2026 European Quality Assurance Forum

Quality Assurance for Skills, Entrepreneurship and Innovation:
Partnering with the World of Work

Hosted by National Polytechnic University of Armenia, Yerevan
18-20 November 2026

ISSN: 1375-3797

Authors

Name: Ana Tecilazić

Position: Vice-Rector for Quality

Organisation: Algebra Bernays University

Country: Croatia

Short bio:

Ana has been a teacher and researcher at Algebra Bernays University since 2021 and has served as Vice-Rector for Quality since 2023. Before joining the University, she represented Croatia's Ministry of Science and Education in numerous European bodies, including the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and its working structures. She is currently a member of the EURASHE Board, represents EURASHE in the BFUG Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance, and co-chairs the EURASHE Community of Practice for Quality Assurance. She also chairs the Executive Board and the Quality Committee of DIVERSE European University Alliance coordinated by Algebra Bernays University. Throughout her career, she has bridged policy and practice by connecting European, national and institutional perspectives. She is committed to student-centred learning, active student engagement and the continuous enhancement of quality in higher education.

Name: Ivana Verveger

Position: Quality Assurance Advisor

Organisation: Algebra Bernays University

Country: Croatia

Short bio:

Ivana is a Quality Assurance Advisor at Algebra Bernays University. Prior to this role, she was a Blue Book trainee at the European Commission in Bruxelles, in EACEA, where she was involved in the management of innovative projects in the field of higher education. Ivana has been a member of Erasmus Student Network for over nine years, where she held positions at the local, national and international level related to mobility, education and culture. She is currently a member of the Learning & Teaching Working Group and the chair of the Micro-Credentials Committee of the DIVERSE European University Alliance.

Paper

Lifelong learning and Micro-Credentials in European University Alliances: Emerging Approaches to Quality Assurance and Institutional Transformation

Abstract

Lifelong learning and skills development have become central priorities of European higher education policy, reflected in initiatives such as the Union of Skills agenda and the Bologna Process commitment to flexible learning pathways. Micro-credentials have emerged as a key instrument for supporting upskilling and reskilling needs, expanding access to learning opportunities and enhancing the responsiveness of higher education to rapidly changing labour markets. At the same time, European University Alliances have been positioned as laboratories for the transformation of higher education, experimenting with new forms of transnational educational provision and cross-border quality assurance. This paper presents the findings of a desk-based analysis of all 73 European University Alliances, including 65 funded alliances and 8 alliances awarded the Seal of Excellence. The study examines how lifelong learning and micro-credentials are embedded within alliance strategies, policy frameworks and quality assurance arrangements. Particular attention is given to the extent to which alliances have developed mechanisms to support the design, delivery, recognition and quality assurance of flexible learning opportunities across institutional and national boundaries. The findings reveal considerable diversity in the maturity and scope of alliance approaches. While some alliances have positioned lifelong learning and micro-credentials as strategic priorities supported by dedicated frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms, others remain at an earlier stage of development. The analysis also highlights emerging approaches to transnational cooperation in the quality assurance of flexible learning provision. The study represents the first phase of a broader research initiative exploring the contribution of European University Alliances to lifelong learning, innovation and skills development in Europe. The findings provide insights into how cross-border quality assurance can support the development of flexible learning pathways and strengthen higher education institutions' capacity to respond to evolving labour market and societal needs.

Introduction and European Policy Context

The accelerating transformation of labour markets, driven by technological innovation, demographic change and the green and digital transitions, is fundamentally reshaping the demand for knowledge, skills and competences. According to the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, employers expect 39% of workers' existing skills to be transformed or become outdated by 2030 (World Economic Forum, 2025). These developments underline the growing importance of continuous upskilling and reskilling and challenge education systems to provide more accessible, flexible and responsive learning opportunities.

Higher education institutions are increasingly expected to respond to these changes by extending their educational mission beyond traditional degree programmes and initial education. Lifelong learning (LLL)

requires institutions to accommodate diverse learner profiles, including working professionals and individuals seeking career transitions. This calls for more flexible educational models, modular learning opportunities and pathways that enable learners to acquire, update and demonstrate competences throughout their lives.

At the European level, this transformation has gained renewed political momentum through the European Commission's Union of Skills initiative, which places investment in human capital, LLL and skills development at the centre of European competitiveness, economic resilience and social cohesion (European Commission, 2025a). The initiative calls for a stronger culture of LLL, more opportunities for continuous upskilling and reskilling, closer cooperation between education and the labour market, and improved transparency and portability of skills and qualifications across Europe. It also reinforces the need for higher education institutions to adapt their educational provision to increasingly diverse learner profiles and changing skills demands. In this policy context, micro-credentials have emerged as a key instrument for making learning more flexible, accessible and responsive to labour market needs, while raising questions about the recognition and quality assurance (QA) of learning achievements across institutional and national boundaries. To address these questions, the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (Council of the European Union, 2022) established a common European framework for their development, provision and recognition, introducing a shared definition, standard elements and principles for their design and issuance, including QA. The subsequent progress report on its implementation (European Commission, 2025b) identifies significant developments across European education and training systems, but also considerable differences in the uptake of the recommended measures, including those relating to QA and recognition. These findings highlight the challenges of translating common European principles into consistent institutional practices. In this context, QA is particularly important for building trust and supporting the recognition, stackability and portability of micro-credentials across institutional and national boundaries.

European University Alliances provide a particularly relevant setting for examining these developments. Conceived as platforms for deeper transnational cooperation and institutional transformation, alliances are experimenting with joint educational provision, flexible learning pathways and shared approaches to educational governance. Their cross-border character creates opportunities for jointly developed micro-credentials but also raises questions concerning the consistency, transparency and mutual recognition of QA arrangements across participating institutions.

Against this background, this paper examines how European University Alliances are translating European policy ambitions into strategic commitments, dedicated policy frameworks and QA arrangements for micro-credentials. It addresses two interrelated research questions:

1) To what extent have European University Alliances integrated micro-credentials into their strategic priorities, dedicated policy frameworks and QA arrangements?
2) What patterns of alignment or divergence can be identified between the development and provision of micro-credentials and their formal integration into alliance-level QA frameworks?

To address these questions, the paper draws on a systematic desk-based analysis of 73 European University Alliances, examining publicly available evidence of their strategic commitments, policy frameworks, micro-credential provision and QA arrangements.

Methodology and Sample

The paper adopts a descriptive, desk-based research design covering the total of 73 European University Alliances, comprising 65 alliances funded under the European Universities initiative and 8 alliances awarded the Seal of Excellence. The analysis is based on publicly available information on the alliances' websites, including their strategic documents, policy papers, project descriptions, educational offers and QA documentation. A structured data collection instrument was developed to examine the extent to which LLL and micro-credentials are integrated into alliance-level strategies, policies, activities and QA arrangements. The instrument comprises indicators addressing the explicit inclusion of LLL in alliance strategies, the existence of dedicated policy documents, targeted projects and activities within the alliances' main funded projects, formal integration of micro-credentials into QA frameworks, and the provision and accessibility of learning opportunities. Binary indicators were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages. To examine the relationship between micro-credential provision and its formal integration into alliance-level QA arrangements, alliances were further classified into four categories based on the presence or absence of publicly documented formal QA arrangements and micro-credential provision (Figure 1).

This classification was used as a basis for identifying patterns of alignment and divergence between micro-credential provision and the alliance-wide QA arrangements across European University Alliances. The research is limited by the authors' reliance on publicly available documentation. Consequently, the findings reflect the visibility of alliance-level approaches at the time of analysis and do not necessarily capture QA activities undertaken by individual partner institutions. The absence of publicly documented micro-credential provision or formal QA arrangements should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that such activities or mechanisms do not exist.

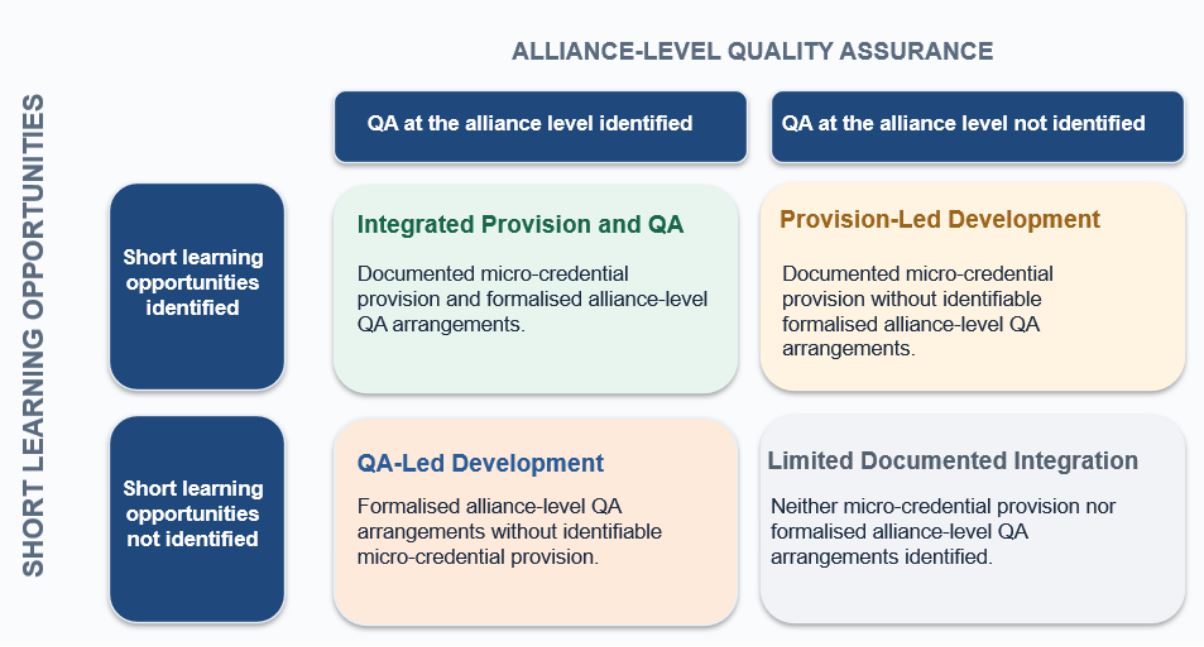

Figure 1. Typology of micro-credential provision and QA integration in European University Alliances

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the desk research findings.

Results

The descriptive findings (Figure 2) reveal substantial variation across European University Alliances in the strategic integration of LLL, the development of dedicated LLL and micro-credential policies, the implementation of related projects and activities, the provision and accessibility of learning opportunities, and the formal integration of micro-credentials into alliance-level QA frameworks.

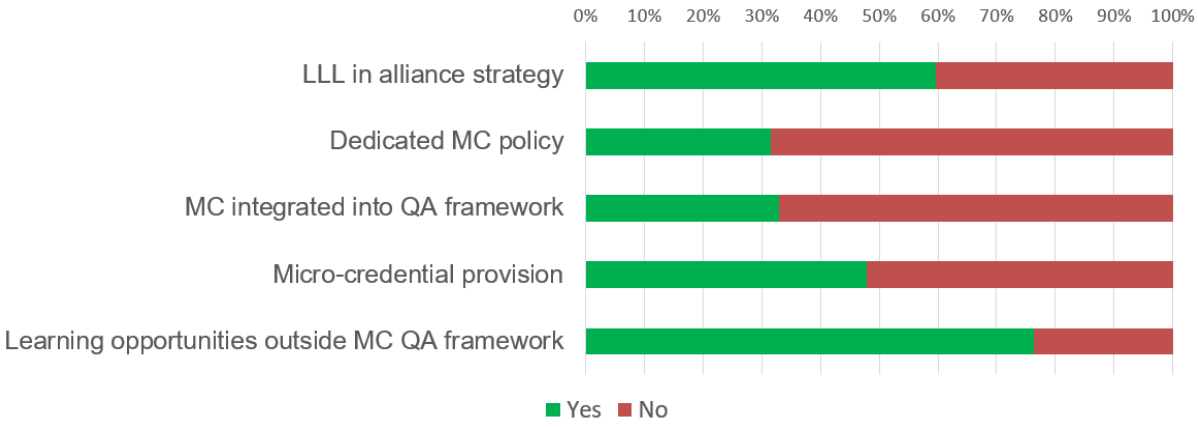

Figure 2. Developments across alliances

Source: Authors' desk research, n=73.

The findings suggest that strategic recognition of LLL is more widespread than the development of dedicated policies and formal QA arrangements. While 58.9% of alliances explicitly address LLL in their strategic documents, only 31.5% have published dedicated micro-credential policies, and 32.9% have formally integrated micro-credentials into alliance-level QA frameworks. Notably, LLL is gaining

prominence even among alliances comprising traditional research-intensive universities, suggesting a gradual shift from a peripheral activity towards a mainstream component of their educational mission. European University Alliances may be contributing to this transformation by facilitating more flexible and inclusive learning opportunities and reaching beyond traditional student populations.

Alliance strategies also reveal that LLL extends well beyond micro-credentials, encompassing part-time study programmes, flexible learning pathways, online and blended learning, recognition of prior learning, continuing professional development, and educational opportunities for adult and non-traditional learners. Many of these activities are not necessarily designed or recognised as micro-credentials. Consequently, the strategic integration of LLL should not be interpreted as an equivalent commitment to developing micro-credential provision and corresponding QA arrangements.

Nevertheless, the analysis reveals a strong association between dedicated micro-credential policy development and the formalisation of QA arrangements. Among alliances with micro-credential policies, 18 out of 23 alliances (78.3%) have also formally integrated micro-credentials into their QA frameworks, compared with only 12.0% of those without such policies. This suggests that dedicated policies and QA arrangements frequently form part of a more coordinated approach to micro-credential development. However, the extent to which alliance-level QA frameworks build upon existing institutional and national arrangements or introduce additional joint standards, procedures and responsibilities remains difficult to establish from publicly available documentation.

A particularly significant finding is the divergence between micro-credential provision and its formal integration into alliance-level QA frameworks. While 47.9% of alliances offer short learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials, only 32.9% have formally integrated micro-credentials into alliance-level QA frameworks. More importantly, among the 35 alliances offering micro-credentials, almost half (17 alliances; 48.6%) have no identifiable formalised QA arrangements at alliance level. This suggests that the expansion of micro-credential provision is not necessarily accompanied by corresponding developments in transnational QA. However, the absence of documented alliance-level arrangements does not imply that these learning opportunities are delivered without QA, as institutional QA mechanisms may still apply.

This divergence also raises questions about the depth of transnational cooperation. In several alliances, learning opportunities developed and delivered by individual partner institutions are consolidated and promoted through common alliance platforms, without clear evidence of joint curriculum development, delivery or QA. In such cases, the alliance primarily enhances the visibility and accessibility of existing institutional offerings rather than creating genuinely joint educational provision. The distinction between the collective presentation of learning opportunities under a shared alliance identity and their substantive integration into joint educational and QA processes is therefore particularly important when assessing the transformative potential of European University Alliances.

Furthermore, 75.3% of alliances offer learning opportunities outside their formal micro-credential QA frameworks. These include various forms of short-term learning, seasonal schools, blended-intensive programmes, training and professional development that are not necessarily designed or certified as

micro-credentials. This diversification raises questions about the extent to which common standards for learning outcomes, assessment, certification and QA are applied across different forms of provision.

Accessibility represents another important dimension. Publicly available information does not consistently indicate whether learning opportunities are open to external learners or restricted to students and staff of partner institutions. Some activities are organised through Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), which primarily serve learners from participating institutions. The role of funding arrangements in determining eligibility and participation fees also remains insufficiently documented. Consequently, although the findings suggest that alliances are expanding and diversifying their educational portfolios, the extent to which these developments translate into more inclusive and financially sustainable learning opportunities requires further investigation.

These findings point to growing strategic recognition of LLL and diversification of educational provision, alongside uneven progress in the development of dedicated policies, genuinely joint learning opportunities and formalised alliance-level QA arrangements. They highlight the need to distinguish between the expansion of educational offerings under a common alliance identity and the deeper institutional integration required for sustainable transnational provision and QA.

A cross-tabulation of micro-credential provision and its formal integration into alliance-level QA frameworks, using the analytical matrix and classification criteria outlined in the methodology, identifies four distinct patterns of alignment and divergence among European University Alliances (Figure 3). 18 alliances (24.7%) demonstrate integrated provision and QA, combining documented micro-credential offerings with formalised alliance-level QA arrangements. A further 17 alliances (23.3% of the total sample) offer micro-credentials without identifiable formalised QA arrangements at alliance level. Conversely, 6 alliances (8.2%) have documented formal QA arrangements despite having no identifiable micro-credential provision. This may reflect preparatory efforts to establish common frameworks for future educational activities, although the analysis cannot determine whether these arrangements anticipate future provision or relate to activities not captured in publicly available sources.

Finally, the largest group, comprising 32 alliances (43.8%), falls into the category of Limited Documented Integration, with neither formalised alliance-level QA arrangements nor micro-credential provision identified. However, this finding should not be interpreted as evidence of inactivity in LLL, as these alliances may offer a broader range of educational opportunities outside formal micro-credential frameworks.

	ALLIANCE-LEVEL QUALITY ASSURANCE			NO ALLIANCE-LEVEL QUALITY ASSURANCE		
SHORT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	INTEGRATED PROVISION AND QA			PROVISION-LED DEVELOPMENT		
	• Aurora	• CHARM-EU	• CIVIS	• ACE2EU	• Arqus	• COLOURS
	• DIVERSE	• E3UDRES2	• ECIU	• ChallengeEU	• EDUC	• EU-GIFT
	• ENHANCE	• ENLIGHT	• EU-CONEXUS	• EU4DUAL	• EUNICE	• EUNICoast
	• EUPeace	• FILMEU	• HEROES	• EURECA-PRO	• EUTOPIA	• EUniWell
	• INGENIUM	• INVEST	• T4EU	• EUonAIR	• EUt+	• EuroTeQ
	• ULYSSEUS	• UNITA	• Una Europa	• SEA-EU	• STARS EU	
NO SHORT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES	QA-LED DEVELOPMENT			LIMITED DOCUMENTED INTEGRATION		
	• Circle U.	• ENGAGE.EU	• EPICUR	• 4EU+	• ARTEMIS	• ATHENA PLUS
	• FORTHEM	• UNIC	• UREKA SHIFT	• Across	• AcrossEU	• BAUHAUS4EU
				• CIVICA	• EC2U	• EELISA
				• ELLS	• EMERGE	• ERUA
				• EU GREEN	• EUGLOH	• EULiSt
				• EduCare 5.0	• IN.TUNE	• KreativeEU
				• NEOLAiA	• NeurotechEU	• OpenEU
				• PIONEER	• Q-Helix	• RUN-EU
				• SUNRISE	• StudyEU Amber Road	• UNINOVIS
				• UNIVERSEH	• UNIgreen	• UP University
				• Unite!	• YUFE	

Figure 3. Micro-credential provision and alliance-level QA

Source: Authors' desk research, n=73.

This analysis suggests that the institutionalisation of micro-credentials within European University Alliances does not follow a uniform or necessarily linear trajectory. While some alliances combine provision with formal QA integration, others demonstrate different configurations of these elements. Importantly, the existence of both provision and formal QA arrangements does not in itself establish the extent of joint curriculum development, delivery or shared QA responsibilities. The findings therefore highlight the importance of distinguishing between the collective presentation of educational opportunities under a common alliance identity and their substantive integration into transnational educational and QA processes.

Conclusions

The findings of this desk-based analysis point to the growing importance of LLL and micro-credentials within European University Alliances, but also to considerable differences in how these priorities are translated into policies, educational provision and QA arrangements. Almost half of the alliances offering micro-credentials have no identifiable formalised QA framework at alliance level. Moreover, bringing learning opportunities together under a common alliance identity does not necessarily mean that they are jointly developed, delivered or quality assured. The development of transnational educational provision and its QA thus appears to be progressing at varying paces across alliances.

These findings raise questions about the adequacy of existing QA approaches in the context of increasingly diverse forms of transnational learning. Further research is needed to understand how institutional and national QA arrangements operate within alliances, whether they adequately address the specific challenges of joint provision, and where additional alliance-level mechanisms might add value. Of particular importance is whether these arrangements can build sufficient trust among institutions to support the recognition of short learning achievements across borders, including their

accumulation towards larger qualifications and their portability between institutions and education systems. The challenge is therefore not simply to develop more micro-credentials or introduce additional QA procedures, but to establish whether existing and emerging arrangements can provide a reliable basis for their recognition and use beyond the institution that awards them.

References

Council of the European Union (2022) 'Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on a European approach to micro-credentials for LLL and employability (2022/C 243/02)', Official Journal of the European Union, C 243, 27 June, pp. 10–25. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H0627(02) (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

European Commission (2025a) The Union of Skills. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2025) 90 final, 5 March. Brussels: European Commission. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0090 (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

European Commission (2025b) Executive summary of the progress report on the implementation of the Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for LLL and employability. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2766/7385248 (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

World Economic Forum (2025) The Future of Jobs Report 2025. Geneva: World Economic Forum. Available at: https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_Report_2025.pdf (Accessed: 23 October 2026).