# A8.1, O3: Report on International Accreditation and the European Qualifications Framework

# Beneficiaries

- Aalborg University, Denmark
- Dublin City University, Ireland
- Groupe INSA | Institut National des sciences appliquées
- Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania
- Linköping University, Sweden
- Tampereen Korkeakoulusäätiö sr, Finland
- Hamburg University of Technology, Germany
- Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal
- Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain
- University of Stavanger, Norway
- Universita degli Studi di Trento, Italy
- University of Twente, The Netherlands

# Abstract

This report takes a look at contemporary international and European accreditation practices and the European Qualifications Framework, and the possible impact of these practices on the ECIU University. Furthermore, the report includes future needs for, and suggestions for the further development of, European accreditation practices.

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# Symbols and Abbrevations

In the order of appearance.

- ECIU = European Consortium of Innovative Universities
- EHEA = European Higher Education Area
- EQF = European Qualifications Framework
- NQFs = National Qualifications Frameworks
- LRC = Lisbon Recognition Convention
- EQAR = European Quality Assurance Register
- ESG = European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
- ECTS = European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and its guidelines
- EDCI = The Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure
- ENQA = The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- ENIC-NARIC networks = The European Network of Information Centres in the European Region, and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union
- EQAVET = the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training

# 1   Introduction

The WP8 work in accreditation issues has been, for the most part of the project's first year 2020, reliant on more detailed strategic decisions of project goals related to it. An important new context for the work in WP8 and task 8.1.3 is given in the strategic decisions made in the ECIU University 2030 paper[1] published in October 2020. The vision paper sets goals of a ECIU University dealing in non-degree education, thus limiting and focusing the analysis of accreditation practices and European frameworks to non-degree accreditation. Micro-credentials for learners in the form of micro-modules is set as the main form of challenge-based learning. Because of these strategic choices, degree education and joint degrees have been left out of the analysis and this report. ECIU University is currently (April 2021) working with its own vision of a European degree.

ECIU University's member universities are bound by similar European accreditation and qualifications framework regarding degree education. Nevertheless, the conceptualization of accreditation and recognition regarding challenge-based education, and micro-credentials and micro-modules, is diverse. The importance of defining the meaning and need of accreditation regarding continuous learning in ECIU University has emerged. This report is a joint effort of ECIU University tasks 8.1.3 and 7.1[2] as both WPs are working on accreditation issues. Many results derive also from a WP8.1.1 questionnaire in June-August 2020, and WP8.1.1 discussions held with all ECIU University member universities in November 2020, as accreditation related issues have been included as thematic topic in the 8.1.1 work on the current legislation in respect to tertiary education in 12 European countries and at the EU-level.

# 2   Objective

This report provides an overview of accreditation and recognition in ECIU University member countries and European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Joint work of WP7 and WP8 has provided the gathered information for the report through one survey (by WP7), one workshop (joint effort of WP7 and WP8), and overall desk research. ECIU University Vision 2030 focuses on continuous education, micro-credentials and micro-modules instead of degree education, and the analysis of the data in this report is affected by this strategic decision.

# 3   Accreditation at European level

According to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the EHEA is characterised by a diversity of approaches to external quality assurance, including accreditation, evaluation or audit, at the level of study programmes and/or institutions. These different approaches find their common denominator in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG).[3] Thus, the following frameworks and actors, among others, are involved in the accreditation and recognition of continuous education and micro-credentials:

- European and national frameworks:

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[1]   ECIU   University,   2020.   ECIU   University   2030.   Connects   U   for   life.   https://assets-global.website-files.com/562fb917aa38ca2e349b422e/5fa153b1c8e6ad03c125f699_20201195%20ECIU%20-%20Opmaak%20visie%202030%204.pdf.

[2] WP 7.1 has two tasks: 1) To create an overview of the systems for institutional accreditation of study programmes and courses, and 2) to create a joint accreditation process of micro-credentials and courses.

[3] ECIU University Deliverable Report 7.1.2. Report from first workshop in WP 7.1.

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- European Qualifications Framework (EQF).
  - National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and the 12 national qualifications systems in ECIU University.
  - The Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (commonly known as the Lisbon Recognition Convention—LRC).
  - European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).
  - European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015).
  - The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.
  - European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and its guidelines.
  - The Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI).
- Actors:
  - The 12 ECIU University member universities.
  - The European Commission.
  - The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) representing quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states.
  - National Quality Assurance and accreditation related agencies.
  - The European Network of Information Centres in the European Region, and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres in the European Union (ENIC-NARIC networks)

Other influencing agreements and guidelines for the accreditation and recognition in ECIU University, and European Universities in general, include:

- The transparency of qualifications (European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area).
- Quality assurance in higher education (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area).
- Quality assurance in vocational education and training (the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, EQAVET; community of practice that promotes European collaboration in developing and improving quality assurance in vocational education and training; EQAVET could possible provide useful best practices and prior studies related to continuous learning, especially with external stakeholders).
- Credits for achieved learning and the system for the credits (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, as part of European and national qualifications frameworks).
- Recognition issues (Lisbon Recognition Convention and the Diploma Supplement, as well as the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad).
- Recognition of prior learning and validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- Lifelong learning and career management (e.g. Europass).
- National qualifications frameworks, other tools, and infrastructure of each member university's country.
- The Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI; support for the issuing, sharing and storage of all forms of learning achievements in a digital format, including micro-credentials, and will link to the European Student Card Initiative).

# 4 Accreditation of degree and continuous education

The work in WP8.1.3 regarding accreditation and recognition in ECIU University member countries and European Higher Education Area EHEA has been done in the form of joint efforts with WP7.1 and WP8.1.3, as mentioned, as well as in the WP8.1.1 legal analysis work. Here, results from a WP7.1 survey, a joint workshop, a WP8.1.1 questionnaire, and discussions held with all ECIU University member universities, are presented.

## 4.1 Overview of accreditation based on the results

The survey results by WP7.1. show a variety of different contexts for ECIU member universities. It was carried out under WP7.1 and *gave a basic overview over how the various partner institutions in the ECIU University organise accreditation processes for courses and study programmes, and how national frameworks regulate the institutions' possibilities to self-accredit programmes.*[4]

The objective of the first joint workshop in WP7.1 (and wP8.1.3) was to reach a better and shared understanding of the main problems around joint accreditation. The intended outcomes were:

- To establish a network of administrators working with accreditation within the ECIU University.
- Produce a first concept note on joint accreditation, summing up from the workshop and pointing towards the work needed to be done to reach the goal for WP7.1 activity.

Joint workshop of WP7.1.2 and WP8.1.3, and its results has been described in detail by Deliverable report 7.1.2 "Report from first workshop in WP 7.1". Overall, the presentations and following discussions in the workshop *show that there are many questions that need to be addressed*. This is a process that will continue within the ECIU University; a follow-up workshop is planned for April 2021.

In Table 1, results of a WP8.1.1 questionnaire (answers gathered in June to August 2020) are presented. Here is important to note that this WP8.1.1 questionnaire was sent and answered before ECIU University's strategic decisions made in the ECIU University 2030 vision paper in October 2020. Two themes in the questionnaire focused in recognition and accreditation issues:

- Ensure automatic mutual recognition with ECIU member universities. (8 member universities notified of anticipated obstacles or uncertainty related to this theme.)
- Create joint accreditation process and quality assurance for education with ECIU member universities. (10 member universities notified of anticipated obstacles or uncertainty related to this theme.)

Legal challenges, including the possibility of the need for legislative changes, related to mutual recognition with ECIU University member universities exist in Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), Hamburg University of Technology (Germany) and Dublin City University (Ireland). Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania) notifies of a need for bilateral and/or multilateral agreements between ECIU University members. In Linköping University (Sweden), the quality of any joint degrees will be difficult to recognize automatically, and similarly in Aalborg University (Denmark), recognition can be done case by case, but not automatically. In University of Aveiro (Portugal) some problems might arise, depending on the scope and the dimension of the automatic recognition.

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[4] ECIU University Deliverable Report 7.1.2. Report from first workshop in WP 7.1.

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In in Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), Hamburg University of Technology (Germany), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania) and University of Stavanger (Norway) legal or other national level changes are needed regarding joint accreditation and quality assurance. In similar terms, in Dublin City University (Ireland) legal challenges might exist. In University of Trento (Italy), accreditation processes in the framework of ex ante information system (quantitative aspects) might be problematic. In University of Aveiro (Portugal), there is a need for changes in the national agency (for accreditation and quality assurance) and for coordination at European (institutions) level. University of Twente's (The Netherlands) and Dublin City University's (Ireland) answers refer to an existing difficult situation of joint programs, and they mention that currently accreditation systems are different from each other. Additionally, Linköping University (Sweden) notifies of a need to clarify what the join accreditation process and quality assurance would aim for.

| Red colour indicates countries anticipating legal obstacles regarding specific themes | Finland | Sweden | Norway | Lithuania | The Netherlands | Germany | Spain | Portugal | Italy | Ireland | Denmark | France | Total amount of "Yes" answers |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Education theme (15)** | 1 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 12 | 2 | 65 |
| Develop a joint education roadmap with ECIU member universities. |  | X |  | X |  |  | X |  |  | X | X |  | 5 |
| Develop a challenge-based learning scheme with ECIU member universities (involving learners, researchers, educators, and key-actors from the surrounding society, societal partners and industry). |  | X |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  | X |  | 3 |
| Develop challenge-based joint ECIU European Degree with ECIU member universities. |  |  | X | X | X |  | X | X | X | X |  |  | 7 |
| Develop minors with ECIU member universities. |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | 2 |
| Develop micromodules and microcredentials with ECIU member universities. |  | X |  | X |  |  | X |  | X |  |  |  | 4 |
| Create agile, tailor-made life-long learning opportunities with ECIU member universities. |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  | X |  |  |  | 3 |
| Develop joint European Competence Passport with ECIU member universities (including learning outcomes acquired at non-HEI stakeholders). |  |  |  | X | X |  | X | X |  | X | X |  | 7 |
| Employ European Student Card together with ECIU member universities. |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X | X | X | X |  | 5 |
| Ensure automatic mutual recognition with ECIU member universities. |  | X |  | X | X |  | X | X | X | X | X |  | 8 |
| Develop joint assessment mechanisms to allocate and distribute ECTS with ECIU member universities. |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | X |  | X |  | 3 |
| Create joint accreditation process and quality assurance for education with ECIU member universities. |  | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |  | 10 |
| Share education infrastructure with ECIU member universities. |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X | 2 |
| Share student data and registers with ECIU member universities. | X |  |  | X | X |  | X |  | X | X | X | X | 8 |
| Develop educational support for challenge-based learning for teachers together with ECIU member universities. |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | 0 |
| Develop and harmonize educational policies with ECIU member universities to optimally facilitate challenge-based learning. |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |  | X | X |  | 4 |

Table 1 Anticipated obstacles related to educational themes asked in a report by WP8.1, June-August 2020.[5]

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[5] Red colour indicates anticipated legal obstacles in ECIU member universities' countries, and yellow colour indicates accreditation and recognition related obstacles. For note, these results are from before the ECIU University Vision 2030 paper was decided.

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## 4.2 Overview of accreditation of micro-credentials

The European Commission's 'A European Approach to Micro-Credentials' document[6] published in December 2020 describes *"what micro-credentials are and - - how micro-credentials relate to National Qualification Frameworks, national qualification systems and current certificates and diplomas."* the Commission's document brings together different views to micro-credentials and is based on both vocational education and higher education. In contrast to ECIU's micro-credentials and challenge-based learning, the Commission's conceptualization of micro-credentials refers mostly to flexible learning through short courses. Thus, the framework in which micro-credentials and micro-modules take place, is fundamentally different than the framework to which ECIU's Vision 2030 refers to; challenge-based learning and research settings, focusing in learning in the interaction between the higher education institutions, stakeholders partaking in the challenges, and the learners and researchers. In addition to bringing together different perspectives and needs for micro-credentials, the Commission's document has made proposals for a shared definition of micro-credentials, common to all the sectors; common characteristics of a European approach to micro-credentials, and a roadmap of actions to be taken at European level.

An ECIU University white paper on micro-credentials, 'Paving the road for the micro-credentials movement'[7], was published by the ECIU University on 28 January 2021. The paper provides strategic goals and concrete steps 'for the future development of the micro-credentials movement', based on ECIU University's vision. At the time of writing this deliverable report, WP4, responsible of micro-credentials in ECIU University, is working with WP7.1 in the planning of the quality assurance of micro-credentials. The ECIU University's white paper on micro-credentials has provided the vision, and WP4 is currently working on a roadmap and next steps. Contents of the roadmap will greatly affect the evaluation and planning of accreditation of micro-credentials.

If micro-credentials are produced only as part of degree education (accredited according to European qualifications and other necessary frameworks and principles by the national quality agencies), no obstacles for recognizing or accrediting micro-credentials exist. On the other hand, at least two main challenges exist: the overall challenges in recognition and possible accreditation of micro-credentials and micro-modules as a new form of continuous education and non-degree education; and private and other external stakeholders producing micro-credentials as traditional accreditation processes do not necessarily recognize these as educational institutions. From the perspective of these two main challenges, the traditional tools provided by Bologna process and the ones in use in the EHEA will need to be examined thoroughly for the ECIU University to understand how they can support quality assurance and wider uptake of micro-credentials, according to its vision 2030 and the white paper on micro-credentials.

## 4.3 Summary of accreditation of continuous education

As a summary of accreditation practices related to continuous education, the main question is how to recognize and accredit new forms of continuous education at different levels: (pan-) European,

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[6] European Commission, 2020. Final report: A European approach to micro-credentials - output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group. https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7a939850-6c18-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1.

[7] ECIU University, 2021. Paving the road for the micro-credentials movement. White paper on micro-credentials. https://www.eciu.org/news/paving-the-road-for-the-micro-credentials-movement.

national, alliance or network level, and institutional level. Possible answers could be found through following additional questions:

- How to recognize and accredit micro-credentials and micro-modules that are still forming and in the process of institutionalization (vagueness of concepts and goals)?
- How to develop policy tools (and goals) created and used in the Bologna process to support the recognition and accreditation of micro-credentials and micro-modules?
- How to increase common understanding and trust related to these forms of continuous education while each university alliance in the European University Initiative have their own perspective to them (e.g. challenge-based thinking in ECIU University)?
- How to lead this institutionalization process into the EQF?
- How to harmonize possible changes in the EQF into national qualifications frameworks?
- And how to harmonize and implement possible changes in the EQF into each European University's institutional setting?

# 5 Future needs for European accreditation practices

Looking into the future of European higher education and the accreditation practices taking place, it is clear that we need aligned recognition practices, especially for the relatively new micro-credentials and micro-modules, throughout Europe. We also need to evaluate in what ways we need accreditation, as it is traditionally understood, applied to micro-credentials, and whether or not there is room for new ideas. Micro-credentials provided by external stakeholders, in relation to traditional universities, should be also included in the planned recognition and accreditation practices. Any system of recognition, quality assurance or accreditation should be accepted by all partners. Recognition and accreditation scenarios are currently under work in ECIU University, and as such, it is too early to provide any concrete ideas or structures for possible practices. An ECIU University workshop dealing in accreditation is planned to be held on 28 April 2021.

Similarly, any proposals for a legal framework for joint quality assurance is not available as of yet, since ECIU University is currently working on it. As decided in the ECIU University 2030 vision paper, degree education has been left out of the focus of ECIU University, and thus, from this report.

# 6 Acknowledgements