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Towards a European Micro-Credential Label Building Trust, Transparency, Recognition and Lifelong Learning Across Europe

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Executive Summary

The European Union has established a comprehensive foundation for the development of micro-credentials through the Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability (2022). More recently, the Joint European Degree Label (EDL) has demonstrated how a common European quality framework can be operationalised through shared criteria, transparent assessment processes and recognition mechanisms. OECD research concludes that successful micro-credential eco-systems have multiple components including; high-quality courses, a strong alignment between these and key stakeholders and national trust and innovation architecture i.e. education providers, employers, qualification systems, quality assurance frameworks, labour-market intelligence and digital credential infrastructure (OECD, 2026). In this context, there is a compelling opportunity to explore the establishment of a European Micro-Credential Label (EMCL).

The EMCL would provide a trusted European quality mark for micro-credentials that meet agreed standards for quality, transparency, portability, recognition and learner-centred design and alignment with stakeholder requirements. This label would benefit learners, employers, education providers, professional bodies and policymakers by strengthening confidence in shorter forms of learning and enabling more effective lifelong learning pathways. (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2026).

This paper argues that Europe is now well-positioned to move from principles and standards towards a voluntary European trust label for micro-credentials supporting harmonisation across Europe. The label would support country specific nuances and requirements and promote a harmonised and interconnected micro-credential system in Europe.

The proposed label builds upon existing European frameworks, providing a visible and trusted European-level quality, trust and transparency mechanism. It would leverage existing national quality assurance arrangements and ultimately support institutional autonomy and European University Alliances collaboration.



Introduction

The pace of economic, technological and societal change requires individuals to continuously update their knowledge, skills and competences throughout their lives. Digital transformation, green transition policies, demographic change and evolving labour market needs have accelerated the demand for flexible forms of learning that can respond rapidly to emerging skills gaps (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Recognising this challenge, the Council of the European Union (2022) defined micro-credentials as records of learning outcomes acquired through a small volume of learning, assessed against transparent criteria and underpinned by quality assurance processes. Micro-credentials are intended to provide flexible, targeted learning opportunities that complement, rather than replace, traditional qualifications and degree programmes.

Despite widespread growth in micro-credential provision across Europe, significant challenges remain regarding quality assurance, portability, recognition and comparability. Learners often struggle to understand the value of different micro-credentials, while employers and institutions face difficulties assessing their quality and relevance (Council of the European Union, 2022). However, the OECD (2026) identifies employer involvement and labour-market intelligence as emerging international good practice in developing eco-systems and notes that employer endorsement is rapidly becoming a defining characteristic of trusted micro-credentials.

The successful development and initial rollout of the Joint European Degree Label provides an important precedent. It demonstrates that European-level trust frameworks can be designed to strengthen quality and visibility while respecting institutional autonomy and national education systems (European Commission, 2026).



Why Europe Needs a European Micro-Credential Label?



From Quality Assurance to Ecosystem Harmonisation

Many debates on micro-credentials have focused solely on quality assurance and recognition. While these are critically important, emerging international evidence suggests that quality assurance alone is insufficient, a point recognised by the I'MINQA report on a trust label for micro-credentials in 2025 by the ENQA and national QA agencies.

The OECD's review of international micro-credential systems further demonstrates that successful ecosystems require coordination across multiple dimensions, including governance, labour-market engagement, qualifications frameworks, digital infrastructure and learner support systems (OECD, 2026). This finding has important implications for Europe rather and suggests that the EMCL needs to represent more than solely a quality badge.

The EMCL should be understood as a mechanism that contributes to ecosystem harmonisation across Europe. The label can help align a multitude of stakeholders including; learners, higher education institutions, European University Alliances, vocational education and training providers, employers, quality assurance agencies, professional bodies, quality assurance architecture including qualification frameworks, digital credential systems. Fundamentally, the EMCL aims to support a coherent, and cohesive trusted micro-credential ecosystem.



Building Trust

One of the most significant challenges facing the micro-credential ecosystem is the absence of a recognisable European mechanism that signals quality and reliability. While providers increasingly issue micro-credentials, stakeholders often lack confidence in determining whether these credentials meet consistent standards. The OECD signals trust as an outcome of multiple interconnected factors rather than a single quality assurance mechanism, trust of credentials is strengthened when they are:

1. Delivered by recognised education and training institutions;
2. Subject to transparent quality processes;
3. Clearly described
4. Externally validated where appropriate
5. Aligned with labour-market needs
6. Portable across systems and borders (OECD, 2026)

The EMCL should function as a trusted quality mark, indicating that a credential satisfies agreed European requirements relating to learning outcomes, assessment, transparency, quality assurance and learner-centred design (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2026). It can also be designed to represent and mean for learners, employers and institutions.

Notably, the European Students' Union in their Micro-Credential Statement (2026) justifiably state that not every short course, digital badge or learning activity should automatically be recognised as a micro-credential. They align with the position that micro-credentials should meet agreed European standards relating to quality assurance, assessment, learning outcomes and transparency. The ESU further emphasise that learner trust depends fundamentally on the credibility of issuing organisations, particularly in an increasingly diverse landscape that includes public institutions, private providers and digital learning platforms.

The EMCL would provide a visible and trusted European signal that a credential has been developed in line with agreed standards and recognised quality requirements, making it easier for learners, employers and institutions to identify high-quality provision across borders. (European Students' Union, 2026). Just as the Joint European Degree Label aims to serve as a symbol of excellence for transnational degree programmes providing coherence of experience to learners, a Micro-Credential Label could increase confidence in short-form learning opportunities throughout Europe (European Commission, 2026).

The EMCL would build on the success of European instruments and policies supporting harmonisation including Erasmus+, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), European Standards and

Guidelines (ESGs) and the newly defined Joint European Degree Label. A position supported by the European Students' Union (2026). They call for the complementarity of micro-credentials with current modes of learning asserting that micro-credentials should be stackable, support progression to larger qualifications, and be portable across institutions, sectors and countries. Furthermore, they stress that micro-credentials should not exist as isolated learning experiences but should contribute to coherent and meaningful learning pathways (European Students' Union, 2026).



Improving Recognition

Recognition remains one of the most frequently cited barriers to the wider adoption of micro-credentials. While some institutions and education systems recognise micro-credentials for progression, credit accumulation and professional development purposes, recognition practices vary considerably across sectors, institutions and countries. The European Commission's Progress Report on the Implementation of the Council of the European Union's Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials (2025) found that automatic recognition mechanisms remain at an early stage of development.

Approaches differ substantially between higher education, VET and employment systems, and that the lack of common definitions, quality assurance arrangements and recognition frameworks continues to hinder portability, comparability and cross-border recognition (European Commission, 2025). Furthermore, survey respondents highlighted that fragmented approaches to recognition and varying national practices can create barriers to learner mobility, international cooperation and labour market integration (European Commission, 2025).

The EMCL could facilitate greater consistency by creating a common reference point for recognition decisions. This would support learners seeking progression opportunities, employers evaluating skills attainment and institutions considering credit transfer or accumulation arrangements (Council of the European Union, 2022). The EMCL should therefore promote:

- **Academic Recognition by** supporting progression and credit transfer across institutions.
- **Professional Recognition by** facilitating acceptance by professional and sectoral organisations.

- **Employer Recognition by** increasing confidence among employers regarding the value and relevance of labelled credentials.
- **Cross-Border Recognition by** supporting mobility throughout Europe and beyond.

Importantly, such a label would complement, rather than replace, existing national recognition mechanisms and institutional autonomy (Council of the European Union, 2022) what is sought is harmonisation through the EMCL not uniformity.



Supporting Lifelong Learning

The Council Recommendation explicitly identifies micro-credentials as an important tool for increasing participation in lifelong learning and supporting labour market transitions. Micro-credentials can play a significant role in helping Europe meet its skills development and adult learning objectives (Council of the European Union, 2022).

A European trust label would strengthen visibility and confidence in micro-credentials, encouraging greater participation among learners and increasing investment by employers and education providers (Council of the European Union, 2022).



Learning from the Joint European Degree Label

The Joint European Degree Label was established to provide visibility, prestige and trust for transnational joint programmes delivered by higher education institutions across Europe (European Commission, 2026).

The framework is built around two overarching dimensions:

1. Programme organisation and quality assurance.
2. European values and priorities.

Its criteria include student-centred learning, quality assurance, inclusiveness, employability, multilingualism, digitalisation and sustainability

(European Commission, 2026). Many of these principles are highly relevant for micro-credentials. However, several programme-level requirements, such as joint degrees, mobility requirements and dissertation supervision, are neither practical nor appropriate for small-volume learning experiences (European Commission, 2026).

A future EMCL should therefore adopt the quality, transparency and learner-centred principles of the Joint European Degree Label while remaining agile enough to accommodate short, rapidly evolving learning opportunities.



Learnings and Lessons from the IMINQA Quality Label Feasibility Study

The findings of the IMINQA feasibility assessment (Zhivkovikj & Munjishvili, 2024) on the establishment of quality label for micro-credentials provide strong evidence that Europe has reached a stage of micro-credential maturity. However, greater coordination is required to unlock scale, trust and cross-border recognition.

The study found broad support among quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and alternative providers for a European quality label. With participants viewing label not as an additional accreditation mechanism, but rather as a common European trust signal capable of increasing transparency, strengthening learner confidence and improving employer understanding of micro-credentials.

Stakeholders consistently identified fragmentation, inconsistent quality signalling and limited recognition across systems and borders as key barriers to wider adoption of micro-credentials (Zhivkovikj & Munjishvili, 2024). These findings suggest that, despite the existence of a common European micro-credential definition and design principles, learners and employers still face difficulties in distinguishing high-quality, trustworthy micro-credentials from an increasingly complex marketplace. The EMCL would directly address this challenge by translating existing European policy commitments into a visible and recognisable quality and transparency instrument.

Importantly, the study concludes that the greatest added value of a European lies in connecting, amplifying and indeed harmonising existing

quality arrangements through a common European framework. Quality Agencies emphasised that a successful label should be complementary to national systems, reduce information asymmetries, support recognition decisions and strengthen confidence among employers and learners (Zhivkovikj & Munjishvili, 2024).

The study further highlights the importance of clear governance, public transparency, digital verification and accessible information systems, all of which align closely with the objectives of the Council Micro-Credential Recommendation (2022). Taken together, the findings indicate that a EMCL could serve as an important piece of European educational infrastructure: a practical mechanism for improving trust, supporting mobility, enabling recognition and reducing fragmentation across the rapidly expanding micro-credential landscape.

In this respect, the study reinforces the OECD's (2026) conclusion that the future success of micro-credentials depends not only on the quality of individual credentials but also on the development of coherent ecosystems that link quality assurance, labour-market relevance, learner portability and transparent recognition arrangements.



Protected Designations and Quality-Assured Labels: Lessons from International Practice

International experience suggests that creating trusted, quality-assured designations that provide confidence to learners, employers and education providers. The OECD's review of emerging micro-credential ecosystems highlights that most jurisdictions have focused on developing common definitions, quality frameworks, qualifications framework linkages and recognition arrangements rather than legally protecting the term itself (OECD, 2023).

A particularly noteworthy example is Ontario, where the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) has proposed the use of the Ontario Micro-Credential (OMC) designation as an official quality-assured mark. Under this model, only recognised post-secondary institutions operating within Ontario's quality assurance system may issue an OMC, while employers, industry bodies and other organisations can participate through approved partnership arrangements. This approach preserves innovation and collaboration while providing stakeholders with a reliable signal of quality and trust (OECD, 2023).

Other jurisdictions have adopted complementary approaches. In New Zealand, micro-credentials are formally integrated into the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) and are subject to approval, accreditation and review processes administered by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Rather than protecting the term itself, New Zealand has focused on ensuring that recognised micro-credentials are underpinned by robust quality assurance, demonstrated stakeholder need and transparent learning outcomes (OECD, 2023).

Similarly, British Columbia has established a provincial Micro-Credential Framework that provides a shared definition and design principles for micro-credentials, emphasising competency-based learning, industry relevance and recognition for employment and further learning purposes. The British Columbia experience demonstrates the value of a clear public framework that strengthens consistency and stakeholder confidence while maintaining flexibility for providers to innovate and respond rapidly to labour market needs (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Training, 2021; OECD, 2023).

These international examples suggest that Europe has an opportunity to adopt a similarly positive and enabling approach. Rather than seeking to legally protect the term micro-credential, a future EMCL would serve as a recognised European trust mark. It would be awarded only to micro-credentials that meet agreed European standards relating to quality assurance, transparency, assessment, portability, stackability and learner-centred design. Furthermore, the EMCL should also be designed to align with:

- National skills strategies;
- Regional development priorities and innovation systems;
- European and/or national skills forecasts;
- Labour-market observatories;
- Sectoral intelligence initiatives;
- The Pact for Skills;
- The Union of Skills agenda;
- The Skills Portability Initiative and proposed Skills Portability Act (European Commission, 2026), including emerging European standards for digitally issued, comparable and verifiable qualifications.

The EMCL should be developed in close connection with the Skills Portability Initiative so that European quality assurance, digital verification and cross-border comparability reinforce one another. Whilst the Skills Portability Initiative will provide the technical and regulatory conditions for qualifications and skills to travel more easily, the EMCL can help ensure that portable micro-credentials are also trusted, educationally meaningful and recognisable across institutional, sectoral and national boundaries.

Conclusions of the European Skills High Level Board (2026) reinforce the importance of embedding micro-credentials within broader regional and sectoral skills ecosystems. The Board recommended the development of Skills Partnerships for Adult Reskilling (SPARKs), bringing together employers, education and training providers, regional authorities, research organisations and social partners to create agile and labour-market-responsive learning systems. There are natural and congruent synergies between the SPARK model and the objectives of a EMCL. While the EMCL centres on a trusted European framework for quality, transparency and recognition, SPARK ecosystems can contribute to governance and stakeholder engagement structures necessary to ensure that learning opportunities remain relevant to rapidly evolving regional and sectoral skills needs. The High-Level Board specifically identifies micro-credentials as an important mechanism for more flexible upskilling and reskilling and along with other stakeholders calls for their wider development, recognition and funding. The Board further highlights the need for learner-centred and accessible learning opportunities tailored to working adults.

A future EMCL whilst focusing on quality assurance principles can also leverage recognised skills ecosystem partnerships, including SPARKs, Centres of Vocational Excellence, Pact for Skills partnerships and European University Alliances. The goal being to strengthen employer confidence, facilitate skills anticipation and ensure that labelled micro-credentials contribute directly to regional innovation, economic development and workforce transformation objectives

Such alignment would help ensure that micro-credentials address genuine economic and societal needs. This model would preserve openness and innovation across the broader micro-credential ecosystem while providing learners, employers, higher education institutions and policymakers with a visible signal of quality and European added value (Council of the European Union, 2022; OECD, 2023; European Commission, 2026)



Existing Foundations for a European Micro-Credential Label



Annex I: European Standard Elements

A key strength of the 2022 Council Recommendation is the inclusion of Annex I, which establishes a common set of European standard elements for describing micro-credentials (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Mandatory elements include:

- learner identification;
- title of the micro-credential;
- awarding body;
- learning outcomes;
- workload;
- level;
- assessment type;
- quality assurance arrangements.

These standards create a foundation for transparency, comparability and interoperability across Europe (Council of the European Union, 2022).

A European Micro-Credential Label should require compliance with these standard elements as a minimum condition for participation.



Annex II: European Principles for Design and Issuance

Annex II establishes ten principles governing the design and issuance of micro-credentials:

1. Quality
2. Transparency
3. Relevance
4. Valid assessment
5. Learning pathways

6. Recognition
7. Portability
8. Learner-centredness
9. Authenticity
10. Information and guidance (Council of the European Union, 2022).

These principles represent a ready-made European quality framework and should form the core assessment criteria for any future label.



The ECIU University Experience

The experience of ECIU University demonstrates the practical potential of micro-credentials in European higher education. ECIU University has pioneered challenge-based learning approaches that bring together universities, industry and society to address real-world challenges. Its model supports flexible learning pathways, interdisciplinary collaboration and shorter learning experiences that can be accumulated over time to support personal and professional development (ECIU University, n.d.).

The alliance has demonstrated several characteristics that align closely with European micro-credential policy objectives:

- flexible learner pathways;
- challenge-based learning;
- cross-border collaboration;
- lifelong learning participation;
- engagement with employers and societal stakeholders.

These developments illustrate how universities are already moving towards more modular and responsive forms of learning provision. However, the ECIU experience also highlights the need for greater trust and recognition. As providers increasingly develop innovative micro-credentials, learners and employers require a consistent way to determine which credentials meet agreed European standards.

A EMCL would provide that trust architecture. Rather than constraining

innovation, it would enhance the visibility, recognition and credibility of innovative initiatives such as those pioneered by ECIU University (ECIU University, n.d.; Council of the European Union, 2022).



Stakeholder Benefits



Benefits for Learners

A EMCL would provide learners with greater confidence in the quality and value of micro-credentials. Labelled credentials would contain transparent information regarding learning outcomes, workload, assessment arrangements and quality assurance processes, enabling informed decision-making (Council of the European Union, 2022). The label would also support portability and recognition, making it easier for learners to present credentials across institutions, sectors and countries (Council of the European Union, 2022).



Benefits for Employers

Employers frequently report challenges in understanding and evaluating the growing number of credentials available in the marketplace. A European Label would reduce information asymmetries by signalling compliance with agreed standards. Employers would gain greater confidence in the quality, relevance and authenticity of labelled micro-credentials and would be able to invest more confidently in workforce upskilling and reskilling initiatives (Council of the European Union, 2022).



Benefits for Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions would benefit from increased visibility and credibility for their micro-credential offerings. A common European framework could facilitate collaboration between institutions and support the ambitions of European Universities alliances by improving recognition and portability (European Commission, 2026; Council of the European Union, 2022).



Benefits for Vocational Education and Training Providers

The label would provide VET providers with a mechanism for demonstrating quality and enhancing cross-sector recognition. It would support adult learning programmes, continuing professional development and lifelong learning pathways while strengthening the credibility of shorter learning experiences (Council of the European Union, 2022).



Benefits for Policymakers and Society

For policymakers, the label could support the implementation of the European Skills Agenda, the European Education Area, digital transition strategies and sustainability objectives. It would strengthen the infrastructure required for lifelong learning and foster a more resilient European workforce (European Commission, 2020; Council of the European Union, 2022).



Conclusion

Europe possesses many of the elements required to establish a successful EMCL. The Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-Credentials has already provided a common definition, a set of standard elements and ten quality principles for design and issuance. The Joint European Degree Label demonstrates how European-level frameworks can be translated into robust assessment and recognition systems (Council of the European Union, 2022; European Commission, 2026).

At the same time, pioneering initiatives such as ECIU University and other European University Alliances have shown that flexible, challenge-based and stackable learning models are becoming an important feature of the European educational landscape. What remains missing is a trusted European mechanism that signals quality, transparency and recognition across this increasingly diverse ecosystem.

A EMCL would not replace national systems, institutional autonomy or existing qualifications. Rather, it would provide a harmonised shared European trust architecture that supports lifelong learning, labour market responsiveness and educational innovation. In doing so, it could become

a complementary and useful instrument to advance Europe's ambition to build a more skilled, adaptable, inclusive and resilient society. Importantly, the EMCL should not be viewed solely as a labour market instrument. As highlighted by the European Students' Union and stated equally as clearly in the Council of the European Union's (2022) recommendation on micro-credentials, micro-credentials must complement rather than replace comprehensive degree education. They also should be developed in ways that protect student and learners rights, inclusion, public accountability, and the broader civic purposes of higher education. The EMCL should therefore place learner-centred design, transparency, quality assurance, and stackability at its core, ensuring that flexibility is accompanied by trust and educational integrity

Arguably the EMCL should represent more than a technical certification mechanism. It is an opportunity to create a shared European standard that connects quality, recognition, learner empowerment, social inclusion, and workforce transformation. By bringing together the learner-centred principles advocated by the European Students' Union and the ecosystem approach championed by the European Skills High-Level Board and numerous other state and European actors, the EMCL can become a cornerstone of the European Education Area and the Union of Skills.

The question is no longer whether micro-credentials will play a significant role in Europe's future learning landscape. The question is whether Europe can seize the opportunity to ensure that they are coherent with current education and training mechanisms. It is essential that they are trusted, inclusive, portable, and ultimately provide meaningful learning opportunities for learners and employers alike. The ECIU University alliance believes that a EMCL provides that assurance and should progress forward as a strategic European priority.



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