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Micro-Credentials in Ireland

HSW-Gespräch mit Bryan Maguire

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*HSW-Gespräch mit Bryan Maguire***Microcredentials in Ireland**

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Bryan Maguire

Ireland is widely regarded as a pioneer in the field of microcredentials in higher education and beyond. To gain deeper insight into the thinking, policy rationales, and practical approaches shaping this development, Imke Buß and Olaf Bartz conducted an interview with Bryan Maguire. He is a Director at Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and a member of the Board of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The interview explores Ireland's strategic choices and lessons that may inform international practice.

Das Hochschulwesen (HSW): Ireland is widely regarded as a pioneer in microcredentials. How did this happen?

Bryan Maguire (BM): I think we had microcredentials *avant la lettre*. Before the term microcredentials was coined, the practise was already quite widespread that higher education institutions offered short programmes with certification to various cohorts of learners. To those who had completed undergraduate degrees and were doing master's degrees and were doing top up programmes or to those who hadn't completed degrees but who were interested in some topic that was offered by the university or another higher education institution.

So when we devised our national framework of qualifications over 20 years ago, we already had devised it in a way that not just inserted the first, second and third cycles and the short cycle but also made provision for three different alternative classes of qualification.

One was minor awards. Minor awards were seen as components of major awards. So a module from a degree programme would be a minor award but offered as a freestanding offer. These were quite common and have been practised widely.

The other was Special Purpose award and this was an award that was devised for a programme that was specific for a particular purpose, particular occupational purpose typically, but it could be a new skill set. It could be a new area or a specific area of regulation. I give an example: When the national environment agency introduced a new certification scheme for energy efficient housing, green housing. They required a qualification for all of the practitioners, whether they were architects or engineers or builders or so on. Sometimes offered by higher education institutions, sometimes offered by vocational institutions.

The third category of qualification of award was supplementary award though in practise the title supplementary hasn't been used very much but special purpose awards have been quite common over the last 20 years and as indeed have been minor awards. So this practise was there.

HSW: So these were the same qualifications, the same modules for different groups, like continuing education and like your regular students. Was there a different in pricing or was it just the same module and everyone who wanted to participate could?

BM: Initially they were a special purpose. There were a standalone qualification and later on, as the curriculum for the undergraduates for the full time students was revised, these competences were incorporated into that curriculum.

But that's just a particular example of a what a special purpose might be: A regulatory purpose, or simply a sort of a technologically inspired purpose. So, for example, if you're an IT specialist and you need to develop cybersecurity skills or AI skills, then there are supplementary special purpose awards which in the last few years have been rebranded as microcredentials.

And it's also the case that in the beginning, the technological universities or the Institutes of Technology were more active in this kind of special purpose awarding function than the traditional universities.

But with the Microcreds initiative,¹ as it was called, this all received a boost about three or four years ago. The traditional universities got very active in developing new programmes: Parts of existing programmes offered to

¹ Vgl. <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/human-capital-initiative-pillars-1-2-and-3/> (21.12.2025).