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Paper

Title: Beyond the Diploma? Micro-credentials, Quadruple Helix Collaboration and Quality Assurance in Future-Oriented Higher Education

Abstract (300 words max)

In the context of lifelong learning and a rapidly evolving labour market, traditional degree models are increasingly challenged by demands for flexibility, stakeholder engagement and new approaches to competence recognition. The aim of this presentation is to show how collaboration between HE institutions, students, employers, policymakers and local communities – understood through the Quadruple Helix framework – supports the development of innovative study programmes and new approaches to competence recognition. Particular attention is paid to micro-credentials as a practical outcome of stakeholder collaboration and as a mechanism linking higher education with evolving societal and labour market expectations. The discussion is based on three international case studies: the Joint Bachelor's Degree in Sustainable Blue Economy (SeaBluE) developed within the SEA-EU alliance, the Joint Bachelor in Sustainability (BASUS) coordinated by Jagiellonian University within Una Europa, and the Polish programme Solidarity Studies developed by the University of Gdańsk in cooperation with the European Solidarity Centre. All three programmes demonstrate strong stakeholder involvement in programme design and quality development. Within the Quadruple Helix framework, micro-credentials support lifelong learning and more personalised educational pathways. This presentation adopts a student-centred perspective and examines how stakeholder-driven programme design and micro-credentials may increase higher education attractiveness. The presentation will also examine how quality assurance frameworks can support stakeholder co-creation, lifelong learning and the integration of micro-credentials into HE systems, drawing on the example of New Zealand's national micro-credential framework to illustrate how micro-credentials can be embedded within a national qualifications system while responding to social and labour market needs. The presentation argues that the future development of HE depends not only on what universities teach, but also on how effectively they collaborate with the wider ecosystem surrounding them to create flexible learning pathways for lifelong learning.

1. Introduction: a student perspective on collaboration and flexible learning

For a student choosing a learning pathway, flexibility raises practical questions: can I participate, what will I learn, how will I be assessed, and where will my achievements be recognised? University collaboration can help provide answers but can also create complexity.

I compare documented collaboration in programme design and its implications for the quality assurance (QA) of micro-credentials. My question is: what conclusions about co-creation, accessibility and recognition emerge from analysing three programmes through the Quadruple Helix, and how can they inform micro-credential design from a student perspective?

I approach this topic as a student and student expert working in quality assurance, directing attention towards participation in decisions and the experience of educational provision.

SeaBluE and BASUS illustrate coordination and diverse pathways; Solidarity Studies connects directly to planned module credentials. The Quadruple Helix provides their common analytical framework. The cases inform conditions for micro-credentials rather than constituting three implementations.

European recommendations and developments in Poland and New Zealand inform recommendations linking partners' contributions with assessed outcomes, accessibility and clear responsibilities.

2. Quadruple Helix collaboration and the role of students

The Quadruple Helix describes knowledge creation and use through collaboration between academia, the economy, public authorities and society. It extends university–industry–government relations. Carayannis and Campbell (2009) understand the fourth sphere through culture, media, values and public debate; other interpretations emphasise civil society, citizens and users (Cai and Lattu, 2022).

The Quintuple Helix adds the natural environment (Carayannis et al., 2012). I retain four spheres to examine collaboration and student roles, while considering the programmes' environmental objectives.

In higher education, universities contribute research and teaching expertise, employers professional knowledge, public authorities policy perspectives, and community and civil society partners their experiences and needs. Collaboration can encompass needs identification, content design and teaching (Day, 2024). Cojocariu et al. (2024, pp. 366–367) present proposals including mentoring, co-delivering workshops and suggesting dissertation topics based on professional problems.

Different priorities and resources require ongoing dialogue and agreed responsibilities (Helix4HE, n.d.). Roles overlap: employers may be businesses, public institutions or civil society organisations. Analysis therefore concerns the nature of contributions.

Students are members of the academic community and directly experience the consequences of programme decisions. They also contribute their own professional and social experiences, and their representatives can express learners' collective interests. They should therefore participate in identifying needs, designing educational provision and evaluating its quality. Their perspective helps establish whether proposed arrangements also address the conditions for participation in education: access to classes, workload and the support needed. This does not, however, mean that students should automatically be assigned to a single helix.

I compare documented contributions without assuming equal participation by all four spheres, examining partners' influence on decisions and envisaged student co-creation. Distinguishing consultation from the use of opinions in decisions connects collaboration with educational quality.

3. Micro-credentials: concepts and quality assurance questions

A micro-credential records learning outcomes acquired through a small volume of learning and assessed against transparent criteria, for example through a short course or programme module. The European approach specifies information including outcomes, workload and assessment (Council of the European Union, 2022). Attendance alone is insufficient, and digital format does not determine value.

Micro-credentials can complement degrees, update competences and open universities to new learners. Their quality depends on responding to identified needs, assessing stated outcomes and providing appropriate support. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA, 2023, pp. 30–34) identifies opportunities to adapt existing QA systems to this provision.

For students, informed choice requires understanding requirements and subsequent uses. Issuing a credential does not guarantee recognition by another university or employer. Combining credentials towards a larger qualification requires agreed rules and educational coherence (ENQA, 2023, pp. 31–34). These conditions should be known before learning begins.

4. Case selection and analytical approach

The cases illustrate different aspects of collaboration: SeaBluE combines economic, environmental and social objectives; BASUS coordinates a joint programme; Solidarity Studies uses social and cultural knowledge alongside planned module credentials. Together they connect programme organisation with flexible learning.

I use public external evaluation reports for SeaBluE and BASUS and the Solidarity Studies self-evaluation, in the absence of a public panel report (ACCUA, 2025; PKA, 2025; University of Gdańsk, n.d.). Solidarity Studies received a positive ex-ante evaluation of readiness for delivery (PKA, 2026).

Common criteria are needs, partners' contributions, student participation, pathway choice, assessment, support and improvement. The comparison distinguishes self-evaluation descriptions from external findings, and plans from implementation.

5. Three programme cases: collaboration, flexibility and quality assurance

5.1. SeaBluE

SeaBluE (Joint Bachelor's Degree in Sustainable Blue Economy), coordinated by the University of Cádiz within SEA-EU, comprises 180 ECTS credits, a common core and six specialisations. It prepares graduates to use marine resources while considering environmental and social consequences (ACCUA, 2025).

Seven universities participated in design, consulting stakeholders and students. The report describes industry and societal needs and envisages partnerships with businesses, public agencies and non-profit organisations for placements, fieldwork and research. However, individual external partners' influence on decisions and delivery is harder to establish. The co-

teaching model concerns partner universities' teachers, while the panel requested clarification of associated partners' involvement (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 7–8, 13, 21, 25).

The panel also identified a predominance of economic outcomes over ecological and sociocultural dimensions (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 11–13). Broad partnerships therefore require deliberate agreement on educational objectives.

Students were consulted, and two representatives from two universities were envisaged on the internal QA committee (ACCUA, 2025, p. 28). Compulsory twelve-month mobility highlights economic inequalities and accommodation needs (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 16, 24). The prepared handbook organises information, while its availability also requires up-to-date websites (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 23–24). International opportunities must be accompanied by conditions enabling students to use them.

5.2. BASUS

BASUS (Joint Bachelor in Sustainability), coordinated by Jagiellonian University within Una Europa, comprises 180 ECTS credits, a common core and six specialisations combining natural science, social, economic and legal perspectives. Specialisation and mobility enable different pathways (PKA, 2025).

The programme primarily demonstrates academic collaboration across institutions and countries. The report confirms external stakeholders' participation in design and interest in delivery, but describes their influence on decisions less fully (PKA, 2025, p. 33). Interdisciplinarity and societal themes do not establish co-creation by all four spheres.

The consortium agreement provides for a Student Council representing the programme's students (PKA, 2025, p. 16). It creates an opportunity to represent experiences across the entire pathway, beyond a single university. The significance of this structure will depend on whether students' views inform the partners' joint decisions.

Material circumstances can constrain pathway choice. The panel recommended joint housing support, a guaranteed accommodation pool and a guide to services and mobility (PKA, 2025, pp. 36–39, 41). These arrangements help make international provision accessible.

The report also questioned language progression: entry requires B2 English, while the final foreign-language outcome specifies at least B2, potentially in another language. It recommended a higher target or advanced applications (PKA, 2025, pp. 19–20). Shared quality responsibility thus encompasses both participation conditions and competence development.

5.3. Solidarity Studies

Solidarity Studies is a second-cycle programme developed by the University of Gdańsk with the European Solidarity Centre. Its self-evaluation describes six modules and research-based projects connecting reflection on solidarity with social and cultural practice (University of Gdańsk, n.d., pp. 20–25, 39–43).

Documented contributions include regional social development analyses brought through a team member from the Regional Centre for Social Policy, course content and urban learning inspired by the City Culture Institute, and the European Solidarity Centre's historical knowledge and educational resources (University of Gdańsk, n.d., pp. 41–42). These combine academic, public and sociocultural perspectives. Cultural contributions do not establish civil society representation, and the economic sphere's contribution is less clearly documented.

Student representatives and external stakeholders are envisaged in the programme section within the Programme Council (University of Gdańsk, n.d., p. 64). This creates a review channel whose influence can be assessed during delivery.

This case connects most directly with micro-credentials: the self-evaluation envisages module credentials requiring completion of constituent courses (University of Gdańsk, n.d., pp. 23–24, 28). These remain plans, not evidence of issued or recognised documents. Students need clarity about eligibility, certified outcomes and subsequent use; co-created content requires transparent access arrangements.

6. Comparative discussion: implications for micro-credentials

The cases reveal different uses of knowledge: SeaBluE highlights external contributions and competing objectives; BASUS, coordination; Solidarity Studies, social and cultural input. The helix identifies contributions without requiring identical representation.

Engagement should encompass design, teaching and review (Day, 2024). Cojocariu et al. (2024, pp. 366–368) propose mentoring, professional tasks, accessibility and support for students at risk of exclusion. These are expectations, not demonstrated outcomes. QA should trace needs through decisions to consequences, balancing employers' views with student experiences and broader educational purposes.

Universities also need internal agreement. Leadership is responsible for resources and sustainable provision; academic staff contribute subject and teaching expertise but need conditions enabling collaboration; administrators understand procedures and support tools; students contribute knowledge of learning conditions and experience. These perspectives should inform design before content, schedules and participation arrangements are fixed. I propose equal consideration of each group's knowledge and needs, with responsibilities, resources and authority appropriate to their roles. This supports educational quality and feasibility for those delivering the programme.

Student participation requires responses to expressed views. Compulsory mobility makes accommodation and living costs part of accessibility (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 16, 24; PKA, 2025, pp. 36–39, 41). Language requirements should address entry and development (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 18–19; PKA, 2025, pp. 19–20).

The existing SeaBluE handbook and planned BASUS guide illustrate the need for clear, current information and named support contacts (ACCUA, 2025, pp. 23–24; PKA, 2025, p. 39). This matters especially during short institutional contact; information cannot replace conditions enabling participation.

Micro-credentials can certify assessed outcomes addressing specific needs, but their format does not establish co-creation. SeaBluE and BASUS are not analysed as implementations; Solidarity Studies supplies the direct connection through planned module credentials (University of Gdańsk, n.d., pp. 23–24, 28).

One possible direction would be to certify selected modules or coherent sets of learning outcomes in programmes such as SeaBluE and BASUS. A student could then present a specific achievement before completing the entire degree, while an employer or another university would receive a clear description of it. This is a proposal arising from the analysis, whose usefulness would need to be explored with students and intended users of the credentials. A component should be selected on the basis of its educational value in its own right and reliable assessment of outcomes; completing a semester alone does not automatically justify awarding a micro-credential. External partners could help identify useful

competences and tasks, while universities would be responsible for integrating them into a coherent programme and ensuring credible assessment.

International provision requires agreement on outcomes, workload, assessment, issuing responsibilities and use between partners. Joint issuance would not guarantee external recognition. Academic recognition, employer recognition and professional entitlements must be distinguished, with separate checks of regulatory requirements. Student value depends on usable achievements rather than certificate numbers (ENQA, 2023, pp. 31–34).

In Poland, a report by Ośrodek Przetwarzania Informacji – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy identified questions about costs, value and recognition (Wiktorko et al., 2023, pp. 56–63). Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych – Państwowy Instytut Badawczy (IBE PIB, 2026) reported 240 micro-credentials offered through Odznaka+, 10,000 documents issued and 56 issuers issuing credentials by the end of August 2026: system figures, not national totals or unique participants. The University of Warsaw permits accumulation towards a postgraduate non-degree certificate. Entry requires at least 15 ECTS credits in micro-credentials at Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF) levels 6–8; completion additionally requires a prior full qualification at least at PQF level 6, aligned outcomes, completion of missing components, participation over at least two semesters and final verification, among other conditions (University of Warsaw, 2026, § 1, inserting § 32(1–7)).

According to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), New Zealand developed a regulated approach from 2018, using qualifications framework levels, workloads and QA procedures to make short provision clearer to employers and useful to learners (NZQA, 2022, pp. 1–3). These arrangements do not replace needs identification or recognition decisions.

A practical application is the digital accessibility micro-credential developed by Victoria University of Wellington and described in that report. The Department of Internal Affairs identified a skills gap in public administration, and the university, the department and organisations of disabled people jointly defined the objectives, activities and assessment. Digital service users' experience therefore influenced what participants were to learn and how they would learn it. Tasks assessed the application of knowledge at work through designing, testing or developing accessible content, or sharing good practice. Following participant feedback, provision moved entirely online from October 2021, enabling people outside Wellington to take part (NZQA, 2022, pp. 8–9).

This example connects a social and professional need with educational content, assessment and conditions for participation. The report also describes the experiences of one participant who used the knowledge within their team and another for whom completing a short course prompted further learning (NZQA, 2022, p. 9). These are individual accounts, rather than evidence of the effectiveness of all micro-credentials, but they illustrate types of value that matter to learners. Compared with the planned credentials in Solidarity Studies, Wellington offers an example of provision already delivered.

ENQA (2023, pp. 30–34) recommends adapting existing QA systems. Learners need support contacts and feedback opportunities early enough to influence their experience, including those without student status or representation. Reviewing content and subsequent uses connects collaboration with opportunities to learn and plan further pathways.

7. Conclusions: student-centred recommendations for quality assurance

Collaboration's value depends on translating partners' knowledge into decisions, accessible participation and credible assessment. The helix identifies contributions; the student perspective asks whether learners can influence and use provision. Micro-credentials need educational value and clear conditions for subsequent use.

I propose three QA recommendations:
First, involve learners in needs identification, design and improvement alongside employers, public institutions and community partners. Explain how their views influenced decisions. Include participants without student status and those without representative roles.

Second, make pathways feasible and understandable before enrolment. Explain outcomes, assessment, costs, workload and support, addressing material, language and organisational barriers. For credentials drawn from larger programmes, specify the achievement's value in its own right and conditions for educational or professional use.

Third, agree responsibilities for delivery, assessment, support and review. Provide accessible problem-reporting channels, timely feedback and examination of subsequent uses. Within universities, leadership, academic and administrative staff, and students need meaningful influence over arrangements affecting them, with duties matched by resources, tools and authority.

Micro-credentials should expand opportunities to learn and use achievements in education, work and social life. Collaboration supports this when learners shape provision, understand requirements and receive support. QA should connect credible certification with responsibility for the learner's experience.

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