**REPORT Group 1 Working Group on Quality Assurance**

12 January 2021, 09:00-16:00h

This meeting was attended by the members of the Working Group on Quality Assurance (one of the working groups in the project MICROBOL) and chaired by the group chair, Magalie Soenen.

Objectives and expected outcomes:

The aim of this meeting was to look at the challenges to be tackled in the application of the Bologna tools to the quality assurance of micro-credentials. The working group outlined the key challenges and started exploring possible solutions in the integration of micro-credentials into the (Bologna) framework(s).

The working group focused on two aspects of quality assurance:

* QA of the learning experience (ESG, other standards & guidelines, …)
* QA of the certificate/credential (link to recognition, European Standard, …)

Methodology:

The working group followed the following structure:

1. Plenary session and results of the survey on Micro-credentials
2. Real-life examples of the quality assurance of micro-credentials in national QA systems, presented by members of the group.
3. Discussions in breakout groups on the 2 aspects of quality assurance mentioned above.
4. Roadmap and proposals for the way forward.

The chair of the Working Group on Quality Assurance welcomed all participants to the meeting and gave an outline of the meeting aims and agenda, followed by the state-of-play of the MICROBOL project. This was followed by a presentation by the European Commission on the Report ‘’A European approach to micro-credentials’’. This presentation introduced the ongoing work of the European Commission on this topic and delved into their approach, as well as the roadmap of actions envisioned to ensure the quality assurance of micro-credentials.

A report of the results of the survey done in 2020 amongst EHEA countries on micro-credentials was then presented by project partner CIMEA as “Micro-credentials and Bologna Key Commitments - State of play in the European Higher Education Area”. The survey in 34 countries revealed that there is an increased awareness of micro-credentials and many countries have or are developing mechanisms to ensure the QA of micro-credentials. However, there has only been minimal legislative uptake and micro-credentials are only explicitly included in the QA systems of very few countries, which show that numerous challenges still have to be addressed when updating legislation and internal quality assurance systems. These presentations laid the groundwork for the work of the day. All the presentations are available on the project’s website, at this [link](https://microcredentials.eu/working-groups/working-group-on-quality-assurance/).

To stimulate discussion on the implementation of quality assurance in HEI’s across countries, a few countries were invited to introduce their national QA systems. Romania highlighted the mechanisms used for ensuring the quality of micro-credentials in their post-graduate courses, while Montenegro explained how smaller courses are defined and integrated into their national legislation. Sweden presented their approach to micro-credentials, and how the MICROBOL definition of micro-credentials is aligned with Swedish higher education courses. Austria reflected on the role of external quality assurance in evaluating how HEI’s institutional procedures guide the internal QA of micro-credentials, as well as the challenges involved. From these countries, lifelong learning and a clear definition of micro-credentials emerged as key guiding factors in shaping legislation, while the challenges associated with the needs of the labour market also came to the forefront. The options offered by stackability and micro-degrees were also discussed.

This session was followed by 2 breakout sessions, where participants were divided into groups to allow all participants the opportunity to contribute.

QA of the learning experience:

The first breakout session focused on the Quality Assurance of the learning experience (applicability of ESG), where numerous questions were put to participants. Although the discussions were extensive, the following issues emerged most frequently:

*What are the challenges in Internal Quality Assurance of Micro-Credentials as expressed by the ESG Part 1?*

* The programme accreditation procedure is too elaborate to be applied to micro-credentials. In case same procedures will be applied to both programmes and micro-credentials, the risk is that institutions will hesitate to develop and provide micro-credentials because of the high administrative burden.
* The challenge is to find the right **balance between developing/encouraging/promoting and regulating of micro-credentials**, without making it too complicated. If a course is offered by a higher education institution (HEI), the quality of the micro-credential should be assured under the ongoing internal QA of HEI’s.
* Another challenge is **student involvement in internal QA**. With regard to regular degree programmes there is an organized, well-defined student body that is involved in the development of curricula, but for these short courses there might be no student participation.
* Each HEI should have a **transparent published policy** and information on how they approach the quality of its programmes or courses. This transparency also plays into the recognition of the qualification.

*What are the challenges in External Quality Assurance of Micro-Credentials as expressed by the ESG Part 2? Is programme accreditation, where applicable, scalable in a context of micro-credentials?*

* The assumption that micro-credentials are mainly offered **online** should be addressed, as this is not always the case.
* The QA of **micro-credentials developed in partnership** between HEI’s and representatives from the labor market, as well as micro-credentials produced only by the labor market should be further explored. In the case of partnerships it is still the responsibility of the institutions to to ensure the QA, but the involvement of other stakeholders should not be underestimated.
* **Different types of micro-credentials** might require different evaluation approaches – for example a stand-alone course may be evaluated differently than a course that is part of a bigger degree. Another aspect that requires consideration is the frequency of micro-credential accreditation.
* It is not only the legislation that needs attention, but also the development of **common** **expectations about micro-credentials** and what ministries want to achieve with micro-credentials. It should be clearer what role they have in HEI’s and lifelong learning provision.
* In external QA, different countries follow different systems – some countries have QA systems focused on institutions, while others have QA systems focused on the quality of programmes. Programme accreditation is one of the methods of external QA. However, the administrative burden of assessing one course as if it were a programme on its own proves challenging. This kind of QA is too elaborate and an administrative burden in comparison to accreditation for similar modules of learning, i.e. programme accreditation is not scalable to micro-credentials. It should be the **quality of the internal QA procedures** that should be assured, rather than each individual micro-credential as a programme.

*In addition to the ESG, what standards and guidelines should apply to micro-credentials within HE?*

* At the moment, there should be no additional standards and guidelines, but the **existing available tools should rather** **be further developed and/or improved**, no matter if it concerns institutional or programme accreditation. The ESG also offers room for national interpretation and experimentation, which is very important and should be kept. The ESG should be reaffirmed as applicable to micro-credentials, but the details should be clarified.
* **Peer support and continued discussions** are important to move forward and a way to do this is to include micro-credentials in the agendas of Bologna Peer support groups.

*What kind of standardisation/guidance material (if any) is needed to be able to assure integration of micro-credentials into your existing quality systems?*

* A coordinated and balanced **bottom-up and top-down approach** will facilitate the development of any further guidelines, for both HEI’s, agencies and policymakers. It would be appreciated if ENQA could take this up in their discussions with national agencies. Sometimes universities lack a national legal framework, but are in a way a step ahead, as they have a much clearer idea of what micro-credentials are and could be used for.
* A framework is needed to guide both HEI and policymakers. It should on one side offer a certain European standardization, but on the other side enough **flexibility** to be incorporated on a national level. It also has to add value to the current systems of QA.

QA of the credential/ certificate:

The second breakout session was focused on the Quality Assurance of the credential/certificate, where numerous questions were put to participants. Although the discussions were extensive, the following issues emerged most frequently:

*Should short learning certificates/credentials in future include all elements listed in the emerging European Standards for micro-credentials? Which elements would you delete, add or alter? See the Annex to this preparatory note.*

* The concept of a ‘**supplement**’ is important for the recognition of micro-credentials.
* The learning competencies and outcomes are crucial for HEIs as well as for employers and should be included in the supplement. For micro-credentials specifically, the shift has to be **from the content of the course to the learning outcomes**. It should be a confirmation of the skills gained by a student. The format in which the course was followed (online, in-person...) becomes irrelevant if this shift to learning outcomes is completed.
* **Prerequisites** needed to enroll in the learning activity should be expanded.
* It should be clarified **who the supplement is for**: students, employers and the education institutions. The needs of these three groups should be considered when designing supplements. However, it is more practical to issue one document that contains all information than different documents for different parties.
* Some elements of the supplement could be made **obligatory** and some **advisory** (for example the grade, supervision).
* A **date of expiration** of the micro-credential could provide useful information for both student and the employer mainly in case of micro-credentials which require updating after a certain period.

*Would a model certificate be helpful? Short explanations for each element? Examples of how other institutions deal with each of the elements in practice?*

* It is a question of country culture. For some countries, a model certificate would be helpful in **expanding the process of recognizing** micro-credentials. Providing some already existing examples of possible solutions and good practices could address this. The elements listed in the emerging European Standard for micro-credentials were found to be a good basis to start from.

*Should the recognition-level of a programme be an element of quality assurance? (e.g. should a QA system care that a MOOC awards a certificate with no official standing within a university)?*

* Ideally, all courses and MOOC’s should award ECTS credits. The issue ties primarily to how MOOC’s are assessed and if this **assessment** is trustworthy.
* It should be considered what information HEI’s want to provide and on the other hand, what is minimally necessary in order to recognise other courses from the perspective of a HEI. In Europe, this is already done in **ECTS credits**.

*Should micro-credentials (the certificate) be digital by default?*

* It was agreed that ideally the certificate should be digital, and that it should also be **directly accessible** to whomever the learner decides to share it with, for example, employers. The Europass online tool, although not open to all Bologna countries, offers this possibility. Further cooperation on the integration of micro-credentials in Europass is needed.
* Some participants felt that a certificate should be both **physical (paper) and digital** and that the choice should not be limited. Both versions should be available from the issuing institution and should not be an issue for quality assurance.

*Should we require, as part of QA for institutions, the creation of ways to track how widely credentials are accepted and by whom?*

* Since QA is often based on trust, this information could be valuable and ideally should be freely available. It is important to know what these micro-credentials are **used for** and if they are fit for purpose.
* It should be possible to track this use of micro-credentials on a qualitative level. To do this on a quantitative level across Europe, would however be very challenging. Whether it is decisive to the QA of courses, should be discussed further. What the **administrative burden to HEI’s** might be in tracking these degrees should also be considered.
* A **register of trusted providers**, such as those in DEQAR, could play a role in the bundling this information.
* Accumulative or **stackable credentials** could also be included in this kind of register.
* **Employers should be informed** on what micro-credentials are and what they are for.

*Some further general comments were also made.*

* It was reiterated that the definition of **‘micro-credential’ remains confusing** for many people and might need to be adapted. From the definition, it should be clear that it refers to the unit of learning as well as to the piece of paper (certificate).
* Within the EHEA, there is no yet a common understanding and terminology of micro-credentials. Making sure that the definition is understood is important as this will ensure that there is standardization across systems, countries and institutions. Language translations of micro-credential is still a big problem, as many countries do not even have a word for the term ‘micro-credential’ and so cannot assign meaning to it. Furthermore, ‘micro’ means small and this could be confusing for the labour market, which might assume that it concerns smaller courses (as supposed to a large collection of courses) and might hinder uptake of these qualifications.
* It was mentioned that programme accreditation is closely tied to the recognition of credentials. There are accreditation guidelines on how to recognize degrees, but it is not clear **how micro-credentials should be recognised**. Currently, **recognition of prior learning** is **not scalable** (enough) for micro-credentials.

Roadmap for the future

The chair briefly charted the next steps for the project and thanked everyone for their presence and contributions.

The **next meeting** of the working group will take place on **6th May 2021**.