European Commission

A EUROPEAN APPROACH TO MICRO-CREDENTIALS

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Small learning experiences, such as short courses leading to micro-credentials, allow for a targeted acquisition of skills and competences adapted to a fast-changing society and labour market while not replacing traditional qualifications. Their objective is to be complementary.

The European approach to micro-credentials aims at providing a clear definition and European standards to allow for the learning outcomes of these small experiences to be easily recognised and understood by employers, learners and, education and training institutions, as well as guiding principles to consider when designing or issuing high-quality micro-credentials. Common approaches to developing and using micro-credentials at the EU level can support and enhance national efforts for their quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition, and portability. It can also help to build trust in micro-credentials for the benefit of the learners, employers, and education and training institutions.

What is a micro-credential?

The European approach to micro-credentials offers a common definition that is valid across sectors of education and the world of work and mirrors the societal mission of education and training institutions, including higher and vocational education and training (VET) institutions, and non-formal providers as well as employers and labour market actors.

> *A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards.*
>
> *Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs.*
>
> *Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be standalone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.*

What EU standard elements should it include?

The basis for trust in micro-credentials is transparency. Micro-credentials should be clearly identified as such with elements that make it possible for learners, education and training institutions, quality assurance agencies, and employers to understand the value and content of micro-credentials and to compare them.

The European approach to micro-credentials suggests a list of critical information elements that any micro-credential should provide:

Mandatory elements

- Identification of the learner
- Title of the micro-credential
- Country/Region of the issuer
- Awarding body
- Date of issuing
- Learning outcomes
- Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits, wherever possible)
- Level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable
- Type of assessment
- Form of participation in the learning activity
- Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential

Optional elements, where relevant
(non-exhaustive list)

- Prerequisites needed to enrol in the learning activity
- Supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online or onsite with identity verification)
- Grade achieved
- Integration/stackability options (standalone, independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable towards another credential)
- Further information

How to design and issue micro-credentials?

When designing and issuing micro-credentials, some key principles should be followed. The 10 principles presented below specify the nature of micro-credentials and offer guidance on the design and issuance of high quality micro-credentials.

The 10 principles highlight the key characteristics of the European approach to micro-credentials. They are universal and may be applied in any area or sector.

1 Quality

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, accessible, and meet the needs** of learners and stakeholders.

External quality assurance is based primarily on the **assessment of providers** (rather than individual courses) and the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures.

External quality assurance is conducted in line with:

- **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.

Providers should make sure that **internal quality assurance** covers all the following elements:

- 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

2 Transparency

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**, 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.

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, and trust in, micro-credentials.

Information on the offer of micro-credentials

- Systems for micro-credentials should provide **transparent and clear information**, to underpin guidance systems for learners, in line with national practices and stakeholders needs:
- **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

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.

Cooperation 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

Micro-credentials are designed to support **flexible learning pathways**, including the possibility to **stack, validate**, and **recognise** micro-credentials from across different systems.

Stackability

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.**

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

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.**

6 Recognition

Recognition has a clear **signalling value** of learning outcomes and paves the way for a wider offer of such small learning experiences in a **comparable way across the EU**.

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.

7 Portability

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, and 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.