MICRO-CREDENTIALS AND THE RECOGNITION TURN: EVIDENCE FROM GERMAN AND BRITISH PILOT PROGRAMMES

Katharina Vogt
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Over the past decade the unit of recognition in European higher education has begun to shift from the degree towards smaller, stackable credentials. Micro-credentials promise to make learning visible at a granular level, yet their value depends on the willingness of universities to recognise learning they did not design or deliver. This article treats that willingness as an empirical question. Drawing on six pilot programmes in Germany and the United Kingdom, it examines how recognition decisions are actually made when the credential at stake sits outside the established architecture of degrees. The study combines document analysis of recognition regulations with thirty-four semi-structured interviews with admissions officers, examination board chairs and programme directors. Three findings emerge. First, recognition practice is organised around a substantial difference test that is applied inconsistently across institutions. Second, the decisive variable is not the credential but the existence of a prior relationship between the issuing and the receiving provider. Third, learners experience recognition as an administrative risk that they manage through redundancy, applying for more programmes than they intend to enter. The article argues that the recognition turn requires an organisational infrastructure of trust rather than further policy declaration.

Contents **Page**

1 Introduction **50**
2 Materials and methods **51**
3 Results **52**
4 Discussion and conclusion **56**

1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the vocabulary of recognition in European higher education has shifted from the degree as the primary unit of exchange towards smaller, stackable units of learning. Micro-credentials, digital badges and modular certificates promise to make learning visible at a granular level, allowing learners to accumulate evidence of competence across providers, sectors and countries. The promise, however, depends on a condition that policy documents rarely examine: the willingness of institutions to recognise learning that they did not themselves design or deliver. This article treats that willingness as an empirical question rather than a normative assumption. Drawing on six pilot programmes in Germany and the United Kingdom, it asks how recognition decisions are actually made when the credential at stake sits outside the established architecture of degrees, and what

those decisions reveal about the limits of the current recognition regime.

The legal and policy scaffolding for such recognition is, in principle, already in place. The Lisbon Recognition Convention establishes a presumption of comparability unless substantial differences can be demonstrated. The Bologna Process has produced diploma supplements, national qualification frameworks and, more recently, guidelines for recognising alternative credentials. The Council Recommendation of 2022 asked member states to adopt national approaches within three years and framed micro-credentials as a means of widening access to lifelong learning. What remains unsettled is the operational layer: who decides, on what evidence, with what discretion and under what accountability. National frameworks specify principles while leaving the granular work to admissions officers, examination boards and programme directors, whose judgements are shaped by disciplinary conventions, institutional risk appetite and the practicalities of timetabling.

Recognition, in other words, is best understood not as a rule-application exercise but as an organisational practice. This distinction matters because the literature on credential recognition has concentrated on legal instruments and comparability tools, treating the institution as a rational actor that applies agreed criteria. Empirical work on admissions suggests something different: decisions are distributed across committees, informed by precedent and constrained by capacity. The gap between the two accounts is where the present study is located. The article makes three contributions. Empirically, it documents how recognition works in six programmes that were deliberately designed to test the boundaries of existing regulations. Analytically, it identifies the mechanisms through which trust between providers substitutes for formal comparability. Practically, it proposes a set of institutional arrangements that make granular recognition auditable rather than discretionary. The argument is developed in four sections: the design and data are described below, the findings are presented in the third section, and the implications for institutional policy are discussed in the fourth.

2 Materials and methods

The study employed a comparative case design. Six pilot programmes were selected: three in Germany (two at a research-intensive university in Berlin, one at a university of applied sciences in North Rhine-Westphalia) and three in the United Kingdom (two in London, one in the north of England). Selection followed a purposive logic. Each programme had been running for at least two admission cycles, each

awarded a credential shorter than a full degree, and each had sought recognition from at least one external institution. Together the cases cover the three credential types that dominate current practice: modular certificates of twenty to thirty credits, professional badges issued with industry partners, and stackable micro-degrees composed of several modules.

Four methods were combined to triangulate the findings across regulatory, organisational and individual levels of analysis: document analysis of national and institutional recognition regulations; semi-structured interviews with thirty-four staff involved in recognition decisions; two rounds of learner interviews conducted six months apart; observation of eleven examination board meetings where recognition cases were decided. Documents were collected between January and September 2024 and comprised recognition regulations, programme handbooks, credit transfer policies and internal guidance notes. Interviews lasted between forty and ninety minutes and were recorded with consent. Learners were recruited through programme administrators, with a target of eight per site; fifty-one learners participated in the first round and forty-two in the second, an attrition rate of eighteen per cent that reflects the mobility patterns of the population. Board observations were non-participant and focused on the sequence of deliberation rather than the identity of applicants.

2.1 Coding and analysis

Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded in two cycles. The first cycle used descriptive codes derived from the research questions: criteria, evidence, authority, discretion and outcome. The second cycle was pattern-based and sought mechanisms that recurred across cases, particularly where similar credentials produced different decisions. Two researchers coded independently, compared coding on a sample of twelve transcripts, and resolved disagreements through discussion; agreement on the first pass stood at eighty-one per cent. Regulatory documents were coded separately and then mapped onto the interview codes to identify where practice diverged from prescription. This mapping proved the most productive analytic step, because divergence was both common and patterned.

3 Results

Three limitations should be noted. The sample is purposive and small, so the findings characterise mechanisms rather than estimate population frequencies. The cases are concentrated in two national systems, both with comparatively mature recognition infrastructures, which

limits generalisation to systems with weaker quality assurance. Finally, the study relies on retrospective accounts of decisions; where possible these were checked against board minutes, but minutes record outcomes more reliably than reasoning. The findings are organised around three themes that emerged from the analysis: the gap between the substantial difference test as written and as applied, the institutional practices that determine whether a credential is recognised, and the strategies learners develop in response to uncertainty. Each theme is presented in turn, with illustrative material drawn from the cases.

3.1 The substantial difference test in practice

All six institutions formally applied a substantial difference test, and all six interpreted it differently. In two cases the test was operationalised as a comparison of learning outcomes, with assessors mapping the credential against module descriptors. In three cases it was operationalised as a comparison of input hours, so that a credential of fewer than twenty credits was treated as presumptively insufficient regardless of its outcomes. In one case the test was not operationalised at all: recognition depended on the recommendation of a subject specialist, who consulted precedent and decided case by case. The variation was not explained by national regulation, which was broadly similar across the cases, but by the disciplinary composition of the deciding body.

A second finding concerns timing. Where recognition was assessed before admission, decisions were more generous than where it was assessed after enrolment. Admissions officers described a structural reason: before admission, a refusal risks losing a fee-paying applicant, while after enrolment a refusal risks nothing but conflict. The same credential could therefore be recognised for one learner and rejected for another, depending on when the question was asked. This temporal asymmetry was not articulated in any regulation and was not recognised by institutional leadership as a source of inconsistency. A third finding concerns evidence. Assessors consistently privileged documents over demonstrations. Portfolios, transcripts and module descriptors were treated as probative; practical tests, employer attestations and samples of work were treated as supplementary at best. Several interviewees explained this in terms of auditability: a document can be filed, whereas a demonstration cannot. The preference was thus organisational rather than epistemological, and it systematically disadvantaged credentials from providers with weak documentary cultures, including employer-issued badges and open online courses.

3.2 Institutional practice

The cases differed markedly in the arrangements through which recognition was decided. Three models were observed, and each produced a

distinct pattern of outcomes. In the centralised model, a single office applied a common rubric across faculties; decisions were consistent but slow, with a median processing time of six weeks, and were perceived by academic staff as insensitive to disciplinary nuance. In the distributed model, faculties decided independently; decisions were fast and contextually informed but inconsistent across departments in the same institution. In the hybrid model, a central office screened applications and referred contested cases to a faculty panel; this combined consistency with speed but required sustained administrative investment. Table 1 summarises the models and their observed consequences.

Model	Decision authority	Observed strengths	Observed weaknesses
Centralised	Single recognition office	Consistency across faculties; auditable records	Long processing time; limited disciplinary sensitivity
Distributed	Faculty committees	Fast decisions; contextual judgement	Inconsistency within institution; weak documentation
Hybrid	Central screening, faculty panel	Balance of speed and consistency	Requires dedicated administrative capacity

Table 1 Organisational models of recognition and their observed consequences. Source: author's fieldwork, six pilot programmes, 2024.

Two further practices proved consequential. The first was the presence of a named contact at the receiving institution. Where such a contact existed, applications were resolved in a median of nine days; where they did not, the median rose to forty-one days and the refusal rate doubled. Interviewees described the contact not as a decision-maker but as a translator who could explain what evidence would be accepted. The second was the use of precedent logs. Institutions that maintained a searchable record of previous decisions resolved new cases faster and more consistently, while institutions that relied on individual memory reproduced the same disputes each cycle.

3.3 Learner strategies

Learners did not experience recognition as a technical process that either succeeded or failed. They experienced it as a risk to be managed. Three strategies recurred across the sample. The first was redundancy: learners applied to more programmes than they intended to enter, on the assumption that at least one would recognise their prior learning. The second was documentation inflation: learners assembled portfolios far exceeding the stated requirements, including evidence

they did not expect to be read, because they could not predict what would be accepted. The third was avoidance: a minority chose programmes whose recognition they could verify in advance, even when those programmes were a poorer fit for their goals.

These strategies carry costs that are invisible in institutional statistics. Redundancy multiplies applications and therefore administrative load, which institutions experience as unsustainable demand rather than as a symptom of uncertainty. Documentation inflation shifts labour onto learners and disadvantages those with less time and fewer resources to assemble evidence. Avoidance narrows choice and, in the cases observed, steered learners away from the more innovative programmes. The cumulative effect is a recognition system that appears to function at the level of individual decisions while producing systematic distortion at the level of the population.

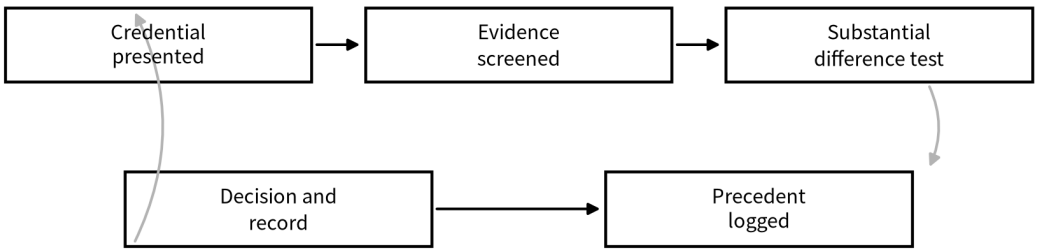

Figure 1 The recognition cycle observed across the six pilot programmes Source: author's synthesis of board observations and interview data.

The cycle that emerged from the board observations is presented in Figure 1. Recognition is not a single decision but a sequence in which each stage shapes the next: the evidence accepted at screening determines what can be compared, the comparison determines the decision, and the decision becomes precedent for the following cycle. The weak link in the observed cases was the final stage. Where precedent was not logged, the cycle restarted from memory, and the same questions were argued again with different outcomes. Strengthening that link proved, in the two institutions that did so, to be the cheapest available intervention.

4 Discussion and conclusion

The findings suggest that the recognition of micro-credentials is constrained less by legal instruments than by organisational capacity. The substantial difference test, which appears in regulation as a single criterion, is in practice a family of practices shaped by disciplinary composition, timing and documentary culture. This has a direct implication for policy: further harmonisation of principles will not produce consistency unless it is accompanied by specification of the evidentiary and procedural conditions under which principles are applied. The 2022 Recommendation moves in this direction by asking for national approaches, but it does not address the institutional layer where the variation observed here originates.

The second implication concerns trust. The strongest predictor of a positive decision in this sample was not the quality of the credential but the existence of a relationship between providers. This is efficient in the short term and problematic in the long term, because it advantages large, well-connected institutions and disadvantages exactly the learners that micro-credentials are meant to serve. An infrastructure of trust that depends on personal relationships reproduces existing hierarchies; an infrastructure that depends on published evidence and precedent logs can be extended. The distinction between the two is a matter of design, not of principle. Three practical recommendations follow from the analysis. Institutions should separate screening from decision, so that evidence requirements are stated before an application is submitted rather than discovered during it. They should maintain searchable precedent logs, which reduce processing time and improve consistency at low cost. And they should treat learner strategies as diagnostic signals: redundancy, documentation inflation and avoidance indicate uncertainty in the system, not irrational behaviour by applicants. Recognising that signal is the first step towards the organisational infrastructure that the recognition turn requires.

The study has clear limits. Its cases are few and drawn from two mature systems, and its design cannot establish how the mechanisms identified here operate in systems with weaker quality assurance or in disciplines with strong professional gatekeeping. Comparative work across a wider set of national contexts, and longitudinal work that follows credentials through several recognition cycles, would test the generality of the findings. What the present study establishes is narrower but firmer: that recognition is an organisational accomplishment, and that its reform requires attention to procedure, evidence and memory rather than to declarations alone.

References

[1] [1] Bologna Follow-Up Group. (2023). Guidelines for the recognition of alternative credentials in the European Higher Education Area. Brussels: BFUG Secretariat.

[2] [2] Cedefop. (2023). Micro-credentials and qualifications: mapping national approaches. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[3] [3] Council of the European Union. (2022). Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability. Official Journal of the European Union, C 243.

[4] [4] European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. (2022). ESG 2015: standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Brussels: ENQA.

[5] [5] Kohler, J. (2021). Recognition of prior learning in European universities: between policy and practice. European Journal of Education, 56(3), 401-417.

[6] [6] Nuffic. (2022). Recognition of micro-credentials: a comparative study of twelve European systems. The Hague: Nuffic.

[7] [7] Oliver, B. (2019). Making micro-credentials work for learners, employers and providers. Melbourne: Deakin University.

[8] [8] Ralston, S. (2020). Higher education governance and the micropolitics of credit transfer. Studies in Higher Education, 45(8), 1689-1703.

[9] [9] UNESCO. (2022). Towards a common definition of micro-credentials. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

[10] [10] Wheelahan, L., and Moodie, G. (2021). Gig qualifications for the gig economy: micro-credentials and the inclusive growth of higher education. Critical Studies in Education, 62(4), 466-482.