Higher Learning Commission

2023 Survey on Alternative Credential Offerings and Quality Assurance Needs

REPORT OF FINDINGS

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Introduction

HLC is considering the development of a new member benefit, a Credential Lab service, to help members in their efforts to support students, the workforce, and their communities. This service would provide programming and resources supporting members' innovative alternative credential offerings, plus provide quality assurance guidelines for members in partnering with external content providers. For this purpose, alternative credentials include short-term, non-degree certificates, industry certifications, digital badges, and micro-credentials.

HLC conducted a survey in May of 2023 of the member institutions to better understand their current work in providing alternative credential programs, to collect ideas about the role of quality assurance within the new credential landscape and gauge their interest in participating in the HLC Credential Lab Service.

Key Takeaways

The survey provided valuable information about the current landscape of alternative credential offerings and areas for engagement and support for member institutions in this arena. Below are some of the key takeaways from the survey.

- **Strong current offerings**: 73% of the respondents indicated that their institutions currently offer some forms of alternative credentials. Stand-alone alternative credentials were the most popular program type (58% of respondents), followed by embedded alternative credentials within a degree (50%) and stackable alternative credentials toward a degree (45%). A quarter of respondents indicated that their institutions provide alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider.

- **Widespread expectations of growth:** Nine out of 10 respondents (91%) anticipated growth in alternative credential program offerings at their institutions. The most-anticipated area of growth was in stand-alone offerings, with 73% of respondents reporting that they anticipated their institution's offerings to grow in this area.

- **Expressed needs for assistance with business aspects:** Most respondents expressed the need for assistance and information in the areas of financial modeling (83% of respondents), new business models (86%), and contractual terms and conditions (80%).

- **Expressed needs for quality assurance:** Referring to the process of developing partnerships with external content providers, the majority of respondents reported needing assistance or information in areas such as the provider's quality assurance metrics (86% of respondents), the role of industry and/or employers in the credential offering creation (80%), provider's experience with other accredited institutions (80%), content creation practices (79%), content update frequency (74%), and financial health of the provider (55%).

- **Expressed interest in HLC member services:** 84% of respondents indicated interest in capitalizing on a member benefit like a Credential Lab Service. 71% of respondents indicated interest in a member service to vet external content providers.

- **Interest in helping to create a Quality Assurance Framework:** 51% of respondents indicated interest in participating in the creation of a Quality Assurance Framework for external content providers.

Survey Overview

An invitation to participate in the survey was sent via email to 2,576 institutional representatives, including Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), Chief Academic Officers (CAOs), and Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs). A total of 499 responses were received, resulting in a response rate of 19%. As indicated in Figure 1, most survey respondents represented public and private not-for-profit institutions, 264 and 210 responses, respectively. Participation of representatives from tribal colleges and private for-profit institutions accounted for 5% of the total number of respondents.

Figure 1. Number of Respondents by Institution Control (N = 499)
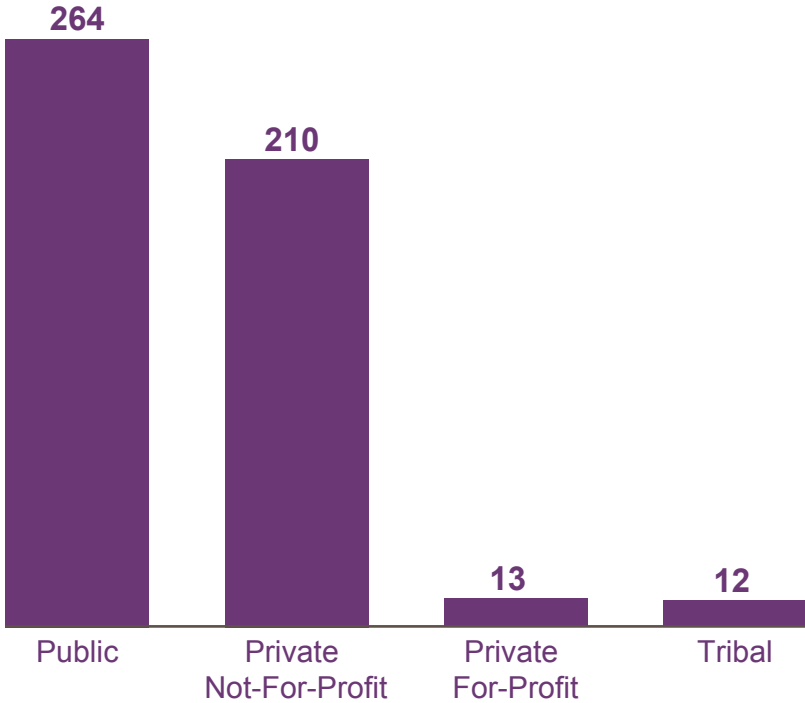
Distribution of respondents by institution control and highest degree, seen in Figure 2, indicated that associate's and doctoral institutions were the top two groups in survey participation. Nearly half (48%) of respondents from public institutions represented associate's colleges, while half (50%) of respondents from private not-for-profit institutions came from institutions granting doctoral degrees. Similarly, associate's colleges accounted for 58% of survey participation from tribal colleges and doctoral institutions accounted for 69% of survey participation from private for-profit institutions.

Figure 2. **Distribution of Respondents by Institution Control and Highest Degree**

Control	Public		Private Not-For-Profit		Private For-Profit		Tribal		Total	
Highest Degree	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	**N**	**%**
Associate's	128	48%	2	1%			7	58%	**137**	**27%**
Bachelor's	26	10%	27	13%			1	8%	**54**	**11%**
Master's	32	12%	74	35%	4	31%	2	17%	**112**	**22%**
Specialist	5	2%	2	1%					**7**	**1%**
Doctorate	73	28%	105	50%	9	69%	2	17%	**189**	**38%**
Total	**264**	**100%**	**210**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**12**	**100%**	**499**	**100%**

Note: Column totals may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

As shown in Figure 3, two-thirds (66%) of respondents came from institutions enrolling 4,000 or fewer students. Notably, 41% of respondents represented institutions enrolling 2,000 or fewer students, and, at the other end of the spectrum, 14% of respondents represented institutions enrolling more than 10,000 students.

Figure 3. **Distribution of Respondents by Institution Control and Total Student Enrollment**

Control	Public		Private Not-For-Profit		Private For-Profit		Tribal		Total	
Institutional Enrollment	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	**N**	**%**
Less than 2,000	56	21%	132	63%	3	23%	12	100%	**203**	**41%**
2,001-4,000	80	30%	46	22%	1	8%			**127**	**25%**
4,001-6,000	25	9%	18	9%					**43**	**9%**
6,001-8,000	23	9%	3	1%					**26**	**5%**
8,001-10,000	25	9%	4	2%	3	23%			**32**	**6%**
More than 10,000	55	21%	7	3%	6	46%			**68**	**14%**
Total	**264**	**100%**	**210**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**12**	**100%**	**499**	**100%**

Respondents by Institutional Roles

Among the respondents, there were 69 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs), 171 Chief Academic Officers (CAOs), 243 Accreditation Liaison Officers (ALOs), as well as 81 other institutional roles. Not surprisingly, 64 respondents (13% of total) reported having served in multiple roles on their campuses.
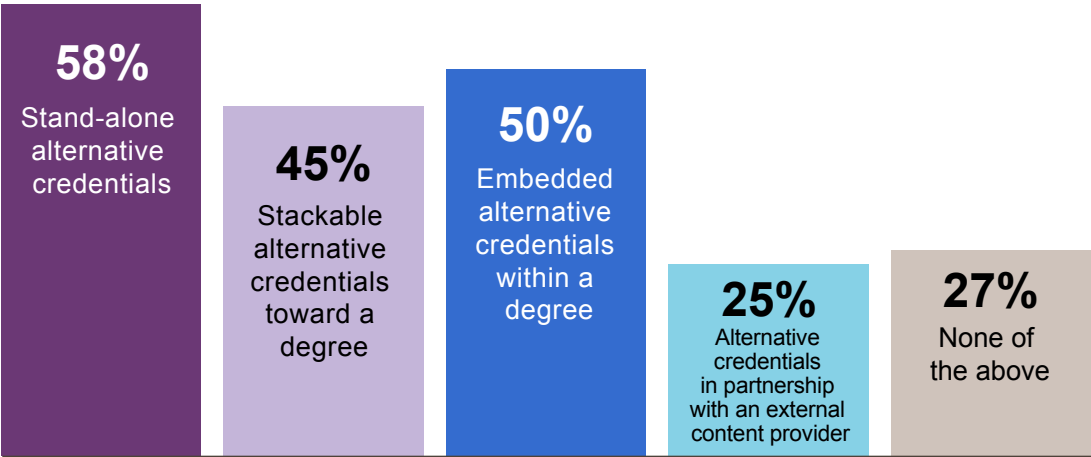
Survey Findings

Current Offerings

Nearly three quarters (73%) of the respondents indicated that their institutions currently offered some forms of alternative credentials, while 27% did not.

Figure 4. **Which types of alternative credentials does your institution currently offer? Select all that apply.**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 493)

58%
Stand-alone alternative credentials

45%
Stackable alternative credentials toward a degree

50%
Embedded alternative credentials within a degree

25%
Alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider

27%
None of the above

As indicated in Figure 4, among the types of alternative credential offerings, the most popular was stand-alone alternative credentials (58% of respondents), followed by embedded alternative credentials within a degree (50%), stackable alternative credentials toward a degree (45%), and alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider (25%).

A breakdown of survey responses by institution control, seen in Figure 5, indicated that alternative credential offerings were most popular among public institutions, followed by private for-profit institutions, private not-for-profit institutions, and tribal institutions. For example, 73% of public institutions reported offering stand-alone alternative credentials, compared with 54% of private for-profit institutions, 43% of private not-for-profit institutions, and 8% of tribal institutions. Notably, among respondents from tribal institutions, 67% indicated that the institutions did not offer alternative credential programs and the most popular type of offering was stackable alternative credentials toward a degree (25%).

Figure 5. **Which types of alternative credentials does your institution currently offer? Select all that apply.**

| Control	Public		Private Not-For-Profit		Private For-Profit		Tribal		**Total**	
Response Choice	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	**N**	**%**
Stand-alone alternative credentials	190	73%	89	43%	7	54%	1	8%	**287**	**58%**
Stackable alternative credentials toward a degree	155	60%	57	27%	7	54%	3	25%	**222**	**45%**
Embedded alternative credentials within a degree	170	65%	70	34%	5	38%	1	8%	**246**	**50%**
Alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider	83	32%	35	17%	3	23%	1	8%	**122**	**25%**
None of the above	31	12%	89	43%	3	23%	8	67%	**131**	**27%**
Total	**260**	**100%**	**208**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**12**	**100%**	**493**	**100%**

Areas of Anticipated Growth

Overall, 91% of respondents (n=496) anticipated growth in alternative credential offerings at their institutions.

As seen in Figure 6, among the types of alternative credential offerings, growth in stand-alone alternative credentials was anticipated by the largest number of respondents (73%), followed by stackable alternative credentials toward a degree (67%), and embedded alternative credentials within a degree (65%). Growth in alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider was anticipated by 41% of respondents.

Figure 6. **In which areas do you anticipate growth of offerings? Select all that apply.**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 496)

73%
Stand-alone alternative credentials

67%
Stackable alternative credentials toward a degree

65%
Embedded alternative credentials within a degree

41%
Alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider

9%
None of the above
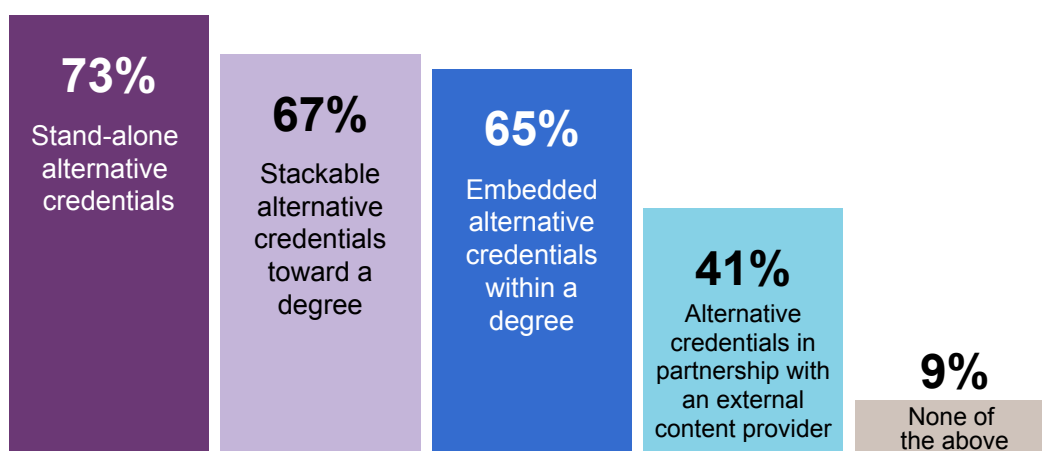
A comparison across institution control types shows that respondents from public institutions had the highest levels of anticipation of growth in alternative credentials at their institutions, with 76% anticipating growth in stand-alone and stackable programs and 71% expecting growth in embedded-within-a-degree programs. Across all institution control types, the most-anticipated area of growth was in stand-alone alternative credentials (in the range of 62% to 76%), while growth in alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider was least anticipated (in the range of 35% to 46%).

Figure 7. **In which areas do you anticipate growth of offerings? Select all that apply.**

Control	Public		Private Not-For-Profit		Private For-Profit		Tribal		**Total**	
Response Choice	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	**N**	**%**
Stand-alone alternative credentials	200	76%	147	70%	8	62%	9	75%	**364**	**73%**
Stackable alternative credentials toward a degree	200	76%	119	57%	7	54%	6	50%	**332**	**67%**
Embedded alternative credentials within a degree	185	71%	121	58%	8	62%	6	50%	**320**	**65%**
Alternative credentials in partnership with an external content provider	121	46%	74	35%	5	38%	5	42%	**205**	**41%**
None of the above	15	6%	28	13%	2	15%	2	17%	**47**	**9%**
Total	**262**	**100%**	**209**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**12**	**100%**	**496**	**100%**

Areas of Need for Assistance or Information

Most respondents indicated that their institution's efforts related to credential programs could benefit from support in the areas of financial modeling (83% of respondents), new business models (86%), and contractual terms and conditions (80%).

Figure 8. **Would assistance/information on the following topics related to credentialing support your institution's efforts?**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 493)

Response ● Yes ● No

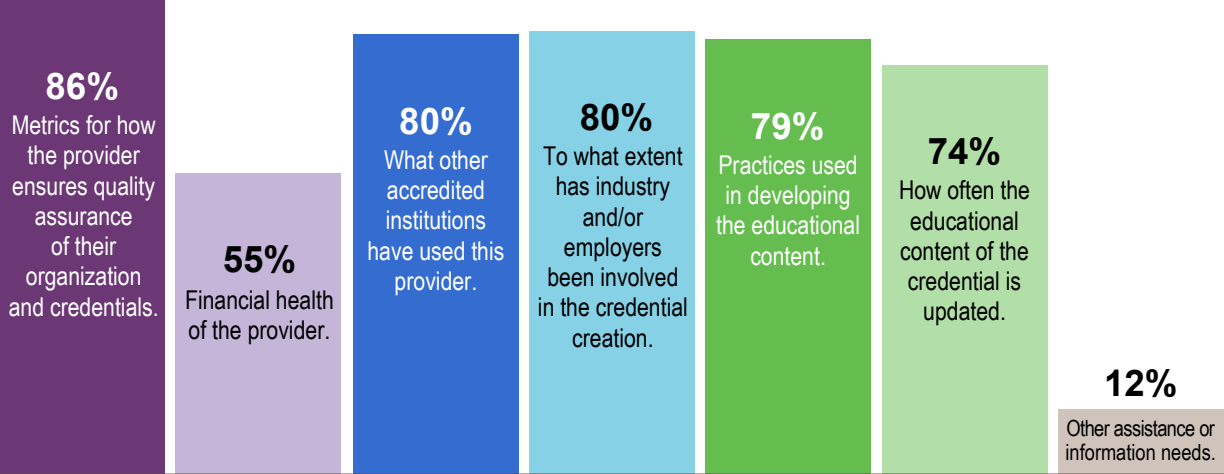|	Yes	No
Financial modeling	83%	17%
New business models	86%	14%
Contractual terms and conditions	80%	20%
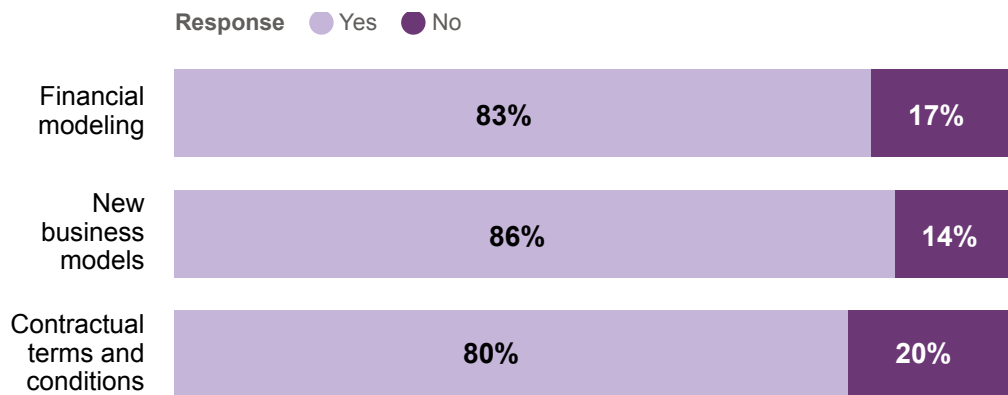
Quality Assurance Needs Relative to External Content Providers

Respondents were asked about quality assurance needs related to partnerships with external content providers. As shown in Figure 9, the top areas of need included quality assurance metrics (86% of respondents), the role of industry and/or employers in the credential creation (80%), past partnerships with accredited institutions (80%), content creation practices (79%), content update frequency (74%), and financial health of the provider (55%).

Figure 9. **What assistance/information would you need when exploring partnerships with external content providers? Select all that apply.**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 455)

86%
Metrics for how the provider ensures quality assurance of their organization and credentials.

55%
Financial health of the provider.

80%
What other accredited institutions have used this provider.

80%
To what extent has industry and/or employers been involved in the credential creation.

79%
Practices used in developing the educational content.

74%
How often the educational content of the credential is updated.

12%
Other assistance or information needs.

A breakdown of survey responses by institution control, in Figure 10, showed differing levels of needs for quality assurance when exploring partnerships with external content providers. Respondents from public institutions appeared to express the highest levels of quality assurance needs when considering financial health of the provider (58% of respondents), prior engagement by other accredited institutions (84%), involvement by industry and/or employers (84%), and content development practices (84%). Respondents from tribal institutions reported the highest levels of need for quality assurance metrics (91%) and content update frequency (82%).

Figure 10. **Quality assurance needs when exploring partnerships with external content providers. Select all that apply.**
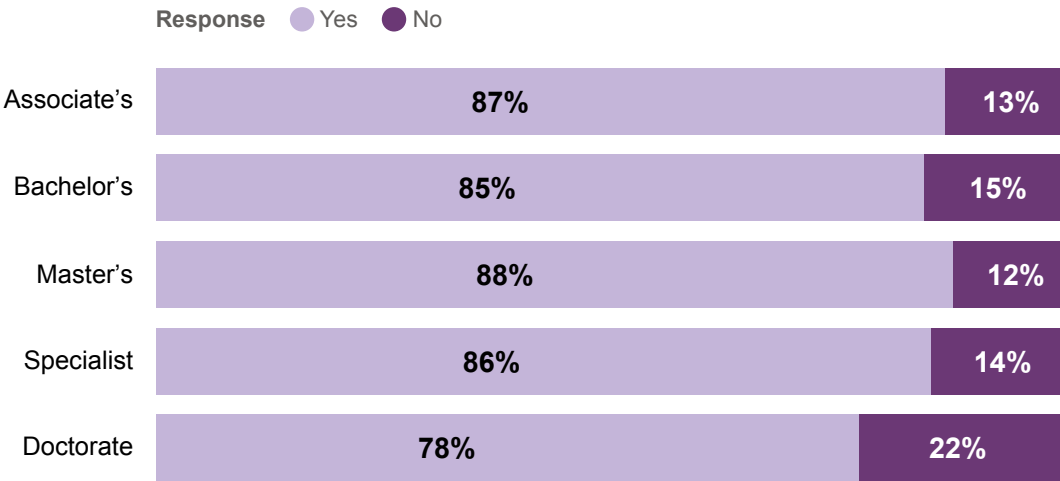
Control	Public		Private Not-For-Profit		Private For-Profit		Tribal		**Total**	
Response Choice	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	**N**	**%**
Metrics for how the provider ensures quality assurance of their organization and credentials.	208	87%	163	84%	11	85%	10	91%	**392**	**86%**
To what extent has industry and/or employers been involved in the credential creation.	200	84%	151	78%	9	69%	6	55%	**366**	**80%**
What other accredited institutions have used this provider.	199	84%	147	76%	9	69%	8	73%	**363**	**80%**
Practices used in developing the educational content	199	84%	144	75%	9	69%	7	64%	**359**	**79%**
How often the educational content of the credential is updated.	191	80%	131	68%	7	54%	9	82%	**338**	**74%**
Financial health of the provider.	137	58%	103	53%	7	54%	2	18%	**249**	**55%**
Other assistance or information needs	33	14%	17	9%	4	31%			**54**	**12%**
Total	**238**	**100%**	**193**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**11**	**100%**	**455**	**100%**

Credential Lab Service

Overall, 84% of respondents indicated that their institutions would be interested in a member benefit like a Credential Lab Service. The share of respondents indicating interest in this area varied slightly across institution type based on highest degree offered, as shown in the Figure 11. Specifically, 78% of respondents from doctoral institutions indicated an interest in a Credential Lab Service, lower by 10 percentage points or less than respondents from other institution types.

Figure 11. **Would you be interested in capitalizing on a member benefit like a credential lab service for your institution?**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 486)

Response ● Yes ● No

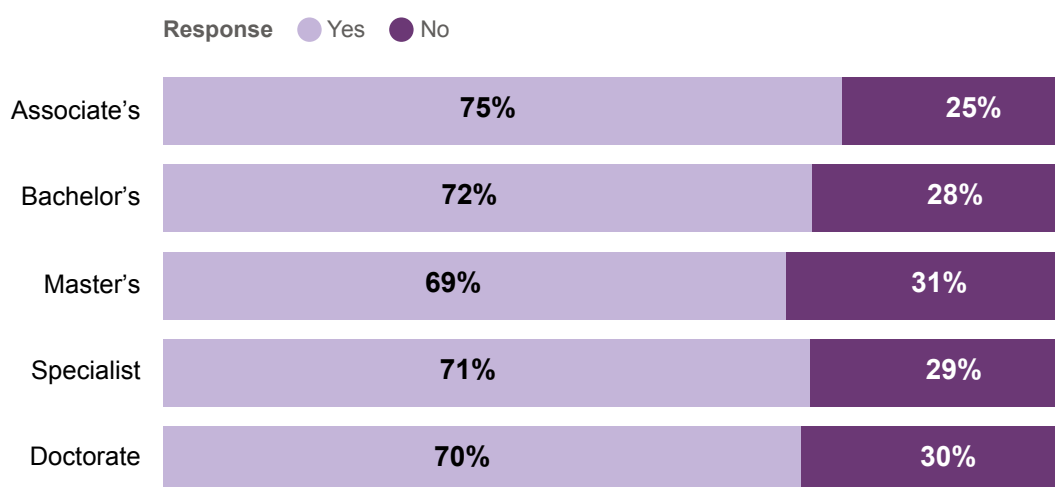| Institution Type	Yes	No
Associate's	87%	13%
Bachelor's	85%	15%
Master's	88%	12%
Specialist	86%	14%
Doctorate	78%	22%

Vetting of External Content Providers

Overall, 71% of respondents (out of a total of 487) indicated that their institutions would be interested in a member service to vet external content providers. As shown in Figure 12, responses varied slightly across institutions based on the highest degree attribute, ranging from 69% to 75% expressing an interest.

Figure 12. **Would you be interested in a member service to vet external content providers?**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 487)

Response ● Yes ● No

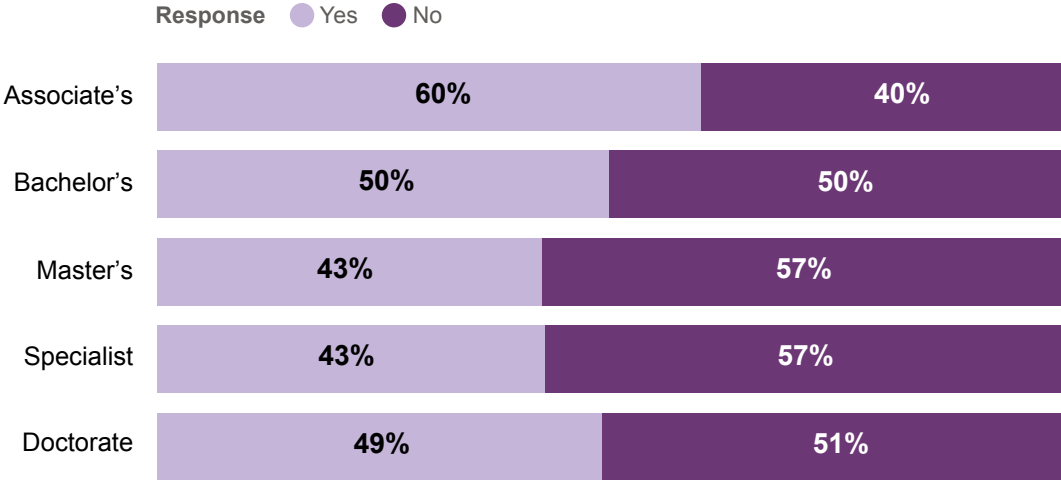| Degree	Yes	No
Associate's	75%	25%
Bachelor's	72%	28%
Master's	69%	31%
Specialist	71%	29%
Doctorate	70%	30%

Creation of a Quality Assurance Framework

Overall, 51% of respondents indicated that their institutions would be interested in participating in the creation of a Quality Assurance Framework for external content providers. A breakdown of responses by institutions' highest degree, as shown in Figure 13, indicated that respondents from associate's colleges expressed the highest level of interest (60%) in this area, followed by bachelor's-degree colleges (50%), doctoral-degree institutions (49%), and others (43%).

Figure 13. **Would you be interested in participating in the creation of a quality assurance framework for external content providers?**

Share of Respondents in Each Response Choice (Total n = 483)

Response ● Yes ● No

Institution	Yes	No
Associate's	60%	40%
Bachelor's	50%	50%
Master's	43%	57%
Specialist	43%	57%
Doctorate	49%	51%

Next Steps

Based on the strong interest expressed by member institutions in this survey, we will provide updates to the membership as the project takes shape.