

25 November 2020**Micro-degrees and badges as supplementary digital credentials**

In view of the fact that university semesters have predominantly been held digitally since spring due to the pandemic, yesterday the General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) approved a recommendation on "Micro-degrees and badges as formats of supplementary digital credentials".

Micro-degrees consist of course topics broken down into micro-components that are ideally structured in such a way that they can be incorporated into a study programme. Badges enable students to demonstrate that they have acquired certain competences in both formal and informal contexts. The HRK paper examines the extent to which micro-degrees and badges can be of use in digital teaching in the German higher education system.

"They are both innovative formats for teaching with lots of potential but they are also intrinsically problematic," explained HRK President Professor Dr Peter-André Alt following the General Assembly. It is recommended that universities be proactive in addressing the ambivalence of micro-degrees and badges.

"Micro-degrees and badges ought to be applied on the basis of the strategy aligned with the respective university profile," said Professor Dr Monika Gross, HRK Vice-President for Digitalisation and Academic Continuing Education, who played a leading role in preparing the HRK paper. Such offers would mainly be suitable for the phase immediately before and after the start of the study programme and for academic continuing education. They could also be used for the further training of university staff and for the purposes of marketing the university. Given the resource intensity, it is advisable to seek cooperation with other universities or external partners.

"However, higher education can only be broken down into micro-components to a limited extent because the overall qualification is more than just the sum of individual certificates," said Gross. It is argued that academic personal development can only be achieved by means of examining complex subject-related content over a prolonged period of time and interacting with teaching staff and fellow students in person on a regular basis.

HRK President Alt: "Micro-degrees and badges can only be a useful complement to other curricular programmes if we wish to preserve the character of higher education."

The fundamental idea underlying micro-degrees is that topics covered by study programmes can be broken down into micro-components and reassembled, with the aim of attaining formalised degrees. As distinctions for programmes that can be accessed without prerequisites,

micro-degrees make it easier to enter a study programme, introduce people in employment to academic content and methods or international students to the German higher education system, and offer supplementary credentials for people interested in continuing education.

By contrast, badges are rather informal in nature. They predominantly make competences visible that have been acquired in the course of or outside the curriculum. Badges can document examination results, assignments, excerpts from an e-portfolio and, most notably, key competences such as the handling of digital data, social engagement, project experience, language skills and intercultural experience.

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