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ECIU University Micro-Credential Implementation Briefing Paper

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Overview

This paper focuses on one aspect of the implementation of Annex 1 & 2 of the European Council Recommendation on Micro-Credentials in a higher education context and within the ECIU Alliance. It focuses particularly on the interplay and the use ECTS and the levelling of micro-credentials to National Qualification Frameworks, and ultimately the European Qualification Framework. It outlines an approach taken within the Alliance and the underpinning rationale for this approach. The paper concludes by pointing to some activity in jurisdictions of the ECIU Alliance in this respect and the need to ensure that EHEA principles of recognition, portability and transparency are paramount as national systems continue to forge ahead with the implementation of micro-credentials across the education and training sectors.

Introduction – Defining Micro-Credentials

The learning opportunities delivered by ECIU micro-modules and challenges fall within the definition for micro-credentials issued within the European Council Recommendation on Micro-Credentials in 2022, and states:

Associate Professor Henri Pirkkalainen, ECIU University activity leader for learner guidance, says centralisation is the key advantage here.

‘Micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to microcredentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Microcredentials 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.

(Council of Europe, 2022, p.13)

Notably, the European definition does not define a micro-credential purely as an award but rather as a learning experience and goes on to state that micro-credentials can be “stand alone or combined into larger qualifications”. It is important to make note of Annex 1 of the Recommendation in this context, where it lists the European standard elements which should be included to describe a micro-credential, mandatory elements in this list include¹:

¹ See Appendix 1 for the more detail

- *Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits where possible).*
 - *Level (and cycle if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable.*

(Council of Europe, 2022, p.16)

Noting that “if applicable” may leave room for interpretation, it should be viewed that understanding the level of formal learning is an essential attribute in the recognition and assessment of prior learning and supports principles of portability and transparency. Annex 2 of the Recommendation, sets out the European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials, with respect to the principle of transparency it asserts of micro-credentials, their workload and relationship to qualification systems the following:

Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable and understandable, with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.

Workload Higher education institutions should use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and comply with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation, where possible, to demonstrate the notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the micro-credential...

Qualifications framework/systems

Micro-credentials may be included in national qualifications frameworks/systems, where relevant, and in line with national priorities and decisions. National qualifications frameworks/ systems are referenced to the European qualifications framework and, for higher education qualifications, self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area, which can further support the transparency of, and trust in, micro-credentials...

(Council of Europe, 2022, p.30-31)

Awarding ECTS and Assigning Levels to Micro-Credentials

The European principles as set out in Annex 2 of the Micro-Credential Recommendation are in line with ECTS guidelines. ECIU institutions have been applying these consistently with respect to micro-credentials in the Alliance that come in form of micro-modules and challenges which are offered to learners. The guidelines recognise that one of the key decisions taken in the design of learning is the level at which the learning is to take place. Levelling of learning is a core principle of ECTS, and it recognises that a level on national and European frameworks normally denote the level of the final qualification (ECTS User Guide, 2015, p.21). The ECTS Guide, furthermore, guides institutions to level smaller units or components of learning (ECTS User Guide, 2015, p.2) using the same principles aimed at formulating programme learning outcomes:

The principles for formulating learning outcomes for educational components are the same as for programme learning outcomes.

(ECTS User Guide, 2015, p.24)

With one of the guidelines for programme learning outcomes stipulating the following:

The learning outcomes should adequately reflect the context, level, scope and content of the programme.

(ECTS User Guide, 2015, p.23)

Further with respect to the evaluation of the quality of ECTS implementation institutions, the following indicators are used:

Educational components are expressed in terms of appropriate learning outcomes, and clear information is available concerning their level, credits, delivery and assessment;..

Students are provided with detailed information and advice so that they can follow progression rules, exploit options for flexible pathways and select educational components at an appropriate level for their qualification;

(ECTS User Guide, 2015, p.51)

ECIU Micro-Credentials

In line with ECTS implementation all micro-credentials in the ECIU project are assigned an EQF level, following the Annex 1 Council recommendation. This is one element of the multi-faceted process that ECIU micro-credentials are subject to and includes adherence to internal quality assurance processes of constituent institutions. Elements of which include, the development of micro-credential descriptors both locally and at ECIU level, internal quality assurance approval and the inclusion of micro-credentials in external quality assurance reviews of academic units within participating organisations. ECIU micro-credentials can be considered from the following perspective they are normally:

micro-credentials for credit, that come in the form of micro-modules or challenges, they are not in themselves a designated award at undergraduate/bachelor, postgraduate/master degree level in the main but are one component of a flexible learning pathway of an individual learner.

These micro-credentials whether challenges or micro-modules, have been developed and designed using ECIU's signature pedagogical format Challenge Based Learning. The predominant form of micro-credential therefore, within the ECIU is micro-credentials for credit i.e. ECTS. As part of the ECIU approach to the issuing of micro-credentials A number of high-profile European initiatives and projects over the past number of years have recommended the levelling of micro-credentials to national qualification frameworks and have encouraged national quality assurance agencies to introduce mechanisms to ensure this MicroBol (2022), ENQA (2023), StackQ (NufficNL, 2022) etc. Notably, none of these initiatives have differentiated a call to levelling based on the outcome of the micro-credential i.e. an award or credit only which is in line with a more comprehensive conceptualisation of qualification as per the EQF Recommendation (Council of Europe 2017).

Future Facing

All European States are engaging with the reporting of the implementation of the European Council Recommendation, and it will be illuminating to see whether the issue of levelling, NFQs, with respect to micro-credentials has come to the fore across the Union.

Notably, clear legislative action has been taken in the Netherlands in this regard, which has unearthed a myriad of questions for education and training providers to grapple with as the process for assigning an EQF-Level to micro-credentials has been mandated to a national agency (Ministry of Education Culture and Science, 2024). As Europe engages with this it might behove an examination of international practice, for example in New Zealand following a review their NZQF has been adapted to include micro-credentials across all levels of their framework and the framework is known as the NZQCF (New Zealand Qualification and Credential Framework) with a specific micro-credential award type.

As this paper illustrates, the recommendation for higher education institutions and Alliances, by default to use ECTS in their implementation of micro-credentials is identified as a key component in supporting transparency and recognition of learning within the education and training system. The debate of the inclusion or EQF levels and indeed national levels to micro-credentials, may seem pedantic at first but it is at the essence of ensuring a cohesive and inclusive system of higher education and training. It will ultimately enhance the trust of cohorts of learners who are engaging with them as part of their lifelong learning journeys.

References:

Council of the European Union, 2017, COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01))

Council of the European Union, 2022, Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability, available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf>

ENQA (2023) QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS: Expectations within the Context of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, available at <https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENQA-micro-credentials-report.pdf>.

European Commission, 2015 ECTS User Guide available at: https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/ects-users-guide_en.pdf

MicroBol (2022) European project MICROBOL Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA, available at: https://microbol.knowledgeinnovation.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/03/Micro-credentials_Framework_final-1.pdf

Ministry of Education Culture and Science (2024) NLFQ Act, available at: <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/stb-2024-223.html>

NUFFIC NL (2022) The Rise and Recognition of Micro-credentials Stacking Modules and the Future of the Qualification, available at: <https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2022-03/The%20rise%20and%20recognition%20of%20micro-credentials.pdf>

Appendix 1 – Annex 2 European Recommendation (Council of Europe, 2022, p.29–p.34)

1	Quality	<p>Micro-credentials are subject to internal and external quality assurance by the system producing them (e.g. the education, training or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). Quality assurance processes must be fit-for-purpose, be clearly documented and accessible and meet the needs and expectations of learners and stakeholders.</p> <p>Providers: External quality assurance is based primarily on the assessment of providers (rather than individual courses) and the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures.</p> <p>Providers should make sure that internal quality assurance covers all the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · the overall quality of the micro-credential itself, based on the standards referred to below · the quality of the course, where applicable, leading to the micro-credential · learners' feedback on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential; and · peers feedback, including other providers and stakeholders, on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential <p>Standards: External quality assurance is conducted in line with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Annex IV of the European qualifications framework Recommendation, where applicable; · the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, where applicable; · the European quality assurance reference framework (the EQAVET Framework) in the field of vocational education and training, where applicable; · other quality assurance instruments, including registries and labels, to build public trust in micro-credentials, where applicable.
2	Transparency	<p>Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable and understandable with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.</p>

		<p>Workload</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher education institutions should use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and comply with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation, wherever possible, to demonstrate the notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the micro-credential. Providers that do not use the ECTS may use other systems or types of information that can effectively describe learning outcomes and workload, in compliance with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation. <p>Qualifications framework/systems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Micro-credentials may be included in national qualifications frameworks/systems, where relevant and in line with national priorities and decisions. National qualifications frameworks/systems are referenced to the European qualifications framework and, for higher education qualifications, self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area, which can further support the transparency, and trust in, micro-credentials. <p>Information on the offer of micro-credentials</p> <p>Systems for micro-credentials should provide transparent and clear information, to underpin guidance systems for learners, in line with national practices and stakeholders needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information on providers of micro-credentials should be published in registers, or incorporated into existing registers. Higher-education providers (and other relevant providers) should be included, where possible, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), based on quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG); Information on learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials should be accessible and easily exchanged through relevant platforms, including Europass.
3	Relevance	<p>Micro-credentials should be designed as distinct, targeted learning achievements and learning opportunities leading to them are updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs.</p>

		Collaboration between education and training organisations, employers, social partners, other providers and users of micro-credentials is encouraged to increase the relevance of the micro-credentials for the labour market.
4	Valid assessment	Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards.
5	Learning Pathways	<p>Micro-credentials are designed to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to 'stack', validate and recognise micro-credentials from across different systems.</p> <p>Stackability</p> <p>Micro-credentials are designed to be modular so that other micro-credentials may be added to create larger credentials. Decisions to 'stack' or combine credentials lie with the receiving organisation (e.g. education and training institutions, employers, etc.) in line with their practices and should support the goals and needs of the learner.</p> <p>Validation of non-formal and informal learning</p> <p>Obtaining micro-credentials is possible following assessment of learning outcomes, obtained either through a specific course leading to a micro-credential, or on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes resulting from non-formal and informal learning.</p>
6	Recognition	<p>Recognition has a clear signalling value of learning outcomes for smaller modules of learning and paves the way for a wider offer of such learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU.</p> <p>Micro-credentials are recognised for academic or employment purposes based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad, when dealing with micro-credentials issued by formal education providers.</p>

7	Portable	Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g Europass), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. The infrastructure for storing data is based on open standards and data models, This ensures interoperability and seamless exchange of data, and allows for smooth checks of data authenticity.
8	Learner centred	Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in the internal and external quality assurance processes and their feedback is taken into account as part of the continuous improvement of the micro-credential.
9	Authentic	Micro-credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder (learner), the legal identity of the issuer, the date and location of issuance of the micro-credential.
10	Information and guidance	Information and advice on micro-credentials should be incorporated in lifelong learning guidance services and should reach the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, supporting education, training and career choices.

Source:

Council of the European Union, 2022, *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability*, available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf>