staff (10); terminology (9); and the lack of perceived benefits among students (2).

Figure 12: Barriers
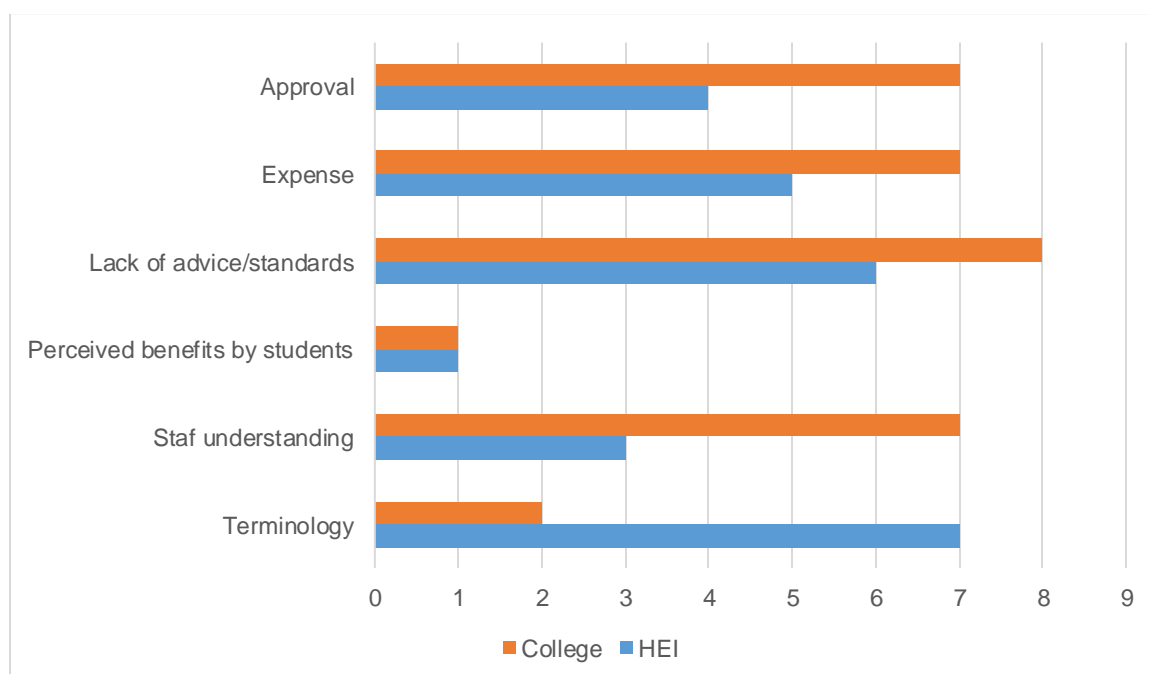
Four respondents identified other barriers:

- teaching and administrative staff resources (2 respondents)
- the institution does not see the benefits (2 respondents)

- timetabling issues
- finding time to develop small qualifications properly
- funding restrictions
- marketing
- lack of demand from employers compared to other courses.

One respondent explained:

'They take a lot of focus, administrative support and effort - micro relates to credit weighting not class size - still a big staff commitment in terms of teaching and assessment but without students' longer-term commitment to study; not sure of demand if not SFC funded; require a lot of tailored marketing effort.'

21 Further comments, innovations or good practice to share

Additional comments were also provided by 16 survey respondents that included:

'When directly linked to sector requirements, the institution and student can see the benefit of undertaking a micro-credential.'

'My institution is developing a curriculum management system to support the management and approval of micro-credentials.'

'We are investing substantially in the development and delivery of micro-credentials.'

'Micro-credentials is a word that has appeared in policy documents but hasn't had enormous traction in the FE sector yet. Needs someone to articulate that clearly to the sector and illustrate what they mean by it and what it hopes to achieve that is different from what colleges already do.'

'We are running a working group on micro-credentials.'

Several respondents also returned in their comments some of the issues which they felt were holding back the development of micro-credentials. For example:

'The biggest issue with this market is that they often don't really want the credit, they just want the learning and therefore, while pass rates are high for those who attempt assessments, attempts are low.'

'They are too expensive - don't attract core funding by way of the PTFG as less than 30 credits. Current additional government funding schemes are driving demand.'

'Re terminology: not a problem in our organisation, but lack of accepted definition across the sector.'

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that micro-credentials and small qualifications are widely offered by Scottish colleges and higher education providers in a range of subject areas. Institutions use a variety of terms to describe small qualifications and sometimes multiple terms are used within institutions. There is a general acknowledgement that the term 'micro-credential' is not well understood by staff or students.

The most common delivery method is online, although many institutions use a hybrid approach and most colleges use in-person delivery as well as other methods. The length of courses varies considerably from less than 10 hours to up to a year, with just over one-third

of all institutions noting there is no fixed duration. Most institutions provide some kind of certification to recognise achievement.

Although most respondents felt that their small qualifications are transferable internally and externally, respondents from less than half of the institutions indicated that students were able to 'stack' or build an award to recognise their learning via multiple small qualifications.

A number of barriers to the effective development and delivery of small qualifications were identified, including a lack of advice and quality standards, expense and complexity of approval processes, as well as staff understanding and terminology.

Respondents from a range of institutions and roles feel that micro-credentials or small qualifications have a positive role to play in the development of Scottish higher education including widening access, economic and workforce development, flexibility and contributing to meeting national policy objectives. Additionally, institutional benefits include potential business and reputational gains, responsiveness and enhancing a university's civic role.