

Micro-credentials in Scotland: Sector-wide Survey

A micro-credential is the record of assessed knowledge, skills and/or achievements within a focused area of outcome-based learning. It is normally the outcome of a small, discrete credit-bearing course.

Executive summary

To support the [Understanding Micro-credentials and Small Qualifications in Scotland](#) Enhancement Theme project, a survey was undertaken in January/February 2023 to provide a current update on the micro-credential landscape in Scotland. Respondents from 34 different institutions/organisations provided a helpful snapshot of the current provision of micro-credentials and short qualifications in Scotland. 79% of responding institutions/organisations have developed or approved micro-credentials or small qualifications, with seven having developed 30 or more since January 2021. Micro-credentials and small qualifications have been developed or approved at SCQF Level 2-11, although the majority of awards are at Level 5, 6 and 7.

The survey results and subsequent correspondence enable an estimate of 22,715 learners on 350 (credit-rated) micro-credentials in Scotland in 2022-23. The predominant mode of study for micro-credential courses is a blended approach using a combination of online and in-person delivery. The current micro-credential/small qualification provision is aimed at new learners, employers and existing learners, although the predominant target audience differs for colleges and higher education institutions. Connecting or stacking of micro-credentials to form larger awards (macro-credentials) is of interest to the responding institutions/organisations but it is not known whether this is due to learner requests, an ambition to support macro-credential achievement through stacking, or simply a reflection of respondents' interest in gaining further information on this aspect.

Introduction

There has been recent interest in micro-credentials across Scotland, the UK and globally as an opportunity to provide upskilling or reskilling of the workforce. Micro-credentials are small subject-focused awards; the definition of a micro-credential provided above is taken from the [Scottish Tertiary Education Micro-credentials Glossary](#). Micro-credentials and non-credit-rated small qualifications can also be used to further an individual's skills or knowledge in a specific area, that may or may not be related to employment and can be used to support entry into larger qualifications including at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

[Understanding Micro-credentials and Small qualifications in Scotland](#) is an Enhancement Theme project that is running from 2021-22 to 2022-23. The project is substantially supported by the Scottish Tertiary Education Micro-credentials Network (the Network) with representatives from colleges, universities and stakeholder bodies across Scotland. The project has delivered a number of useful outputs including a *Scottish Tertiary Education Micro-credentials Glossary* which can be accessed from the project website. Further

information about higher education micro-credentials is available in the QAA [Micro-credentials Characteristic Statement](#).

A [practitioner-based survey on micro-credentials](#) was undertaken in winter 2021-22 which provided a snapshot of the provision of micro-credentials and small qualifications in Scotland at that time, as well as practitioner perspectives on the benefits of micro-credentials and small qualifications. One year on and having explored a range of micro-credential practice within and outwith Scotland and the UK, the Network wanted to establish the extent to which micro-credentials or non-credit-rated small qualifications have been developed in Scotland, and their levels and sizes. There is interest in how many learners are registered on these awards, how they are delivered and the primary audience for whom these awards are developed. To provide this current update on the micro-credential landscape in Scotland, a short survey was undertaken in January/February 2023.

1 Respondents

The survey was open to colleges, higher education institutions (HEIs) and other credit-rating bodies (CRBs)¹ and HE providers in Scotland. The survey was open for two weeks with the majority of questions able to be answered using a list of pre-supplied options to reduce the time required to complete the survey.

The survey comprised 17 questions and was able to be completed by multiple people within an institution/organisation. In total, there were 38 respondents (see Figure 1) representing staff from 34 different institutions/organisations: 16 HEIs (16 respondents); 15 colleges (18 respondents); and 3 other CRBs (4 respondents).

Figure 1: Respondents' institution/organisation

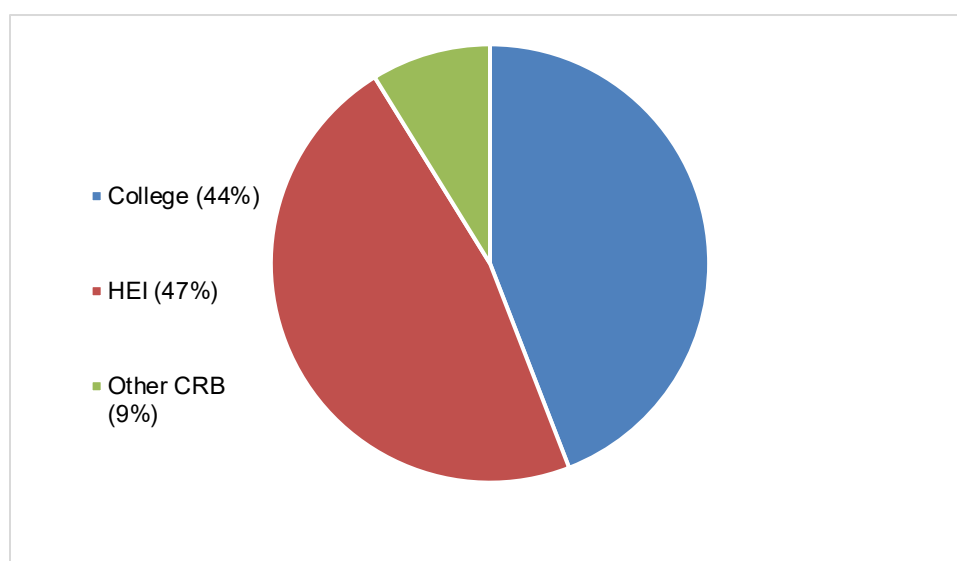
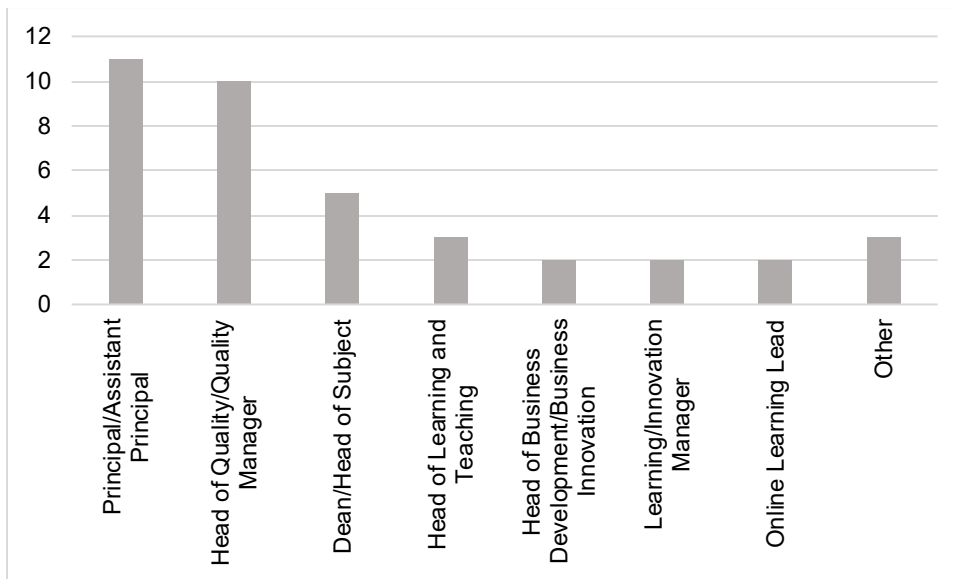


Figure 2 shows the variety of the respondents' job roles: 11 senior leaders/managers; 10 Heads of Quality or in quality roles; 5 Deans or Heads of Subject; 3 Heads of Learning or similar; 2 Heads of Business Development; 2 staff from learning and/or innovation roles; 2 online learning leads; a project officer; a Flexible Studies Framework Lead; and a Head of Graduate Attributes and Skills Development.

¹ Other credit-rating bodies (CRBs) are non-HEI and non-college sector organisations that are approved as Credit-Rating Bodies by the [SCQF Partnership](#).

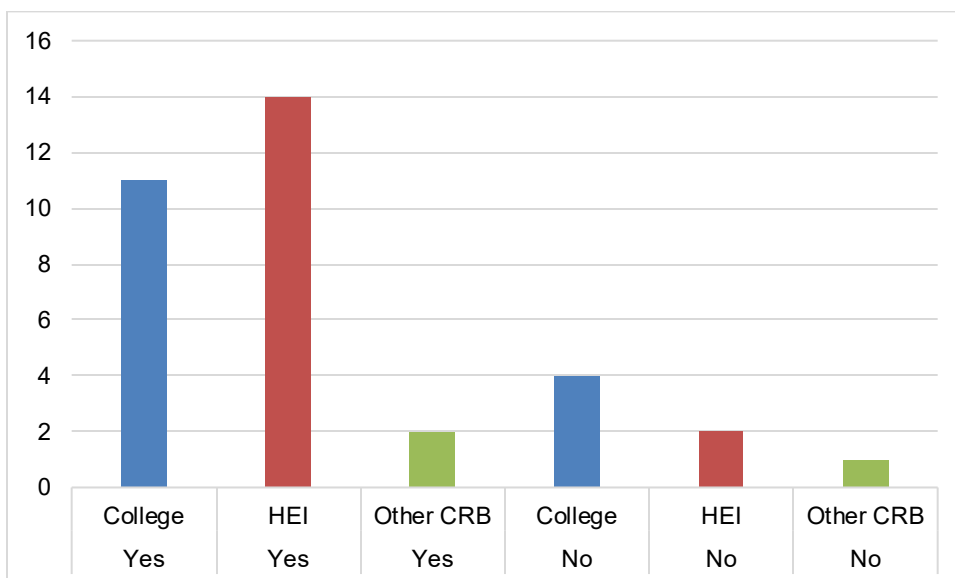
Figure 2: Respondents' job roles



2 Scope of micro-credential and small qualification development

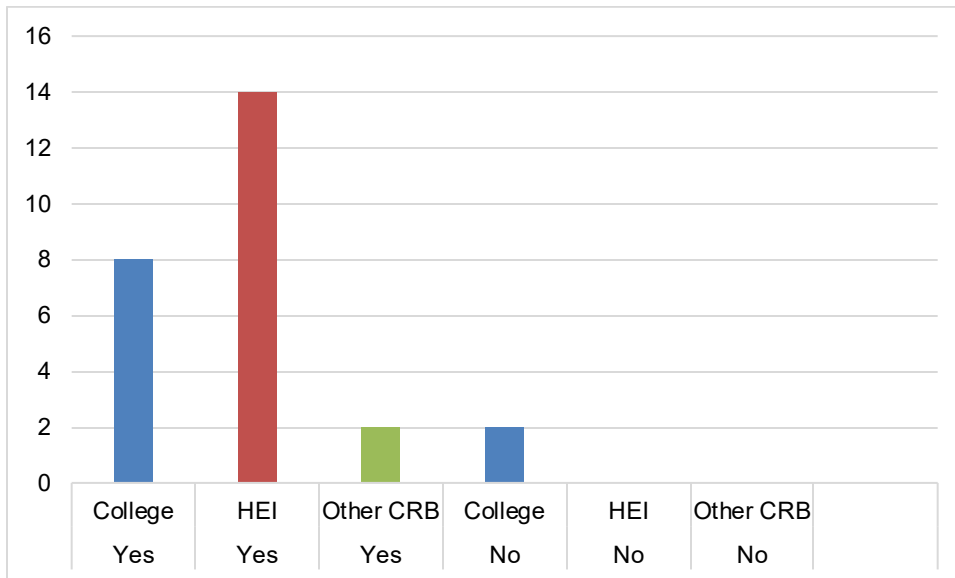
The majority (79%) of the responding institutions/organisations have developed or approved micro-credentials or small qualifications. This comprises 73% of responding colleges (11), 93% of responding HEIs (14) and 67% of the other CRBs who responded (2), as shown in Figure 3. The vertical (Y) axis of the chart in Figure 3 indicates the number of institutions/organisations and this depiction is consistent throughout Figures 3 to 13.

Figure 3: Institutions/organisations which have, or have not, developed micro-credentials or small qualifications



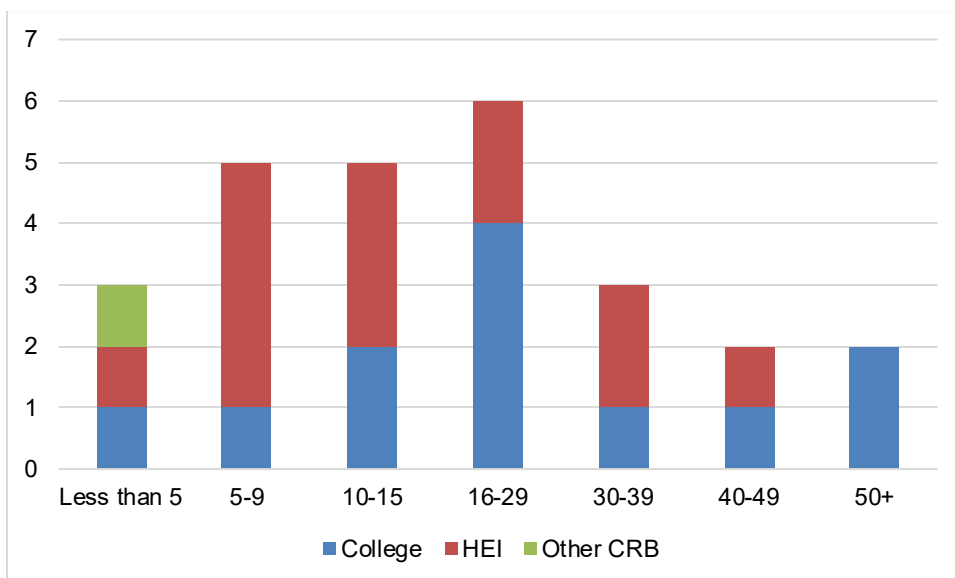
Of the institutions/organisations that have developed or approved micro-credentials or small qualifications, all but 2 (23) of them have credit-rated some or all of these. The respondent from one organisation did not answer. No HEIs or other CRBs reported development of non-credit-rated awards.

Figure 4: Institutions/organisations which have, or have not, credit-rated their micro-credentials or small qualifications



There is a wide range in the number micro-credentials or small qualifications developed or approved by the institutions/organisations since January 2021 - from none to over 50 - as depicted in Figure 5, noting the Y-axis of the chart indicates the number of institutions/organisations. Respondents from two institutions did not answer this question.

Figure 5: The number of micro-credentials or small qualifications developed or approved since January 2021

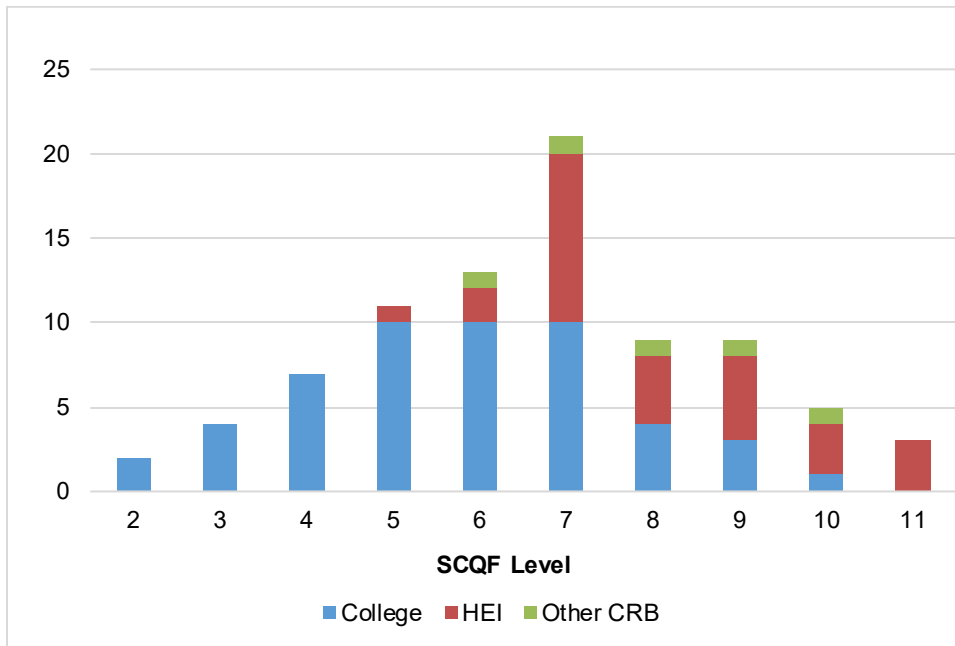


3 Level and size of micro-credentials

Micro-credentials and small qualifications have been developed or approved across nearly the full range of [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework \(SCQF\)](#) levels, as shown in Figure 6, noting that respondents were asked to provide the broad comparable level if the small qualifications were not credit-rated. Micro-credentials and small qualifications at or below Level 6 are predominantly within the college sector, while those at Level 8 and above are predominantly in the university sector. At Level 7 there is equal development across

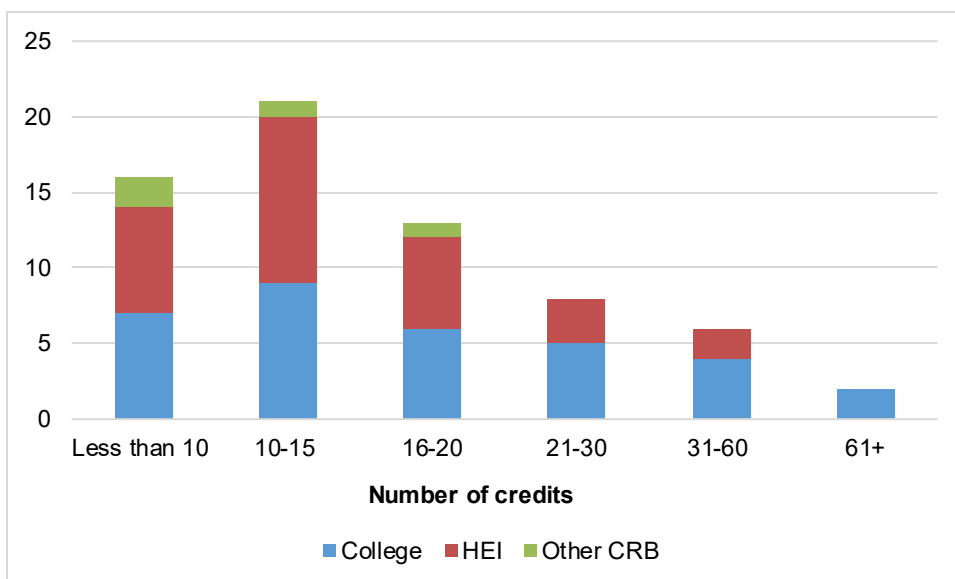
colleges and universities. Only colleges have micro-credentials/small qualifications at Level 2, 3 and 4. Micro-credentials at Level 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are available at colleges, HEIs and other CRBs. Only HEIs have micro-credentials at Level 11 and respondents from just 3 HEIs report this level of small qualifications. Note that some institutions/organisations have awards at a range of levels and a range of sizes so the total number of responses in Figure 5 and 6 exceeds the number of responding institutions/organisations.

Figure 6: Range of levels of micro-credentials and small qualifications



In terms of size, micro-credentials and small qualifications range from less than 10 credits or 100 learning hours to more than 60 credits/600 learning hours - see Figure 7. The smallest award reported is 0.1 credit - equivalent to one hour of learning. Four colleges reported micro-credentials/small qualifications of 5, 6 or 8 hours of learning. Two colleges reported their largest awards were more than 60 credits in size; the largest reported was 64 credits. Other CRBs only have smaller micro-credentials with none being larger than 20 credits.

Figure 7: Reported micro-credential/small qualification sizes



4 Learners on micro-credentials

Of those institutions/organisations who have micro-credentials/small qualifications, all have some learners currently registered on their awards as shown in Figure 8. Only three institutions have less than 25 learners, and two colleges and two HEIs both reported between 25 and 49 learners. Of the two other CRBs who reported learner numbers, these were between 50 and 499 learners. 10 institutions/organisations reported having more than 500 learners on their micro-credentials.

Figure 8: The number of learners registered on micro-credentials/small qualifications

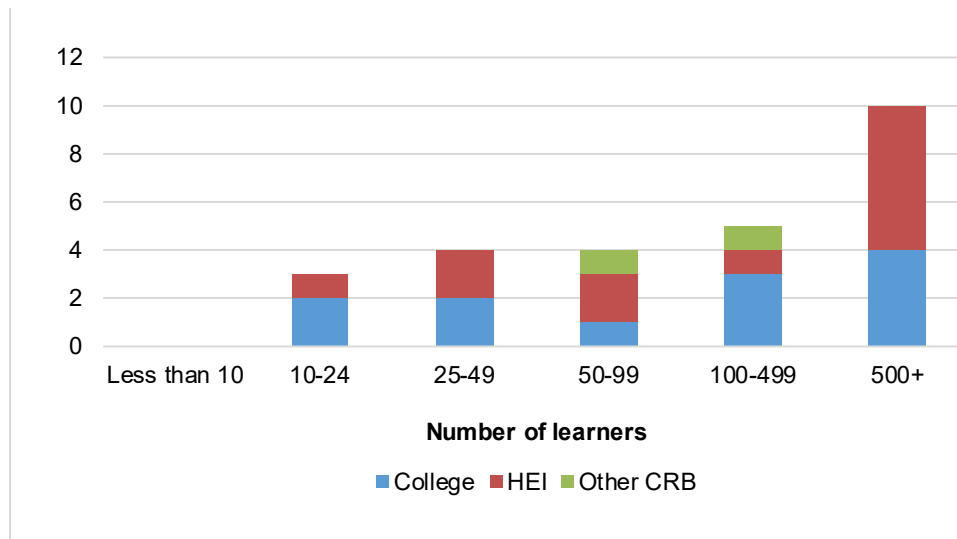
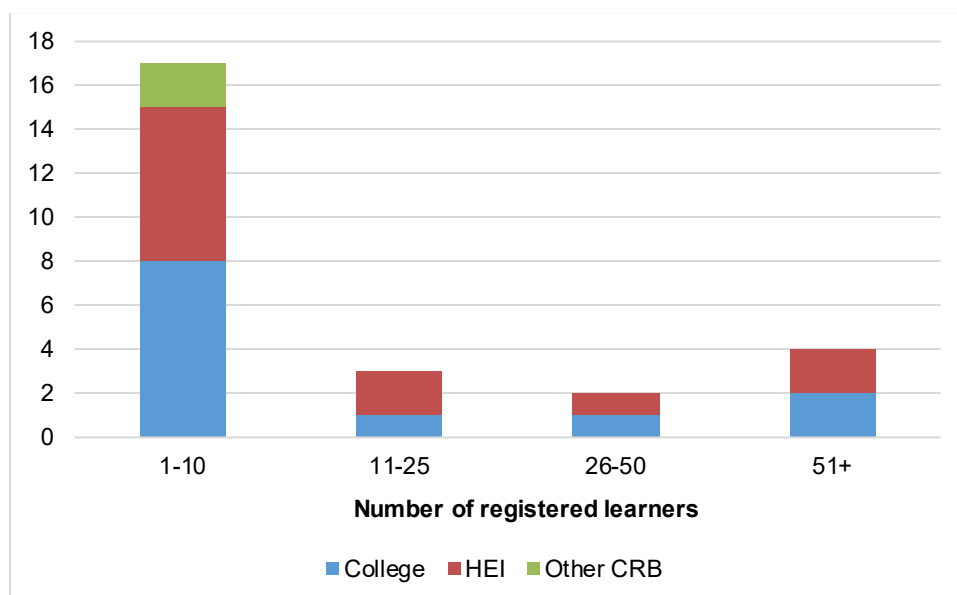


Figure 9 shows the spread of learners across micro-credentials/small qualifications; the majority of the institutions/organisations have learners registered on up to 10 of their awards. Three institutions have learners registered on 11-25 micro-credentials and two have learners registered on 26-50 micro-credentials. Two colleges and two HEIs have learners registered on more than 50 micro-credentials/small qualifications.

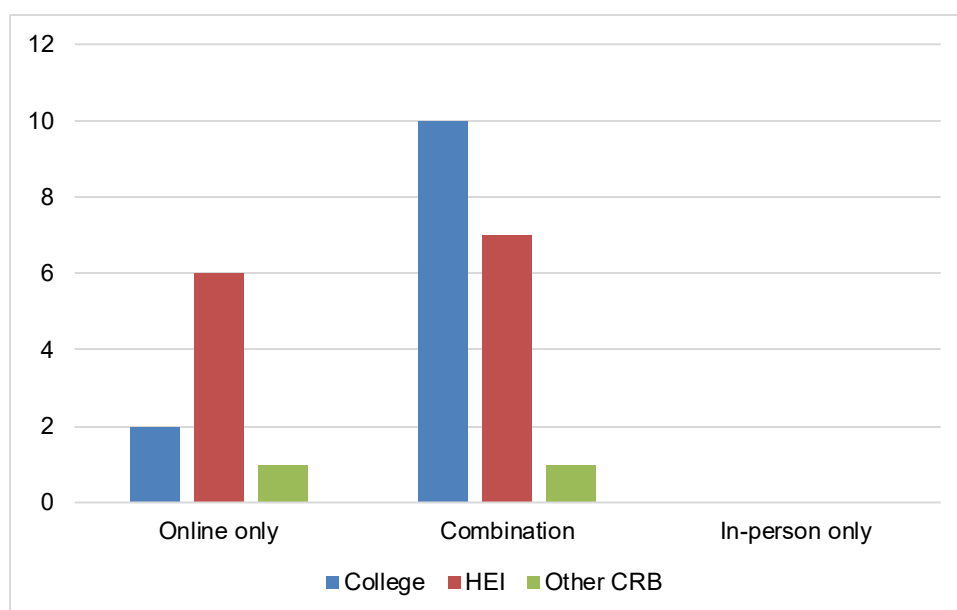
Figure 9: The number of micro-credentials/small qualifications on which learners are registered



5 Delivery

Institutions/organisations predominantly use a combination of online and in-person delivery for their micro-credential and small qualification courses. This represents a change from the [practitioner survey](#), undertaken in winter 2021-22, which identified that the majority of micro-credential and small qualification delivery was online. Additionally, in that survey 92% of colleges reported in-person delivery which contrasts with the current position in which no college reported wholly in-person delivery. The reason for these changes are not known; it may be that the experience of online delivery gained during the Covid pandemic is now being utilised in a blended approach with the use of a combination of both online and face-to-face delivery.

Figure 10: The predominant mode of study of micro-credential/small qualification courses

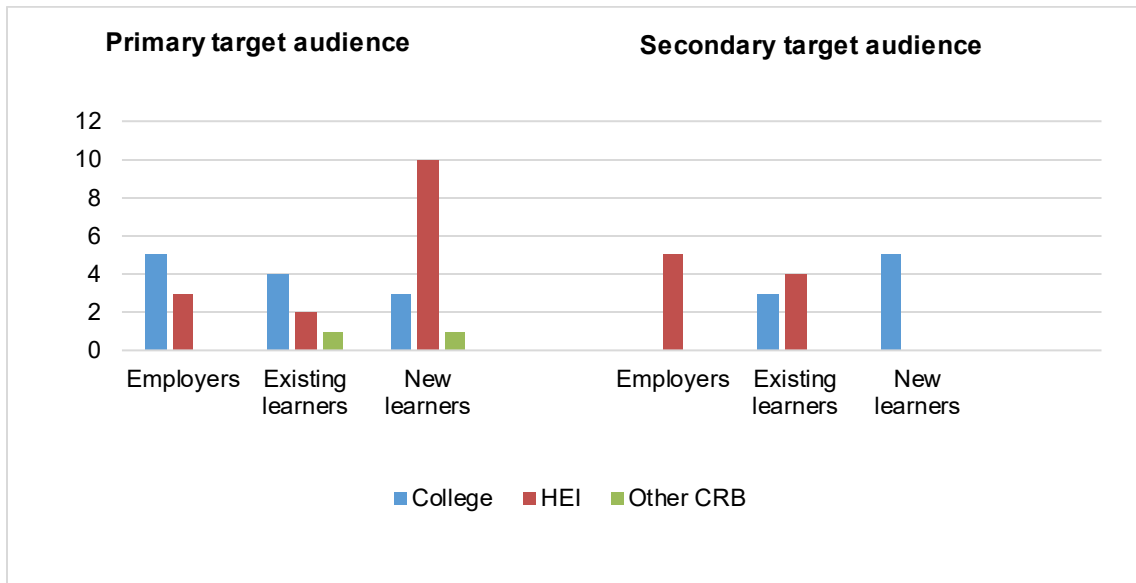


6 Target audiences

Respondents were asked to identify up to four key target audiences for their micro-credentials and small qualifications. The most popular response was new learners, identified by 10 HEIs as their primary target audience, as shown in Figure 11. In identifying a secondary target audience, HEI respondents were fairly evenly split between employers (5 HEIs) and existing learners (4 HEIs). There was less commonality among colleges with employers being identified by 5 colleges as the primary target audience, existing learners were chosen by 4 colleges, and new learners by 3 colleges. In terms of a secondary target audience, colleges only identified employers (5 colleges) and existing learners (4 colleges). Responses from the two other CRBs identified existing or new learners as their only target audience.

Some colleges and HEIs also identified tertiary targets as existing learners (2 colleges and 5 HEIs), employers (3 colleges and 2 HEIs) and new learners (2 colleges and 2 HEIs). Only 2 institutions opted for 'other' as a target audience choice, with one HEI identifying 'Those at risk of redundancy needing to upskill' as the only quaternary target provided (the other institution did not specify what 'other' referred to).

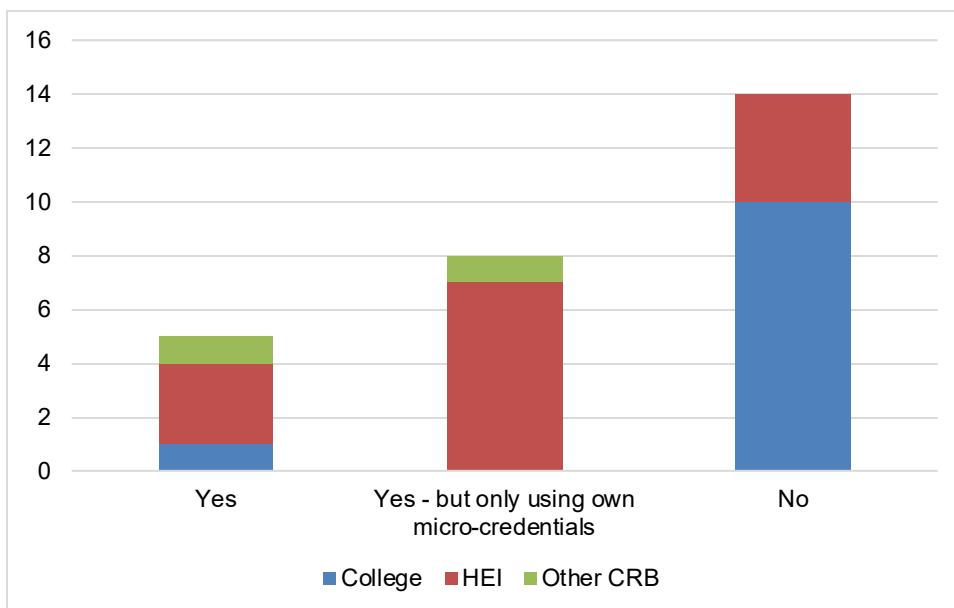
Figure 11: The primary and secondary target audiences for micro-credentials/small qualifications



7 Stackability

The survey explored the stackability of micro-credentials, where a learner can build upon the learning from one micro-credential with subsequent micro-credentials from the same or different institutions/organisations. Figure 12 shows that the majority (52%) of respondents confirm that their micro-credentials are not able to be stacked; this is comparable with 54% identified in the [practitioner survey](#) of 2021-22. Similarly, of the 13 institutions/organisations that indicated that stacking is available to learners, 53% currently report this is only possible using their own micro-credentials, compared to 73% reported in 2021-22.

Figure 12: The stackability of micro-credentials



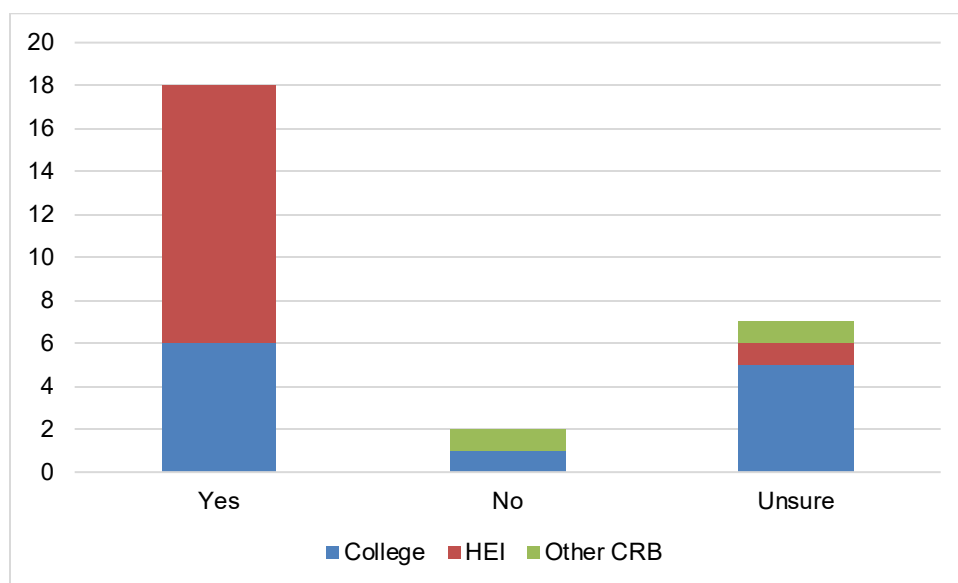
Anecdotal information from those working on micro-credentials across the European Higher Education Area suggests that there is no significant demand for stackability from learners or

higher education providers. This contrasts with the 2021-22 practitioner survey which identified the following as benefits of micro-credentials:

- *opportunities presented by stacking credit and working collaboratively across institutions*
- *a more manageable and achievable way of participating in higher education*
- *students can build their qualification in stages.*

The current survey therefore asked if stacking of micro-credentials is 'something that your institution is interested in or an area in which you are looking to develop policy or provision?' Respondents from the majority (67%) of institutions/organisations answered 'yes' to this question; only 2 respondents said 'no'; and 7 were unsure (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Interest in stackability of micro-credentials



8 Institutional policy and webpages

Respondents from 4 institutions confirmed there was an institutional policy on micro-credentials or small qualifications, 21 said there was not one and 1 did not know. One university provided a link to its micro-credentials approval process on its website. This notes that documentation required for micro-credential approval is proportionate to the scale of the provision, comprising a micro-credential approval form and a module descriptor form. Additionally, due to the small scale of micro-credentials, the annual monitoring of micro-credentials is via a short, written report rather than the University's standard annual monitoring report.

In response to the question 'Do you have a webpage that lists all your available micro-credentials?', 10 respondents - from 3 colleges and 7 HEIs - said 'yes' and each provided a link to their institution's websites. Of these, 6 were headed or branded for upskilling and/or short courses, 1 was for the college's online courses, and 1 was the institution's web page to search for all courses. Two HEI respondents referenced webpages that were specifically titled or dedicated to micro-credentials; 1 college referenced the SCQF database.

Conclusion

This survey demonstrates that micro-credentials and small qualifications are widely offered across Scotland and are available to learners at colleges, HEIs and other CRBs.

The range of micro-credentials available to learners spans SCQF Level 2-11. Learners can choose from very short provision of less than 10 hours of learning, to awards of over 30 credits requiring 300-600 hours of learning. Only one college reported a micro-credential over 60 credits. Although the QAA Characteristics Statement for Micro-credentials places no upper or lower limits on the amount of credit that a micro-credential carries, it does state that a micro-credential is not normally an award in its own right on one of the UK frameworks for higher education qualifications, which nominally places an upper limit of 120 credits on a higher education micro-credential (at SCQF Level 7 or above).

Based on the lowest amount of the ranges provided for respondents in the survey, there are at least 5,330 learners on micro-credentials/small qualifications in Scotland, with at least 4,670 learners on a minimum of 251 (credit-rated) micro-credentials. Using the mid-point of the survey options (up to 499 learners and counting 500+ as 500 learners; and up to 50 micro-credentials and counting 51+ as 51 micro-credentials), a conservative estimate is 5,615 learners on 350 (credit-rated) micro-credentials. Following the survey, three HEIs confirmed learner numbers, such that the estimate may be increased to 22,715 learners. It should be noted that three HEIs and four colleges did not respond to the survey and these figures may be considerably higher.

The predominant mode of study for micro-credential courses is a blended approach using a combination of online and in-person delivery. The use of blended learning may be compared with the wide range of short courses available globally through online providers, including those delivered through platforms such as FutureLearn and Openlearning. The current survey did not explore the rationale behind the different delivery methods used by institutions/organisations. There is a current Scottish tertiary sector enhancement project on effective and inclusive digital and blended learning which may be helpful to institutions/organisations designing micro-credential courses or reviewing delivery methods.

The primary audience for micro-credentials and small qualifications provided the greatest difference between colleges and HEIs in the survey. The responding HEIs are predominantly using micro-credentials to attract new learners, while colleges are targeting employers, followed by existing learners and new learners. The targeting of employers is in line with the use of micro-credentials to support upskilling. Micro-credentials may be used as a taster for those interested in undertaking a larger qualification or macro-credential and can provide confidence to an education provider of an individual's ability to study at undergraduate or postgraduate level, for example. The other CRBs each only had one primary target audience in new and existing learners.

The QAA Characteristics Statement for Micro-credentials identifies flexible pathways into and through higher education as a key potential purpose for micro-credentials, which aligns with HEI respondents identifying new learners as a key primary target audience. The Characteristics Statement also proposes that micro-credentials have the potential to provide an alternative route to obtaining a traditional degree, potentially through a learner accruing modules to build or stack credit towards a larger award such as a degree. Noting that there appears to be little interest in stacking from a European perspective, the survey explored Scottish institutions/organisations' interest in stacking and the majority (67%) of respondents agreed that this is something in which their institution/organisation is interested. In considering this response, it should be noted that there is a distinction between learners who achieve one micro-credential and choose to undertake another in a particular specialism to further develop a particular skill or specialism, and those who are deliberately

seeking to build a larger qualification through the combination of credit from multiple micro-credentials. The survey did not seek to further explore institutions' interest in stacking and the survey results do not indicate whether the interest is due to learner requests, an ambition to support macro-credential achievement through stacking, or simply a reflection of respondents' interest in gaining further information on this aspect

Less than half of the responding institutions/organisations have dedicated webpages for micro-credentials and/or small qualifications and 'short courses' is commonly used to describe both micro-credentials and non-credit-rated small qualifications on these websites. This suggests that the term 'micro-credential' is still not well known or understood and many providers are using alternative language to promote this area of their provision.

The findings from this survey will feed into the ongoing work of the Network and inform its development of a good practice guide for micro-credentials in Scotland.

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