

POLICY INPUT

Micro-credentials supporting flexible higher education and lifelong learning

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Micro-credentials are attracting increasing interest among various stakeholders. They are mentioned in the 2020 Bologna Process [Rome Ministerial Communiqué](#). They are also the focus of the [MICROBOL project](#), which brings together the members of the Bologna Process to explore how micro-credentials fit into the framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In parallel, the European Commission has been working on micro-credentials as part of its efforts to build the [European Education Area](#). It set up a consultation group that issued a report in December 2020 on the [European approach to micro-credentials](#), which is subject to public consultation with a deadline in July 2021. EUA, acting on behalf of its members, has taken part in these initiatives.

The EUA recommendations [previously put forward for the development of the European Education Area](#) are also relevant for the European approach to micro-credentials. These include the need to focus on actions with strong European added value; to ensure policy coordination and synergies with existing frameworks and to embrace diverse and inclusive education systems; and to ensure transparent governance with stakeholder participation. This document summarises EUA's key messages for the purpose of the European Commission's consultation on micro-credentials.

Micro-credentials are not a new phenomenon. This is true in our societies and in the academic environment with higher education institutions having a long tradition of offering lifelong learning opportunities and units of learning that are smaller than full degrees. The recent attention to micro-credentials stems from changing societal needs, globalisation, digitalisation, and the need for upskilling and reskilling the labour force, especially in the context of the recovery plans surrounding the Covid-19 crisis.

Micro-credentials should be seen as complementing conventional qualifications as part of lifelong learning and continuous professional development and as an entry mechanism to a degree programme. However, they do not substitute formal qualifications as their learning outcomes and volume of learning are much smaller.

Higher education institutions are one of the key providers of micro-credentials and they are the drivers of innovation in this area. They offer micro-credentials for various reasons. To a large extent, offering them is a way to respond to the needs of society and thus part of an institution's societal mission. However, the terms and the extent to which higher education institutions engage in the provision of micro-credentials vary greatly from one higher education system and institution to another. This depends on the division of tasks in the system, on the one hand, and on the institutional mission, profile and strategy on the other hand.

Any future European approach to micro-credentials should aim to increase clarity and transparency and build on the existing EHEA tools¹. For a proper uptake of micro-credentials, learners need to have access to relevant information about the contents, the quality, the learning outcomes and the recognition of these learning activities. The employers need to understand what these credentials mean, what their value is, and how they compare with conventional programmes and qualifications.

A European approach should also leave room for diversity and creativity because these features are at the core of an education offer that builds on the increasing need for flexibility in higher education. The approach needs to acknowledge that micro-credentials come in diverse formats and this forms part of their strength and allows for the development of a rich and competitive micro-credential market. They can be delivered in online, face-to-face, or in blended formats. They can also be as stand-alone units of learning or structured in a sequence of courses that can be embedded eventually within, or cumulate into, a larger credential.

The contribution of universities to lifelong learning goes beyond micro-credentials and it requires better recognition. Therefore, it might be more useful to discuss lifelong learning more widely, rather than focusing solely on micro-credentials.

¹ These tools include the Qualifications frameworks, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the Diploma Supplement, and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).