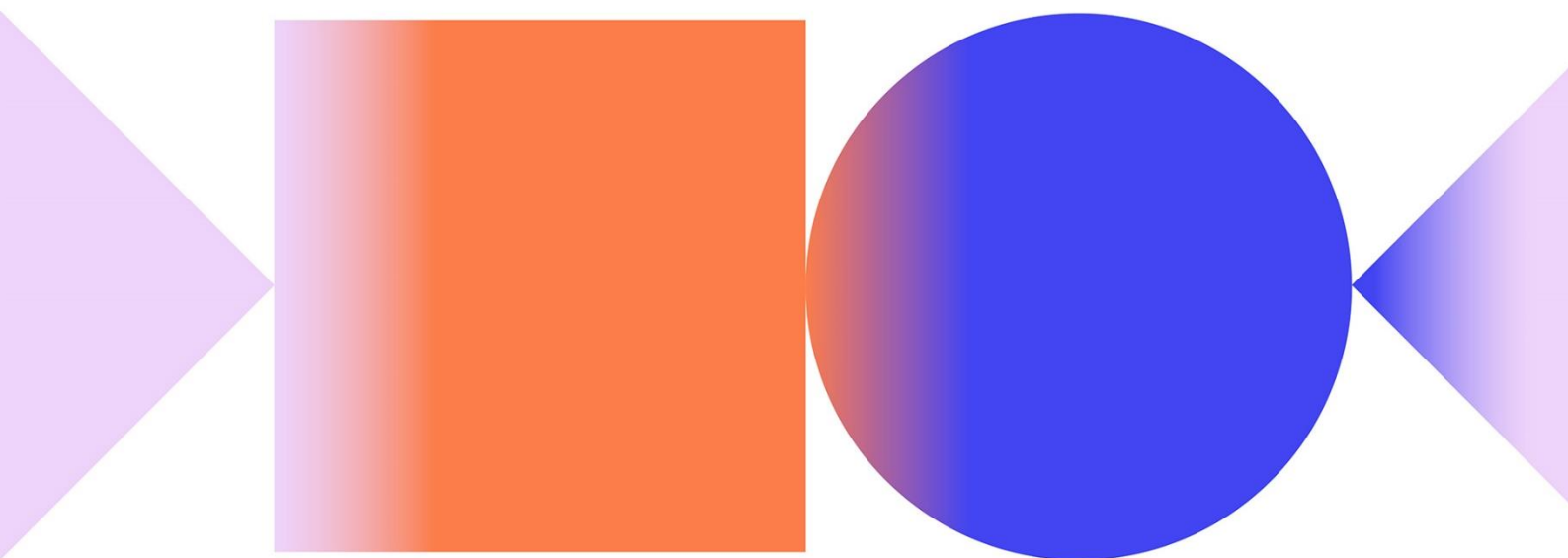# Our view on micro-credentials

Una Europa Position Paper   July 2021

A European definition of micro-credentials

The European Commission's working definition of micro-credentials is as follows:

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes 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 underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards.

The Una Europa perspective

The European Commission's working definition raises a number of important questions for consideration.

Micro-credentials are a way to make **learning paths within universities more flexible,** which is especially relevant in cross-border collaborations, such as Una Europa. In addition, micro-credentials can be a useful tool to reach a much broader target group, especially when collaborating with other types of **stakeholders from local ecosystems.** We therefore advocate that the definition of *learners* remains as open as possible, so as not to restrict the use of micro-credentials to a specific group of learners only but ensure a truly **inclusive and open approach.**

Una Europa
Guiding Pedagogical Principles

- Promote multilingualism
- Facilitate multidisciplinary education
- Foster integration between education, research and innovation
- Create an international learning space in which physical and virtual presence are seamlessly integrated
- Stimulate and integrate peer-to-peer learning and collaboration
- Involve local communities in the educational practice
- Stimulate active and deep-level

Further, it is important to note that *providers* are not specified in the current working definition. This implies that both HEIs and private providers will be operating on equal footing, which carries implications in a variety of areas, notably related to the aspect of **quality assurance** – quality assurance of the learning experience (content), the credential (authenticity) and the providers themselves. In particular, there is a need to clarify, whether the use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the EQF (European Qualification Framework) may be extended to other non-academic providers, in order to fully understand what this would entail in practice. Above all, it is

essential that a **transparent system** be developed for those providers to ensure the **key principles of quality and trust.** As trusted providers, Higher Education Institutions can also play a role here and **explore partnerships** with the private sector, when this is mutually beneficial and strategic.

Moreover, there is an urgent need to define 'agreed standards' according to which the quality assurance of micro-credentials should be conducted, as referenced in both the working definition and the analytical report 'Towards a European approach to micro credentials: A study of practices and commonalities in offering micro-credentials in European higher education' (European Commission, 12/2020)[1]. The **MICROBOL** (Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna key commitments) project[2] refers in this respect to the European standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance, stating that "...micro-credentials are subject to quality assurance in line with **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**". For Higher Education Institutions, this means that the same quality principles apply for micro-credentials as the ones in place for their regular educational offer, but it is **very important to clarify what this means for private providers.** ESG not only already applies to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery, but it also advocates that "quality assurance should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose", another important aspect in the development of short learning experiences.

We would also advocate that the **EQF (European Qualification Framework) for Lifelong Learning** is used as a reference instrument to determine the level of the micro-credentials, together with the **QF-EHEA (Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area – Bologna**).

In terms of **shareability and portability** of credentials, different **technologies** are currently being experimented with at different levels to ensure that micro-credentials, as digital certificates owned by the learner, can be managed through an e-portfolio. As these technologies are still being piloted, it is important to eventually ensure alignment at different levels in order to guarantee maximum flexibility for the learner.

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/towards-a-european-approach-to-micro-credentials-a-study-of-practices-and-commonalities-in-offering-micro-credentials-in-european-higher-education-analytical-report_en
[2] https://microcredentials.eu/

What is the role of Higher Education Institutions in the development and implementation of micro-credentials?

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a very important role to play in the conception, development and implementation of micro-credentials. As **trusted providers of education**, HEIs have the experience and knowledge to design **high-quality** courses and programmes that will lead to micro-credentials that are **trusted, accepted and recognised by learners, employers and national authorities** alike and based on **up-to-date academic research.**

HEIs already undergo extensive **quality assurance practices** either at institutional or programme level that ensure the quality of the institution and their educational offer. In addition, as referenced above, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) will equally apply to micro-credentials, which is essential for the **quality assurance of both the learning content and the credential itself.**

In terms of linking micro-credentials to credits, the **European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)** offers a reliable, recognised and transparent mechanism to make learning outcomes and related study efforts more visible. Micro-credentials offered by Higher Education Institutions can award ECTS, which will not only aid recognition but also provide a clear pathway to **stackability options** and the possibility of leading to an **academic qualification.** This is a clear added value for the learners. It is important to highlight that, in our view, it should not be possible to stack micro-credentials to a full degree. We also believe that, in this early phase, Higher Education Institutions should be given maximum flexibility in determining and allocating number of credits and we do not advocate for a maximum and minimum number of ECTS to be defined.

In terms of portability, Higher Education Institutions are also ideally placed to ensure that IT systems currently under development to both store micro-credentials and ensure their portability across borders, are compliant with relevant regulations. Experience from ongoing pilot projects, such as the **European Blockchain Services Infrastructure Early Adopters (EBSI)** will be very valuable in this respect.

Micro-credentials offered by HEIs are also an important **tool for widening participation,** attracting more diverse learners that have been away from higher education for some time. The inherent flexible nature of learning paths leading to micro-credentials will allow HEIs to reach out to different types of learners and bring them back into further education. Micro-credentials can be used as an instrument for inclusive higher education and are an important tool for universities in Europe to fulfill their societal responsibility.

At Una Europa, we believe in awarding credentials for learning which has **academic skills at its core,** based on **multidisciplinary approaches** and with a focus on the use of academic research in a professional context. Furthermore, all joint innovative formats at Una Europa encourage the development of common **European values,** intercultural awareness, problem solving and critical thinking, entrepreneurial, social, civic and global skills. We are educating the European Citizens of the future.

What is the added value of delivering micro-credentials as a European University Alliance?

Micro-credentials offered by a European University Alliance are inherently linked to learning experiences which are **multilingual and multicultural,** thus promoting and stimulating **multilingualism** and equipping learners with **intercultural tools.** European Universities also encourage the creation of a European learning space with peer-to-peer learning activities that fosters the collaboration of both students and teachers from countries across Europe. This teaching collaboration allows for simultaneous engagement of different local communities for the benefits of all participants and society at large.

Offering micro-credentials for short learning experiences as an alliance of universities offers a range of other benefits, as the offer can be stronger, broader and more interdisciplinary by combining the complementary strengths and expertise of eight universities. Flexible learning paths within an alliance can be created by integrating jointly developed micro-credentials or those offered by partners into existing courses and programmes. The links with eight different universities also increase the learners' potential to go into further studies in different countries, contributing to a mobile workforce.

Moreover, European University Alliances are supported by a range of local and regional stakeholders, such as local and regional authorities, companies and NGOs from local innovation ecosystems, which ensures that the offer is in line with training needs and the interests of different learners across Europe. It also enables European Universities to reach out to a large and diverse audience (professionals, civil society, etc.), which is another clear added value that European Universities are bringing.

There also remain a number of challenges to be addressed, where European Universities can play a key role.

The concept of micro-credentials is being introduced to make short learning experience more comparable between different institutions, specifically in a European and international context. European Universities can be pioneers for implementing micro-credentials at an international level and make an important contribution to the identification of **(legal) barriers at both national and institutional levels.** European Universities can thus be frontrunners in the creation of a transparent **framework at European level** to ensure alignment, comparability,

exchangeability and transferability of credentials. In these alliances, there is already mutual trust and respect in each other's quality assurance and assessment practices, which facilitates and supports stackability, portability and recognition of micro-credentials gained at partner institutions.

There is also an increased need for collaboration with international partners, including other HEI's, training providers and the labour market, and the development of an **international digital supporting system.**

There is also a movement to broaden the scope of national qualification frameworks to forms of learning beyond regular study programmes, mostly for education which is highly relevant for the labour market. Alliances could act as a mediator here and bring together the different movements at national levels.

Lastly, a standardized approach to credits and the definition of ECTS in national frameworks will need to be developed and implemented. In certain countries, for instance, ECTS are defined as "acquired study points, connected to a course". To be defined as a course, a learning experience needs to entail a minimum number of study points, which means that ECTS cannot be attributed to shorter learning experiences in those countries. To make the sure the recognition of acquired ECTS by different institutions, in a national and international context, happens smoothly, a standardized approach is needed.

Example: Una Europa Micro Module in Sustainability

The Una Europa Micro Module in Sustainability is defined by pedagogical flexibility, where a large number of "stackable" and independent (but related) MOOCs are published and made available to participants in order to allow them to build a learning path adapted to their individual needs on a given thematic. In the Una Europa model, the micro module will be initiated and lead by the academic institutions and based on latest research on the subject at hand.

The Una Europa Micro Module in Sustainability offers a holistic understanding of global sustainability challenges and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. The short learning experiences are targeted at learners with an existing bachelor's level degree.

They respond to the demands of the rapidly changing labour market and the needs of learners for flexible ways of supplementing their bachelor-level degree from any discipline with research-based knowledge on sustainable development and skills for applying it within different sectors of the society. The course offer will consist of a core course complemented with courses under three pillars – the environmental, economic, and societal. In order to receive the micro-credential, learners need to select three courses, in addition to the common core course, from at least two pillars.

The individual courses are being developed as MOOCs that will be made openly available for self-study. However, pending technical solutions for strong identification of learners and the portability of credits across different European countries, the learners interested to gain credits as part of the micro-credential need to register for the courses through one of the Una Europa partner universities. In practice, this means that at the initial stage the micro module will be available only to students (including non-degree students, where applicable) from the Una Europa universities. The practicalities of these arrangements are currently being worked out in collaboration with the eight Una Europa partners.

For the registered learners, the courses will include interactive elements with other learners and teachers from across the Una Europa partner universities. This integrative approach has multiple advantages. Particularly, the approach allows for the creation of an international learning space with peer-to-peer learning and collaboration of both students and teachers. It also makes it possible for the teachers to involve their different local communities for the benefit of all participants and stimulate active and deep-level learning by implementing high-impact pedagogies such as student co-creation. At the same time, the fully open version of the MOOCs serves the third mission as anyone regardless of their academic background can study the material and test their learning by completing the built-in assignments.

About Una Europa

Una Europa brings together eight leading research universities with global reputation and reach. Our mission is to create a truly European inter-university environment, where outstanding research is continuously linked to transnational learning and innovative, critical thinking.

The Una Europa partners are Freie Universität Berlin, Alma Mater Studiorum – Universitá di Bologna, University of Edinburgh, Helsingin Yliopisto, Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie, KU Leuven, Universidad Complutense de Madrid and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. Together, we will create a university of the future, where our students, researchers and staff will address the challenges of the future.

Una Europa was selected among the first prestigious 'European Universities' pilots funded by the Erasmus+ programme. The 1Europe pilot project was launched in December 2019 and aims to create a single education eco-system through the development of more than 20 Joint Innovative Formats for education and mobility, covering Bachelor, Master, Doctorate and Continuous Education.

Through top-up funding from the Horizon 2020 programme, Una Europa has launched Una.Resin in February 2021, a new pilot to take the first steps towards creating a single research and innovation eco-system.

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