



Position paper of **eucen** on the public consultation on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability: **eucen and micro-credentials**¹

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Preamble

As a multidisciplinary association for university lifelong learning (ULLL) across Europe, **eucen** aims to empower futures through the provision of inclusive, flexible and equitable ULLL opportunities for all. It also aims to inspire ULLL through the development and dissemination of cutting-edge practice and research among its members in order to create transformational and equitable impact that contributes to sustainable development. One focus of this work is at the intersection of higher education and vocational training, where **eucen** serves as a bridge between industry and higher education institutions (HEI) by developing and implementing education programs that address societal developments.

A rapidly changing world

Today's world with rapidly changing technologies and the rise of AI compels our citizens to continuously update their knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. The global Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the accelerators of these developments, but not the only one. Apart from the digital transition, the climate crisis and 'Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development' are topics that have started to re-shape our lives and impact the ways we will live and work into the future.

Universities play a significant role in fostering the acquisition of future-focused knowledge and skills. They support lifelong learners at various stages, whether they are new students for the first time at the university, or graduates returning to university, or adults engaging in continuing education without prior university experience. This support is achieved by integrating timely and relevant topics in their respective programmes to meet the demands for new skills and competencies. ULLL and university continuing education (UCE) often serve as a gateway for innovation and for new topics, acting as boundary spanner between the academic and the outside world (Seppälä, Santos, Atabarut, 2017). It is in

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this specific setting where innovation takes place, where new topics are shaped and new forms of learning are practiced (both inside and outside the classroom). ULLL plays a central role in facilitating flexible learning in higher education, bridging different worlds and addressing both professional programmes and initiatives aimed at enhancing social inclusion and other important societal needs.

A trend to shortness: micro-credentials

The last years have seen a trend in higher education that is relevant for the rising importance of ULLL as boundary spanner: there is an increasing number of shorter and more work-oriented offers (not being part of traditional degree programmes) where learners can earn certificates or badges or other forms of credentials, and which respond to different demands such as lifelong learning, continuous professional development, and targeted learning initiatives for marginalised groups. Their numbers have increased through a greater interest from both employers and policy at a national and European level, but also through their flexible delivery, boosted not least by digitalisation (Gaebel, Zhang, Stoeber, & Morrisroe, 2021, S. 23). The European Union has been stressing the importance of short-term learning opportunities, focussing on micro-credentials, that could substantially help to *"widen learning and skills development opportunities, and further shape the lifelong learning dimension in higher education"* (European Commission, 2020, p. 4). Following the definition of the European Union *"a micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning"* (Council of the European Union, 2022), the connection to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is thereby highlighted.

The landscape of micro-credentials in Europe, however, still presents several challenges (see *Annex 1* for a transnational comparative table), particularly concerning its scope of workload (ECTS) assigned to them. Numerous variations in legal frameworks across different jurisdictions and national borders exist, while complexities in funding approaches, such as determining fees for developing micro-credentials, can also hinder implementation efforts. Issues related to recognition and 'stackability' and the absence of a uniform understanding of quality assurance practices further complicate matters, necessitating ongoing discussion and resolution and calling for standardisation within the EU. The concept of 'stackability', which allows for the accumulation of micro-credentials towards a qualification or degree, is currently being discussed and implemented in various countries. For instance, the US offers a model where individuals can progressively build their bachelor's degree through what is known as "career laddering". In the EU, 'stackability' is often closely tied to personalized learning pathways. Thereby, opportunities for recognition, accreditation, and the curricular integration of micro-credentials should be provided and established from the beginning.

eucen and micro-credentials

eucen believes that micro-credentials provide a multi-faceted form for supporting lifelong learning as flexible learning, as they include four dimensions of learning promoted by eucen:

1. digital learning whereby learning can take place anywhere at any time in various ways,
2. professional learning for the enhancement of skills and talents,
3. responsible learning for connecting learning with the community, and
4. inclusive learning for a world where everyone is welcome.

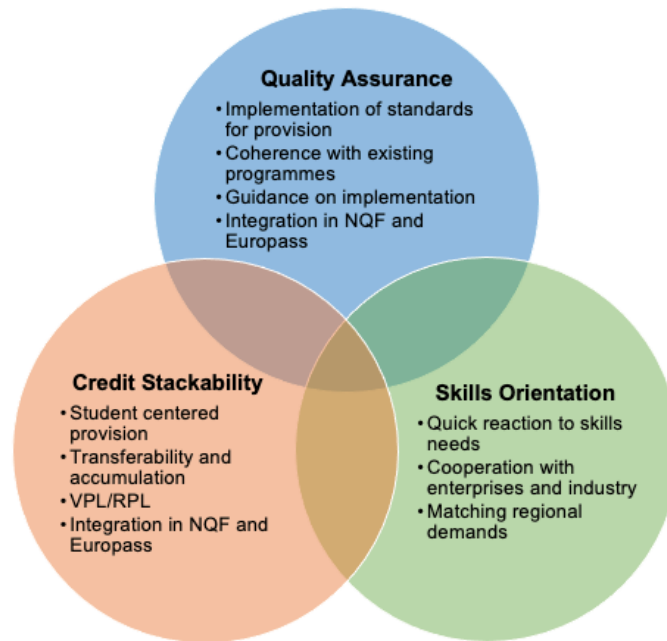


Figure 1: Key characteristics needed for the use of micro-credentials

eucen supports micro-credentials as they serve important goals of ULLL - both for social inclusion and for supporting employability - that have been pursued by eucen and its members across Europe for the last decades. We would like to stress the importance of micro-credentials for different reasons (in line with Cirlan & Loukkola, 2020):

- They are an important step to further *advance* the recognition of prior learning (RPL) by facilitating the process of recognition – once there are transparent clear standards in place. Linkages to qualification frameworks help to classify these credentials and to recognise them for ULLL.

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- They help ULLL and continuing education centres to *respond* more quickly to both societal and professional needs and thereby to *liaise* with different providers of learning – including employers, VET (vocational education and training) schools/providers, public and private institutions – always with the goal to fully apply quality standards of higher learning.
- They bring new skills and competencies that could *enhance* existing programmes and thereby help to *shape* the individual learning paths and learning goals of the students both in work-based learning programmes and ULLL programmes.
- They enable further enhancement in the area of *partnership* with enterprises/industry/civil society organisations in the design and development of curricula, where experts both from academia and enterprises/civil society may provide a much richer and targeted learning experience for learners which ultimately benefits the learner, the organisation and wider society in general.

Conclusions and Recommendations

eucen acknowledges the significant role that micro-credentials play in supporting lifelong learning and enhancing personal growth and employability. When implementing micro-credentials, it is essential to address several key recommendations to ensure their effectiveness and widespread adoption. eucen recommends the following points when implementing micro-credentials²:

- Establish clear guidelines differentiating micro-credentials from traditional higher education offerings to ensure ‘stackability’ and recognition.
- Launch awareness campaigns targeting learners, employers, civil society organisations, and educational institutions to enhance the visibility of micro-credentials.
- Integrate micro-credentials into digital platforms like Europass while ensuring standardisation and verification processes.
- Implement robust quality assurance mechanisms to uphold standards and credibility within micro-credentials.
- Streamline bureaucratic processes at the national level to facilitate smoother implementation.
- Develop National Qualification Frameworks accommodating micro-credentials and optimise delivery mechanisms for efficient validation by employers.

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By addressing these considerations, micro-credentials can effectively contribute to the recognition of diverse learning pathways and the development of essential

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² These recommendations are based on the expertise of the eucen Steering Committee, taking into account the European Commissions recommendations on micro-credentials. Additionally, eucen conducted a short survey with experts on micro-credentials in 12 different countries. The results and challenges mentioned in the survey have been included in the recommendations. See in **Annex 1** the table with the results of the survey.

knowledge and skills for individuals across various contexts. The above-mentioned recommendations, however, need to be discussed for a more widespread use, with a particular focus on standardisation to ensure consistency and reliability across micro-credentialing initiatives.

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Other consulted sources

Austria

[BMBWF Micro-Credentials](#)

Estonia

<https://www.engq.eu/wp-content/uploads/EKKA-2.pdf>

Finland

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/finland_microcredentials_mapping.pdf

France

https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/france_microcredentials_mapping.pdf

Germany

<https://dgwf.net/nachricht/ergaenzung-des-transparenzrasters.html>

Ireland

[QQI early exploration into Micro-credentials in Higher Education](#)

Italy

https://enhanceuniversity.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Final_Policy-Paper_EEA-Implementation_ENHANCE-Alliance.pdf

Spain

<https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2021-15781>

Netherlands

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ANNEX 1: State of implementation of micro-credentials in different European countries in March 2024

	Defined Amount of ECTS	Defined Hours per ECTS	Quality Assurance of Learning	Assessment of Competencies/ VPL	Institutional Accreditation	National Accreditation	Flexible Provision	Credit 'Stackability'	Tools for Transparency	Official Regulation
AT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
CH	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
DE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
EE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ES	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
FI	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
FR	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
HU	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
IE	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
IT	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
NL	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
TR	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

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LEGEND:

- Available
- In process /depending on institution
- Not available
- Situation unclear