



MICROBOL Working Group on Quality Assurance
Input document for the 2nd WG meeting – 6/05/2021

1. Introduction

The MICROBOL project engages ministries and stakeholders involved in the Bologna Follow-up Group to explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used and/or need to be adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials. For this reason, the project looks at quality assurance from the Higher Education perspective, as quality assurance is the basis for trust in Higher Education.

The first meeting of the working groups on QA, recognition and ECTS and QF was focused on identifying challenges in the applicability of Bologna tools to micro-credentials, and the second meeting will focus on tackling these challenges and identifying possible solutions.

This document is meant to:

- serve as a common input basis for the meeting of the MICROBOL Working Group on quality assurance on 06/05/2021;
- provide a comprehensive overview of the main points and challenges emerged in the Working Group meeting held in January 2021;
- provide input on possible solutions and recommendations to overcome these challenges, highlighting the way forward for micro-credentials in general.

2. Obstacles and challenges in applying Bologna tools to micro-credentials: outcomes of the Working Groups meeting held in January 2021

The main challenges for quality assurance highlighted in the WG meeting in January are the following:

- The **programme accreditation** procedure is **too elaborate** and cannot be scaled to be applied to micro-credentials. The **quality of the internal QA procedures** should be assured, rather than each individual micro-credential as a programme.
- **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 this might not (yet) be guaranteed.
- The challenge is to find the right **balance between developing/encouraging/promoting and regulating micro-credentials**.
- **Different types of micro-credentials** might require different evaluation approaches – for example a stand-alone course¹ may be evaluated differently than a course that is part of a bigger degree. An online MC could be different than an onsite offer.

¹ Micro-credentials can be developed as part of a degree programme or as stand-alone programme offering to attract students and allow for lifelong learning. Micro-credentials can for example be developed to be delivered in a





- Each higher education institution (HEI) should have a **transparent published policy** and information on how they approach the quality of its programmes or courses.
- A **framework and guidelines** are needed to guide both HEI, agencies and policymakers. They should on the one hand offer a certain European standardization, but on the other hand allow for enough **flexibility**. It also has to add value to the current systems of QA. It should build on, and not duplicate already existing systems.
- The QA of **micro-credentials developed in partnership** between HEI's and representatives from the labour market, as well as micro-credentials produced only by the labour market should be further explored.
- **Frequency** of micro-credential accreditation.
- Ideally the **certificate** should be digital and should also be **directly accessible**. The Europass online tool offers this possibility but further cooperation on the integration is needed.
- The certificate should be both **physical (paper) and digital**. Both versions should be available and should not be an issue for quality assurance.
- Track **acceptance** of micro-credentials by employers or for further education on a qualitative level.

Some topics to elaborate as possible solutions:

- **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.
- **Existing available tools should be further developed and/or improved**, instead of creating new ones. The ESG should be reaffirmed as applicable to micro-credentials, but the details should be clarified. ENQA could develop **a guideline?**
- The concept of a '**supplement**', or supplementary information, is important for the recognition of micro-credentials. It should be clarified who the supplementary information is for. Some elements of the supplementary information could be made obligatory and some advisory. The **learning outcomes** are crucial. In case a micro-credential provides an entitlement, a **date of expiration** of the micro-credential could provide useful information, for example in the case of vocational education and training (this will not be applicable to all types of micro-credentials). A model certificate would be helpful in **expanding the process of recognizing** micro-credentials.
- A **register of trusted providers**, such as those in DEQAR, could play a role in bundling this information. Accumulative or **stackable credentials** could also be included in this kind of register.

corporate environment to individuals who are not enrolled at university. If the institution offers stand-alone micro-credentials (whether or not in collaboration with industry) more elaborate QA procedures might be needed.



3. Way forward

In order to support the quality assurance of micro-credentials, possible steps on the way forward are outlined below.

3.1. Common awareness/knowledge/consensus of what a micro-credential is

The very first step for having a coherent (standardised) approach for the quality assurance of micro-credentials is to build a common understanding of what is considered a micro-credential, and what should be the main characterizing elements (a “standard”).

Within the MICROBOL project we have the following working definition:

“A micro-credential is a small volume of learning certified by a credential. In the EHEA context, it can be offered by higher education institutions or recognized by them using recognition procedures in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention or recognition of prior learning, where applicable. A micro-credential is designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials have explicitly defined learning outcomes at a QF-EHEA/NQF level, an indication of associated workload in ECTS credits, assessment methods and criteria, and are subject to quality assurance in line with the ESG” ([“European project MICROBOL. Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments”](#), August 2020, p. 7).

Later on, a second definition was developed and presented in the report [“A European approach to micro-credentials”](#), as final output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group:

“A micro-credential is a proof of the learning out-comes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are under pinned by quality assurance following agreed standards”.

The proposed EU Standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials are: identification of the learner; title of the micro-credential; country/region of the issuer; awarding body; date of issuing; notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS, wherever possible); level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF and/or national qualifications framework; Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area); learning outcomes and form of participation in the learning activity (online, onsite or blended, volunteering, work experience). Possible other proposed elements are: prerequisites needed to enroll in the learning activity; type of assessment (testing, application of a skill, portfolio, recognition of prior learning, etc.); supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online





or onsite with identity verification); quality assurance of the credential and, where relevant, of the learning content; grade achieved and integration/stackability options (standalone, independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable towards another credential).

This definition and proposed standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials are a starting point to explore to what extent we can enhance academic recognition of micro-credentials and contribute to inclusiveness of Higher Education.

Recommendation: support knowledge and enhance awareness of the importance of the European standards for the quality assurance of micro-credentials, create consensus on them, contribute to their implementation and develop good practices.

3.2. Internal and external quality assurance

The quality assurance of micro-credentials should be covered by the internal quality assurance (IQA) system and procedures of the higher education institution. Potentially many, though not all, micro-credentials have a relatively short lifecycle, as they are intended to meet a specific skills need. Speaking of regular monitoring of the micro-credentials by the higher education institution through its IQA system is therefore more appropriate.

There is however also a link with the external quality assurance (EQA). The application of programme level evaluation procedures should not be encouraged for each micro-credential course, as these procedures are too elaborate for small volumes of learning like micro-credentials. The focus of external quality assurance should be on the institutional approach to micro-credentials and their explicit inclusion into (existing) processes. Therefore, QA agencies should explicitly address also IQA of micro-credentials in the EQA processes, and develop criteria, such as institutional policy, transparent information on recognition issues, use of ECTS, description of learning outcomes, appropriate assessment methods, etc. The external QA should ensure that the higher education institutions offering micro-credentials have a reliable and well-built system to monitor their quality internally (as, presumably, happens for study programmes).

In some countries, programme level evaluation is linked to study fields/scientific fields. In that case it could also be a solution to evaluate all programmes (full or short) within a certain study field together.

The offer in place (by HEI and alternative providers) should be subject to QA. Rules that are designed to ensure sufficient provision capacity should be contextualized for micro-credential providers.

In some countries different authorities accredit different types of (short) courses, e.g. ministry of education and ministry of labour.

Micro-credentials should in all cases be subject to QA procedures, whether they are part of a degree programme or provided as a stand-alone offering.





Recommendation 1: all micro-credentials should be subject to internal QA, independently of the external QA approach.

Recommendation 2: creation of specific "key considerations" for (I)QA of micro-credentials.²

Recommendation 3: consider how alternative providers of micro-credentials may be included in the HE-QA system for micro-credentials, following the principles of the ESG.

3.3 Learners involvement

When developing policies related to micro-credentials, it is assumed (as this should be a normal procedure in case of all types of learning provision) that learners³ are involved as representatives in the governing bodies of the institution and when institutional consultations take place.

When designing a micro-credential, the needs of the target group of learners need to be considered and learners should be involved in the designing process. However, when the target group of learners is very diverse, reaching all groups might be challenging. Feedback of alumni should be taken into account as part of the continuous improvement plan of the micro-credential.

If we take the above approach that micro-credentials are ensured by IQA, there should be involvement of learners in this process. However, because a micro-credential is shorter, it might be a challenge to get learners involved in quality assurance processes.

We need to make a distinction between students, in general, and the specific learners taking the micro-credentials. Students as a category can be more easily included in programme approval processes as well as in IQA, if they do not need to be coming from the group of learners taking the micro-credential in question. It should be acknowledged that the direct engagement of the learners taking the micro-credential in the quality assurance processes could be complicated.

Recommendation: include learners in all steps of the development and implementation of micro-credentials.

3.4 Transparency of information

The quality of a micro-credential represents one of the main elements to be assessed in recognition procedures. It is relevant that higher education institutions offer transparent information about the quality assurance policies and processes applied to the micro-credentials they award.

² Along the lines of the ENQA, [considerations for QA of e-learning](#) (assessing for each ESG Part 1 standard what specific issues should be considered for e-learning in light of the requirements of the standard and suggestions of the guidelines).

³ With 'learners' we refer to students, as well as non-traditional students that may not be engaged in regular HE.





To further enhance transparency, supplementary information on a micro-credential, such as proposed in the EU-standard⁴, could be a very helpful tool to facilitate recognition and to create a shared (and commonly recognized) format to understand better what the credential is worth.

The supplementary information could also include information regarding recognition of the awarded credits within the same institution (providing thus an indication of the internal value given to the micro-credential).

If transparency is ensured there might be less need for external quality assurance procedures because data can be easily collected, trusted and used for recognition.

Recommendation: HEIs should provide information on the quality assurance mechanism for awarded micro-credentials. In particular, this should be included on the HEI website and in the micro-credential.

3.5 Legislation

In some countries legislation may present some obstacles, for instance if micro-credentials are only allowed to be delivered by institutions that offer full degree programmes in the particular study field. It could be a quality indication, if the higher education institution already has a full programme accredited. However, provision of new micro-credentials should also be encouraged and allowed.

In some countries the digital mode of delivery could also present a legal issue.

Procedures could be different depending on the national cases. So could be the necessary adaptation. It is always important to explore whether a change in legislation is really needed or whether other ways are possible. When it is not possible to move in other directions it is important to explore changes in legislation, and exchange information with other countries that could have the same issues or that have already solved these.

Recommendation: explore whether a change in legislation is really needed, and if this is the case, plan the relevant changes exchanging information with other countries and keeping into account good practices and experiences at international level.

3.6 Register of micro-credentials and providers of micro-credentials

Quality and quality assurance are central elements for other aspects, like recognition. A register of trustworthy providers and offered micro-credentials could be a tool for supporting acceptance and recognition of micro-credentials. Being listed in the register should become a de-facto 'label' of adherence to the framework.

⁴ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/7a939850-6c18-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1>, page 13





This register could also include alternative providers, if they deliver micro-credentials that are evaluated by an EQAR registered agency. The ESG should stay at the basis and procedures could be developed.

Recommendation: promote the development of DEQAR-compatible national and other registers of micro-credentials and providers of micro-credentials at all levels.

3.7 Digitalisation

There is a general agreement that the original certificates of micro-credentials should be in digital format and should be learner-owned. Depending on the national regulatory framework, it can in addition be provided in paper form. This is linked to the fact that digitalization can facilitate portability, transparency and reliability of information and verification of authenticity, and as such supporting a fast and fair recognition process and enhance stackability. If this could be true for all qualifications, it is particularly relevant for micro-credentials, where the digital format (taking into consideration the large number of such certificates) could support a fit-for purpose recognition approach, with the credentials itself containing all the needed information. It would be also relevant to explore synergies with existing initiatives, such as DEQAR database, that could potentially contain also reference to quality assurance schemes for micro-credentials in place at national level, and initiatives that goes in the direction of the digitalization of credentials in general, such as Europass, just to mention few of these.

Concerning the digital provision of micro-credentials, there should be no major implications for the quality assurance and it should be based on the ESG standards. However, digital provision has some particular aspects which differ from on-site provision and which need to be taken in consideration by internal quality assurance. For example, appropriateness of digital tools, adapted learning materials, digital assessment methods, support systems for students. Additional guidance to address the online or face-to-face modes of delivery might be needed, as well as common standards could be interpreted differently (for example teaching staff trained for using digital tools).⁵

Recommendation 1: explore to what extent micro-credentials should be digitally awarded and user-controlled, as a means to support portability, transparency and reliability of information and verification of authenticity, and build a clear digital strategy in line with other ongoing initiatives e.g. [EDCI](#) (Europass Digital Credentials Interoperability) and [EDSSI](#) (European Digital Student Service Infrastructure). Start from project and experiences already live and scale it up, taking inspiration for next steps. Develop and improve experiences already available.

Recommendation 2: explore if and how additional aspects need to be considered on the quality assurance of digitally-delivered micro-credentials.

⁵ Specific guidance on e-learning has been provided by ENQA in the report [Quality Assurance of E-learning](#).





3.8. Alternative providers

Partnership with alternative providers, including companies, should be encouraged, as this might increase the relevance of the micro-credentials for the labour market. Especially for micro-credentials that focus on upskilling/reskilling of people on the labour market and/or on the development of on-demand skills for professionals' employment, the combination of practice with theory will ensure that the learning is relevant to the workplace.

Recommendation: explore in collaboration with alternative providers (including companies) if and how QA procedures should be adapted for the provision of micro-credentials in partnerships.

3.9. Peer exchange and support, involvement of all actors, guidelines

Exchange of experiences and practices at European, national and regional level, inputs from experts and students, occasions to share information on legislative and policy development are essential for the uptake and recognition of micro-credentials both at national and international level.

A guideline for micro-credentials provided by HEIs would be very useful in order to increase the common understanding about and recognition of micro-credentials. This guideline could include good practices and recommendations on how to organize and how to ensure the quality of micro-credentials could be developed within the EHEA. Knowledge and implementation of this guidebook could be evaluated by quality assurance agency during institutional evaluation. The guideline should especially focus on:

- Support HEI in the provision of micro-credentials
- Supporting Quality Culture at HEIs
- Transparency standards/processes
- Introducing database/register for micro-credentials

There is certainly the need for certain standards to facilitate transparency. On the other side, the proposed framework should be open enough to allow for experimentation and innovation. It should as well be flexible and allow for responses to the rapid changes in the knowledge society.

Furthermore, it is important that all the relevant stakeholders (HEIs, QA agencies, ministries) are involved and aware of the discussion about quality assurance of micro-credentials, and can work in the same direction and deploy a common approach to the quality assurance of micro-credentials.

Recommendation 1: create occasion for peer support and exchange of practices among stakeholders at international level.

Recommendation 2: a guidebook or set of recommendations for HEIs about transparency should be developed.





Recommendation 3: support the development of a clear policy framework with transparent standards, while at the same time supporting the increased development of micro-credentials in co-creation with all stakeholders.

4. Reference materials

- Materials of the kick-off meeting: [report](#) and [presentations](#)
- Desk research: “[European project MICROBOL. Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments](#)”
- Survey Report “[Micro-credentials and Bologna Key Commitments. State of Play in the European Higher Education Area](#)”
- Outcome of the first meeting of working groups held in January 2021 (see above and see the minutes of each group: [QF&ECTS](#), [Recognition](#), [QA](#))

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