

# HIGHER EDUCATION MICRO-CREDENTIALS: A EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE

**Roberto ROMERO-LLOP**

**José Manuel CASTRO-JIMÉNEZ**

**Àngels FITÓ-BELTRAN**

**Vanesa VALERO-GARCÍA**

**Sagrario MARTÍN-ARAGÓN**

RUEPEP - Spanish National Network for University Lifelong Learning,  
ES

Email: [rorollo@cfp.upv.es](mailto:rorollo@cfp.upv.es)

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## ABSTRACT

Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) concept and the COVID-19 pandemic have fostered the need for a recognition of learning outcomes from short learning experiences. Recognition of short-learning experiences is not a new concept. It is used by many companies (Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and CISCO, for example), as well as by education providers at all levels in different ways and in concepts like continuous professional development, lifelong learning courses, adult education, and validation of prior learning. The concept of micro-credentials, however, is newer and lacks a clear definition, especially in the university context. This can lead to significant variations in the offer of the so-called “micro-credentials”.

This paper will focus on a proposal for a definition of Higher Education (HE) micro-credentials and the main differences with micro-credentials offered by non-university providers. To do so, this document will follow the council recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability.

## INTRODUCTION

As compared to other recognitions of learning experiences, such as formal programme certificates, micro-credentials can offer more flexibility and demand less time and effort from the learner. Micro-credentials are also a way to empower the learner such that they can choose their own learning pathway, deciding on the specific micro-credentials they want to obtain. Learners can also apply for recognition of prior short-learning obtained in non-formal or informal training experiences through micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials need a clear definition, however, as there is a lack of transparency in the recognition process. There are also many standards involved in the micro-credential ecosystem and its technological support that provoke confusion among stakeholders. Therefore, there is a need for confidence in the micro-credentials and their recognition (MICROBOL, 2021; OECD, 2021a; Oliver, 2019).

Recently, in December 2021, the European Union published a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials (European Commission, 2021). It proposed a definition of what constitutes a European micro-credential, the minimum information it should have, and how to integrate it with the Europass Digital Credentials infrastructure. One piece of information needed for this European approach is the level of learning experience leading to the micro-credential, as defined by the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), or the Qualifications Frameworks in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), so that there is a way to separate Higher Education (HE) micro-credentials from the rest on offer. The *Commission Staff Working Document* accompanying the Proposal for a Council Recommendation also states that the development and regulation of micro-credentials need to prioritise access and inclusion in order to mitigate the risk of omitting unskilled citizens and others who may face social barriers. This proposal, published on June 26, 2022, is now an official Council Recommendation (European Commission, 2022). According to this last document, the European definition of micro-credential is as follows:

“Micro-credential” means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity” (European Commission, 2022, p. 9).

## **EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION micro-credential**

At this point in the paper, it is worth considering the challenges involved in defining the concept of a “European HE micro-credential”, including how to highlight explicitly the HE approach, while also maintaining the required flexibility. Several issues, which are developed below, will be key to facilitate the understanding and recognition of HE micro-credentials.

### **Inclusion in National Qualification Frameworks (NQF)**

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) provides a common reference framework to compare and understand European qualification systems. The EQF is open to micro-credentials as long as they are included in the NQF. A common approach is needed for including micro-credentials within the NQF, both at the European and national levels, since the member states are responsible for their respective NQFs. If micro-credentials are included within the NQF at a certain level, consequently, this will indicate the EQF level of the micro-credential. Thus, including them on NQFs will support the recognition, quality, transparency, and uptake of micro-credentials. Therefore, based on the principle of openness and flexibility, the NQF should also incorporate micro-credentials at the HE Levels and not just in traditional degrees exclusively, as it does currently. However, it should be noted that learning outcomes provided by micro-credentials will not mark the completion of an NQF cycle, but rather intermediate qualifications within the cycle as part of the larger qualification that is the NQF. As such, micro-credentials will not provide direct access to the subsequent level of qualification, but may help facilitate HE access to citizens that could not access it in the past, bridging further expansion of the HE ecosystem.

Considering that alignment of the National and European frameworks facilitates comparing qualifications across Europe, it is important that the National Academic Recognition Information Centers (ENIC-NARIC) provide the necessary information for Europe-wide recognition. The example of Ireland (QQI 2021a), which has taken a European leadership

role in micro-credentials with an NQF that describes qualifications in the Irish education and training system, can be viewed as a benchmark to be adopted across countries. The Irish NFQ is a 10-level system that shows how general education awards, further education and training, and higher education awards are mapped against the ten levels of the framework. It allows learners to know and understand what is needed to achieve a qualification and, moreover, to compare qualifications in order to assist in choosing a particular micro-credential, knowing it will be recognised both at home and abroad.

### **Clarification of the providers of HE micro-credentials**

In recent years, a widely held belief has emerged, which assumes that all education and training institutions will participate in the emerging task of offering micro-credentials at any level. This is based on a 'common sense' understanding of the role and purpose of higher education, particularly in supporting people to attain the skills needed to work (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021). We disagree with this view and argue that Higher Education Institutions (HEI) should analyse the current landscape and their institutional capacity to strategically reset their priorities to become involved in the micro-credential field. Furthermore, in cases of collaboration of HEI with external parties (e.g., private sector partners, employers, and other providers of education) on the development, assessment, or delivery of a micro-credential, we appeal to the fact that the HEI should be responsible both for granting the micro-credential and ensuring its academic quality.

We believe that in order to achieve confidence in the level of the HE credential and to maintain confidence in the HE systems, HE accreditations should only be issued or validated by a HEI with a clear quality policy and authorization to be an actor in HE according to national laws. This is predicated on the fact that it is the university faculty who is qualified to ensure that coherence, sequence and hierarchy in the disciplines are not undercut in providing micro-credentials (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2021). As micro-credentials are defined, there is a high risk that non-HEI or other education providers with no experience in HE could enter the HE arena without the quality accreditations and controls that foster confidence in the system.

On the other hand, more flexibility should be permitted and encouraged through national policies for HE in the field of micro-credential so as to offer the learning opportunities and corresponding qualifications needed in a short period of time (AQU 2021).

### **Fostering assessment, rigour, transparency, and comparison**

Clarifying the standards that are expected in micro-credentials is crucial if they are to be accepted for credit in formal qualifications. Assessment and rigour are critical for ensuring credential and competency validation for issuing qualifications. Moreover, clear and transparent information on course content and learning outcomes should be made available by the micro-credential provider.

Furthermore, there should be mechanisms in place to locate and compare the different HE micro-credentials, such as national catalogues, where HEIs could publish their micro-credentials according to standards that will allow for comparison and, consequently, transferability between institutions and countries. This sort of cross comparison would allow learners could choose the qualification they want to obtain based on broader information and knowledge. The standard should be based on the European recommendation in order to foster transparency and ease of understanding for other European learners.

Ireland, through its National Quality Agency (QQI), has an interesting publishing system where quality and transparency are managed by the same institution. In particular, it includes all quality-assured, recognised qualifications offered by universities and institutes of

technology, as well as private HE colleges, education and training boards, and private further education providers delivering courses leading to a QQI Award (QQI, 2021b).

### **Creation of financial frameworks and counselling**

Increasing access of HEIs to new financial resources is also crucial in facilitating inclusion. Higher education institutions should be able to offer increased learning opportunities and counselling to less-advantaged learners to help them create their own learning pathways. The *Commission Staff Working Document* accompanying the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2021) indicates that short learning experiences have been undertaken primarily by learners that already have resources, leaving a high risk for exclusion of those who may face obstacles. Counselling is also key in order to support inclusion and facilitate education and training opportunities to a wider range of learners. At any rate, learners need more options at lower costs to support their education and training to improve their professional opportunities.

There are many potential barriers to micro-credentials over and above inertia and HEIs' natural reluctance to change. The lack of senior leaders who understand micro-credentials and are willing to act as change agents, for instance, results in a lack of resources, both financial and human, allocated to institutional implementations.

Although specific financial frameworks would be adapted in each country, there should be a clear financial commitment at the national level for HE micro-credentials. Thus, the European recommendation mentions Individual Learning Accounts (ILA's) as a means for enabling and empowering individuals to participate in labour-market relevant training and facilitate their access to or retention in employment. Other initiatives that can be noted include the Springboard+ in Ireland, which aims at complementing the core state-funded education and training system and providing free and subsidised upskilling and reskilling HE opportunities in areas of identified skills need (The Higher Education Authority Ireland, 2022).

### **Clear Policies for lifelong learning for HEIs**

In some countries, it is also vital to adapt the policies to allow HEIs to attend to adult learners that need short programmes as part of their primary tasks. In many countries, the regulations are aimed only at initial learning, so it is very difficult to develop lifelong learning and even more difficult to recognise this learning in other HE study programmes (OECD, 2021b). Another important policy factor to consider is how to reconcile family and work commitments. It is key to find time to study as well as having the financial resources and the economic ability, especially among those with low incomes.

In terms of diversity, policies should consider this feature as being the core of an education offer that builds on the increasing need for flexibility in higher education. The approach needs to assume that micro-credentials come in diverse formats (online, face-to-face, or in blended formats) that allow for the development of a competitive micro-credential offer.

As concerns the faculty staff of HEIs, the lack of incentives around promotion and tenure poses a serious barrier. When there is no associated reward for increased workload, cooperation and participation are not to be expected. This is a matter that demands further action. In the Netherlands, for instance, a noteworthy trend continues to emerge in which professors are assuming more enriched task assignments than traditionally conceived. More specifically, they are assigned not only to Bachelor's and Master's courses but are also engaged in continuing education or education for professionals, which is legitimised and incentivised through rewards and recognition. Therefore, these activities are no longer an

"add-on" and do not come "on top" of existing assignments (Cendon and Noordegraaf, 2021).

Other indirect policies will be needed to include lifelong learning as a main task in the HEI institution.

## CONCLUSIONS

We espouse a view where national qualifications frameworks are driving the micro-credential development. Then, micro-credentials may provide strategic value in their integration with other major institutional initiatives as part of a larger qualification that is the NQF. Assessment and precision are critical for ensuring credential and competency validation for issuance of micro-credentials.

A national publishing system managing quality and transparency should be implemented, which allows credential comparison and transferability between institutions and countries.

Higher education institutions should be the key providers of HE micro-credentials.

Few government agencies and professional associations are taking leadership roles in moving micro-credentials on to national workforce agendas. However, with planning and investment with a focus on providing what our HE institutions do well, micro-credentials may be a conduit to other forms of collaborations with private sector partners, employers, and providers that expand opportunities for the institution and for students. This is not in contradiction with our assumption that accreditations should be issued or validated exclusively by a HE institution (HEI). These considerations and proposals would help the transformation of our HEIs to real Lifelong Learning HE institutions that will help individuals in their upskilling and reskilling through micro-credentials.

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