I'MINQA

Quality assurance of micro-credentials

Reflective questions for internal and external quality assurance

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By the IMINQA Working Group on Quality Assurance of Micro-credentials

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Table of content

Introduction

This guidance is developed as part of the three-year *Implementation and Innovation in quality assurance through peer learning* (IMINQA) project. It supports the work of the Bologna Follow-up Group thematic peer group on quality assurance (TPG C) during the period 2021-2024. The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme to support the implementation of Bologna Process reforms and commitments.

Based on the findings of the research[1] conducted as part of the project, this document aims to support quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and alternative education providers[2] in their work on assuring the quality of micro-credentials in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It does so by setting out a series of reflective questions to guide stakeholders in developing or reviewing their internal and external quality assurance policies and processes.

The document is authored by the IMINQA working group on quality assurance of micro-credentials, led by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). ENQA and the project coordinators would like to thank all members of the working group for their contribution to this document, which it is hoped will be a useful addition to the resources on this topic.

Context

Micro-credentials are a topic of high interest for policy makers, quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions, alternative providers and other higher and vocational education stakeholders, as well as for employers and other actors in the labour market, due to the interest in specific learning and training offerings that better respond to societal and professional dynamics.

Micro-credentials are not a new phenomenon. Higher education institutions and alternative providers have been offering them for a long time, through a range of formats and approaches. The novelty is the new terminology, the effort to converge on a shared definition and standardised framework, and the application of Bologna Process tools to micro-credentials in order to enhance their quality, relevance, recognition and portability. The findings of the IMINQA project desk research show that the term micro-credential is not yet clearly defined in most EHEA countries as the discussions and initiatives related to this topic are either at an initial stage or ongoing. Nevertheless, micro-credentials have become more and more present in both research and policy documents, and on a practical level.

Micro-credentials are seen as a flexible way of acquiring and recognising knowledge, skills and competences, and of responding to the need to upskill and reskill the labour force in light of rapidly changing societal and professional needs, including tackling the green and digital transitions. Micro-credentials are often perceived to be part of lifelong learning provision and, thus, complement (without replacing) conventional higher education qualifications. Therefore, in most of the EHEA countries the discussion around them is taking place in the context of a broader exploration of the

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[1] https://www.ehea.info/Upload/IMINQA_MC_report_Approaches_to_Quality_Assurance_of_Micro_credentials.pdf
[2] For the purpose of this report, alternative providers refer to providers of education at level 5-8 on the European Qualifications Framework, other than higher education institutions or institutions with equivalent status in the national context. The exact definition of alternative providers varies between systems/countries. According to the definition of the European Commission, providers 'may include organisations, social partners (i.e. organisations representing workers and employers), employers and industry, companies, civil society organisations, public employment services (PES) and regional and national authorities, and other types of actors designing, delivering and issuing micro-credentials for non-formal and informal learning'.

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future of lifelong learning, its objectives, quality, relevance and recognition, as well as how these aspects fit in the broader higher education context.

Various previous discussions and projects, most notably the Microbol project[3], reached the conclusion that the existing Bologna Process tools, particularly including the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG), are also applicable to micro-credentials and that the main responsibility for quality assuring micro-credentials lies with higher education institutions. However, it is also noted that internal and external quality assurance approaches may need some adaptation to take into account the specificities of micro-credentials, to ensure that they remain learner-centred, and that they are addressed in line with existing quality assurance mechanisms.

The aim of this document is to provide guidance for stakeholders in creating fit-for-purpose approaches to assure the quality of micro-credentials. The reflective questions are intended to provoke internal discussion and reflection, rather than to provide any prescriptive standards or guidelines. Each question is accompanied by a short explanation to highlight some key issues for consideration, depending on the context. The questions may be used to guide initial discussions but could equally be used as a self-assessment tool to reflect on the effectiveness of existing approaches.

Finally, all stakeholders involved in developing, offering, recognising and quality assuring micro-credentials should consider their role and input to the system-level discourse around such credentials. This would support a sector-wide understanding of the concept and terminology in the local context. This might include engaging with (or leading) initiatives, working groups, or projects to reflect on the position of micro-credentials in the higher education framework and the level of detail required in legislation; peer learning to share practices nationally and internationally; collection and analysis of feedback and outcomes in order to further develop or refine frameworks and guidance; and piloting processes in higher education institutions. Learners, as the primary beneficiary of micro-credentials, should also be appropriately engaged in such activities.

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[3] https://microbol.knowledgeinnovation.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2020/09/MICROBOL-Desk-Research-Report.pdf
See also the statement by the E4 group of ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE: https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/E4-statement_The-ESG-in-the-changing-landscape-of-higher-education_Final.pdf

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Reflective questions for higher education institutions

What are the reasons for offering micro-credentials?

Strategic motivations for offering micro-credentials may include diversifying and enhancing the educational offer, attracting different groups of learners, addressing local needs for employability, and increasing or diversifying income streams. If fitness for purpose is taken as the starting point for quality assurance, the higher education institution needs to be clear on the rationale for offering micro-credentials and ensure that the quality assurance approaches reflect that. For example, are they primarily targeted to existing students or external learners (or both)? Are they offered in partnership with other education institutions, professional/regulatory bodies, businesses, or other societal stakeholders? Are they aimed at skills' development or at access to or progression in higher education?

The strategic rationale for a higher education institution to offer micro-credentials may be very focused, or it may cover a combination of the points above (and more). Being clear about the purpose and intended benefits, for the institution and the learner, supports a more effective and efficient implementation at practical level.

How can the special characteristics of micro-credentials be captured in the internal quality assurance approach?

Does the internal quality assurance approach adequately address whether the micro-credentials are fulfilling their intended aim, while remaining proportionate and suitable for micro-credentials?

Internal quality assurance processes for higher education provision, including micro-credentials, need to meet the requirements of the ESG as well as any national criteria. In addition, internal quality assurance may need to take into account the specific characteristics of micro-credentials (which may also differ between micro-credentials) and ensure that the general and specific objectives are met. Such characteristics may include the short duration; higher levels of flexibility; responsive and timely curriculum development (depending on the subject matter); criteria and procedures for launching and closing micro-credentials; partnerships for delivery; specific teacher competences (including teachers from outside the institution); access to learning resources; specific pedagogical approaches to teaching, learning and assessment; diversity of learners (particularly in relation to previous educational experience); and the connection with the world of work. All these might require different methods and timing for a range of quality assurance processes such as collecting and analysing feedback, reviewing and updating policies, and stakeholder engagement. Importantly, ensuring the participation of learners in the quality assurance processes of micro-credentials could be more challenging than for traditional degree programmes and special measures may need to be put in place.

While not all micro-credentials are delivered online, many do involve some form of digital or blended approach. Therefore, the internal quality assurance may need to address the additional specificities that come with digital education and training.

The internal quality assurance approach may also need to consider alignment with any existing (inter)national frameworks or regulations. These might include the definition of micro-credentials, the use of ECTS, position in qualification frameworks, and connection with other educational activities and programmes.

While discussion around internal quality assurance of micro-credentials usually centres on adapting approaches already in use for degree programmes and/or lifelong learning, it is also worth considering what lessons can be learnt from the quality assurance of micro-credentials and whether these might be applied to the overall educational offer of the institution. Reflection on this could support a generally more responsive and flexible internal quality assurance system across the institution.

What are the specific considerations for quality assuring micro-credentials that are originally conceived as part of an existing programme?

Offering individual modules that emerge from existing programmes as separate micro-credentials may be an efficient way for an institution to expand access to the educational offering. However, it is important to ensure that the curriculum, learning outcomes, pedagogical approach, learning resources and assessment are still appropriate if taken out of the context of the full programme, and that they constitute an independent learning unit with clearly defined outcomes and value.

It is particularly important that curriculum design and teaching approaches do not make assumptions regarding the prior knowledge and skills of the learners, including transversal or soft skills, as the learners may be more diverse and come from a wider range of starting points, compared to learners taking the module within the context of a degree programme. There is an added layer of complexity if the learners taking the module as a micro-credential are studying together with full degree students.

Higher education institutions are therefore encouraged to consider whether tailored checks may be needed to monitor micro-credentials with regard to the issues above, in an approach that goes beyond the module being quality assured as part of the institution's regular monitoring of programmes.

What are the specific considerations for micro-credentials not part of an existing degree programme?

Micro-credentials designed and delivered separately from previously existing degree programmes are generally covered either under the same quality assurance approach as for learning and teaching in degree programmes or under that for lifelong learning provision. Sometimes elements of the two are combined, or there may be no differentiation. It is important for higher education institutions to ensure that micro-credentials that sit outside an existing programme are adequately quality assured and that they do not fall between different areas of responsibility. This may also be relevant if any of the micro-credentials do not have an obvious alignment with an existing discipline at the institution, for which routines and responsibilities for quality assurance may be already in place.

With this in mind, it is nonetheless usually most efficient and effective to draw on existing procedures and reflect on how they can be used and (if necessary) adapted. The level of detail is also an important consideration, so that the processes are robust enough, but proportionate. These considerations can help to avoid additional unnecessary burden on teaching and administrative staff.

What are the specific considerations for micro-credentials developed and/or offered in partnership with other organisations and providers?

If the higher education institution is the awarding body it also maintains the primary responsibility for the quality assurance of micro-credentials delivered with external partners. However, the variety of cooperation models and combinations of types of organisations (within and outside the education sector) means that the details of the quality assurance arrangements will vary according to the context.

Irrespective of the credit volume and type of the learning unit, many institutions may already have in place principles and approaches for working in partnership, and those may provide a good basis for an approach to partnerships for micro-credentials. The adopted approach should cover both the development of the partnership itself and the specific arrangements for the micro-credentials, from design through to delivery and roles for quality assurance.

Specifically regarding internal quality assurance, the division of responsibilities should be clear and agreed from the start. This may require mapping the existing approaches of all partners and ensuring that they are coherent and avoid duplication or gaps across the different partners.

It is also advisable to have in place from the start mechanisms to address problems as they arise, again covering both the relationship between partners and the education delivery.

What other factors might be considered at institutional level?

There are several other issues that are relevant for the effective delivery of micro-credentials, which may need to be addressed by internal quality assurance.

The rise in use of micro-credentials puts additional emphasis on institutional procedures for recognition of prior learning. This applies in relation to students coming with micro-credentials for access and progression at the higher education institution, as well as access requirements for micro-credentials themselves. These also need to take into account informal and non-formal learning and achieved competencies.

Communication and transparency of information is very important, including the use of terminology, especially for learners and partners that might not be familiar with higher education jargon. This also includes the availability of guidance for learners regarding the impact of micro-credentials on future learning pathways, as this is an area seen to be often neglected.

Mechanisms for engagement with internal and external stakeholders may need particular attention and adaptation in the context of micro-credentials. This will particularly include reflection on what constitutes effective student engagement for learners taking micro-credentials.

Finally, when developing or evaluating micro-credentials, higher education institutions may consider targeted piloting or sampling to test or assess the effectiveness of the quality assurance approaches. Ideally the approaches should have sufficient flexibility and responsiveness to allow for diversity and innovation in design and delivery, but within a single robust framework that gives confidence in the quality of the education offered.

Reflective questions for quality assurance agencies

What is the role of quality assurance agencies in supporting micro-credentials?

Quality assurance agencies might take on one or several different roles, depending on the type of agency, scope of activities and remit (if any) within a national/regional system. These roles might include:

- As quality assurance experts, contributing to national and international discourse on micro-credentials and their position and recognition.
- As facilitators of dialogue and peer learning, between higher education institutions and among all relevant stakeholders.
- As providers of support or guidance to institutions on how to integrate quality assurance of micro-credentials into existing internal quality assurance procedures.
- As a body to offer confidence in the quality of micro-credentials by ensuring that they are adequately considered in existing external quality assurance approaches.
- As a body to offer external quality assurance specifically of micro-credentials.
- As a body that provides information about micro-credentials and their quality assurance through databases or registers.

To what extent might existing external quality assurance procedures need to be adjusted to address institutional approaches to quality assurance of micro-credentials?

In most higher education systems (there are a few notable exceptions) and at EHEA level, it is generally considered that there is no need to develop a separate approach for the external quality assurance of micro-credentials. For most quality assurance agencies, it is instead necessary to reflect on how the existing tools may be used or adapted. This will usually include:

- Consideration of whether micro-credentials fall conceptually under internal quality assurance of programmes ('programme' referring to higher education in its broadest sense, including that which is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree), or under internal quality assurance of lifelong learning and how external quality assurance can best address such procedures (particularly if lifelong learning is not usually part of the agency's remit). However, it is also important to keep in mind that such a distinction is not always made, either at the level of the higher education institution or at the level of the quality assurance agency.
- Consideration of whether higher education institutions have procedures in place to determine which existing degree programme modules are suitable to be offered as micro-credentials, if this approach is used.
- Consideration of how the specificities of micro-credentials are covered by higher education institutions when it comes to all aspects of educational delivery, student-centred learning, student life-cycle, and student and staff support.
- Consideration of whether the individual units of learning fulfil the characteristics of micro-credentials (including any formal definition at system level) and whether comprehensive information is provided in a transparent and accessible manner.
- Consideration of how higher education institutions assure the quality of micro-credentials offered in partnership with other organisations (within or outside the higher education sector).

All these aspects nonetheless fall under the principle that it is the responsibility of the higher education institution to quality assure their micro-credentials. Attention may also be paid to proportionality: the extent to which an agency looks at an institution's approach to quality assurance of micro-credentials may depend on the volume of micro-credentials offered by the institution and the position this takes within their overall educational offer, including whether there are any additional complexities associated specifically with the micro-credential provision (such as delivery in partnership with non-HEI providers), as well as implications due to existing academic frameworks and regulations.

How can quality assurance agencies support alternative providers that offer micro-credentials?

Support to alternative providers of micro-credentials may not be relevant in all contexts, but if it is, a quality assurance agency might want to reflect on the following:

- Should the agency offer a (voluntary) external quality procedure for alternative providers of micro-credentials? What is the motivation for the agency in doing so? What does this mean in terms of resources and workload, including providing the necessary support and guidance? What safeguards does the agency have in place to ensure it is working only with legitimate organisations?
- What is the consequence for alternative providers? This might range from formal recognition of the micro-credentials in the national context, through to no formal consequence and it being purely for improvement purposes and/or reputation and credibility. If there are formal consequences, what does this imply regarding any voluntary nature of the procedure?
- If there is a separate, specific quality assurance system in place for alternative providers, what opportunities are there for the agency to interact with the relevant bodies to exchange good practice, work towards harmonisation of the outcomes and equity regarding the recognition of micro-credentials, independent of the type of provider?

Such reflections and actions will likely require discussion with different stakeholders, including national authorities, beyond those in the higher education sector with which agencies are usually engaged.

Quality assurance agencies are also advised to keep informed about developments at European level, such as the inclusion of micro-credential providers on the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) and the related data model, which details the information to be provided about the micro-credential and/or the provider.

Reflective questions for alternative providers

What are the reasons for offering micro-credentials?

As with higher education institutions, the starting point for alternative providers to design quality assurance processes for their micro-credentials should be a reflection on the objectives of this activity (in general, and for each individual micro-credential).

One of the most common aims for providers of micro-credentials is to respond to labour market needs, from both employers and individual workers, to improve the knowledge and skills of the workforce.

Other purposes might be to support learners to access or progress in higher education, or to provide opportunities for personal development to the general population.

The rationale for offering micro-credentials will be closely linked to the mission of the organisation. Companies offering micro-credentials as training for their own employees will take very different approaches to organisations offering training opportunities to a wider audience, or special interest organisations offering education on specific topics.

What connection does the alternative provider have with the higher education sector?

Many providers of micro-credentials may have no direct connection to the higher education sector at all, particularly if their primary purpose is to support skills development for the labour market. However, for those offering micro-credentials at higher education level it could be helpful (or obligatory in some systems) to use frameworks, tools and procedures from the higher education sector, including quality assurance, qualifications frameworks, and ECTS. This will improve the recognition of the micro-credential by higher education institutions, to the benefit of the learner, particularly for facilitating access to or progression in a higher education institution. However, the provider should also ensure that it is eligible for formally offer ECTS, as in some systems this is restricted to certain types of institutions.

In all cases, clear and accessible information should be provided to the learner on the use of the micro-credential, including details that would support learners and institutions in procedures for the recognition of prior learning.

If offering micro-credentials in collaboration with a higher education institution, internal quality assurance will need to be done in partnership. If the higher education institution is the awarding body of the micro-credential then it would normally take primary responsibility for this. In any case, it is important to map and build on existing approaches across all partners to achieve the most effective and efficient approach, and to avoid gaps or duplications.

What tools can alternative providers use to quality assure the education or training offer?

Irrespective of the origin or purpose of the micro-credential, it should be quality assured with the participation of learners and other stakeholders. Many tools and frameworks are available to support quality assurance, which can be adapted for the purposes of micro-credentials. These include various methods for collecting feedback, use of data and indicators, and broader approaches such as the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Most organisations have quality assurance systems and procedures in place for any education or training delivered, even if they are not named as such.

For providers offering micro-credentials in cooperation with a higher education institution, the quality assurance approach will need to comply with national regulations and quality assurance requirements, which should also be aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

For providers offering micro-credentials that may facilitate access to or progression in higher education, recognition of micro-credentials will also be facilitated by alignment with the ESG and by ensuring that the micro-credential meets other national and European level requirements, such as the information and certification provided upon completion of the credential.

In all cases it is helpful to keep in mind that terminology may be used differently within and outside the higher education sector.

What would be the benefits for an alternative provider to engage with higher education external quality assurance processes?

Whether or not external quality assurance from the higher education quality assurance agency is an option will depend on the context and country of delivery. If it is available, alternative providers may reflect on their motivation for undertaking such an exercise, balanced against the human and financial resources required.

Potential benefits of engaging with external quality assurance may include:

- Gaining an external view, including from higher education stakeholders, on the education provision in order to support internal enhancement;
- Meeting the requirements for inclusion on a register or catalogue, which may ensure recognition of the provider and its micro-credentials by higher education institutions and the labour market;
- Enhancing visibility, reputation and credibility for both the provider itself and the micro-credential achieved by the learner.

What other factors might be considered by the provider?

Alternative providers may benefit from reviewing the reflective questions for higher education institutions contained within this document, as inspiration for issues that may also be relevant in their own context.

For all providers of education and training, communication and transparency of information is very important. Information provided in advance about the micro-credentials should be clear about content, expected outcomes, potential future use of the micro-credential by the learner (for

employment or education), as well as whether the micro-credential or the provider has undergone any external quality assurance. Language and terminology needs to be used in a way that is accessible for the target audience.

Alternative providers of micro-credentials are also advised to keep informed about and engage with relevant developments at national and European level that might support the recognition of the credentials that they offer, such as the inclusion of micro-credential providers on the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR).