

Micro-Credential Guide

Microcredentials – a primer for education and training providers

The renewed European 2020 Skills Agenda emphasises lifelong learning as pivotal for addressing ongoing socio-economic changes in our societies comprehensively. Micro-credentials, which are at the heart of this agenda, provide diverse and inclusive pathways for upskilling and reskilling within rapidly evolving labor markets. To ensure their seamless integration and recognition, the EU has introduced comprehensive guidelines.

While these guidelines primarily target accredited educational providers, they also offer valuable insights for other training providers. As such, not all elements are mandatory or applicable to every educational provider or learning opportunity. Instead, they are general recommendations intended to help organisations by establishing best practices related to micro-credentials.

Background

This guide is based on the [Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability](#). The Recommendation is based on a proposal put forward by the Commission on December 10th 2021, building on a wide consultation and evidence-gathering exercises. The Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials was adopted alongside another proposal on individual learning accounts on 16 June 2022.

Microcredentials- in a nutshell

The European guidelines define microcredentials as the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards.

Why digital credentials are critical to trust and uptake

In Europe and within higher education, microcredentials adhere to stringent standards centered on ownership, transparency, and portability building on the Bologna process. The guidelines further include embedded meta-data with additional information about a microcredential. Traditional PDF formats fall short of meeting these evolving requirements.

As the global landscape for microcredentials expands, ensuring their integrity through digital tamper-proof mechanisms becomes imperative to fostering uptake of microcredentials and trust in their value.



Using a Digital Credentials Platform To Issue Micro-Credentials

A digital platform allows education and training providers to manage and issue, microcredentials in a scalable and cost-efficient way and in alignment with the EU's guidelines for transparency, portability, and authentication. When choosing a service, ensure it is fully compliant with EU regulation such as the European guidelines and GDPR.

At Diplomasafe our experts stay on top of evolving regulation and recommendations and we work with experts that are centrally situated in the development of the European approach to micro-credentials, meaning we are able to provide comprehensive advice when necessary.

European standard elements

European standard elements to describe micro-credentials recommended as a resource to support implementation. These standard elements will be included in a European data model that specifies a common format for describing micro-credentials. The data model will be available as an open standard to be used by providers of micro-credentials, where relevant, and could support interoperability and easier exchange of data on micro-credentials.

 Mandatory Elements	 Optional Elements
Date of issuing	Grade achieved
Type of assessment	Further information
Learning outcomes	Prerequisites needed to enrol in the learning activity
Awarding body(ies)	Integration/stackability options (stand-alone, independent micro-credential/ integrated, stackable towards another credential)
Identification of the learner	Supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online, or onsite with identity verification)
Title of the micro-credential	
Country(ies)/Region(s) of the issuer	
Form of participation in the learning activity	
Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential	
Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits, where relevant)	
Level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable	

Additional notes to standard elements

While these guidelines seem clearly defined it is important to note that relevant elements may vary widely depending on the context.

The outcomes of a microcredential is expressed in learning outcomes, and if industry bodies have defined these, they may also be expressed in performance standards (what a person is capable of doing upon completion of the microcredential. In higher Education, microcredentials may be offered for credit or not for credit. In cases the microcredentials offer credit, the European Credit transfer systems is deployed and the nominal workload should be included. For VET systems and industry certifications different principles apply with learning outcomes or performance standards being the central element.

European principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials

10 universal principles to enable trust and quality of micro-credentials

1. Quality

Micro-credentials are subject to internal and external quality assurance by the system producing them (e.g. the education, training or labour market context in which the micro-credential is developed and delivered). Quality assurance processes must be fit-for- purpose, clearly documented and accessible and meet the needs and expectations of learners and stakeholders.

Providers: External quality assurance is based primarily on the assessment of providers (rather than individual courses) and the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance procedures.

Providers should make sure that internal quality assurance covers all the following elements:

- the overall quality of the micro-credential itself, based on the standards referred to below;
- the quality of the course, where applicable, leading to the micro-credential;
- learners' feedback on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential and;
- peers feedback, including other providers and stakeholders, on the learning experience leading to the micro-credential.

Standards: External quality assurance is to be conducted in line with:

- Annex IV of the European Qualifications Framework Recommendation, where applicable;
- the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, where applicable;
- the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (the EQAVET Framework) in the field of vocational education and training, where applicable;
- other quality assurance instruments, including registries and labels, to build public trust in micro-credentials, where applicable.

Further and more detailed guidance on quality assurance can be found here: <https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/ENQA-micro-credentials-report.pdf>

2. Transparency

Micro-credentials are measurable, comparable and understandable, with clear information on learning outcomes, workload, content, level, and the learning offer, as relevant.

Workload

- Higher education institutions should use the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and comply with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation, where possible, to demonstrate the notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes of the micro-credential.
- Providers that do not use the ECTS may use other systems or types of information that can effectively describe learning outcomes and workload, in compliance with the principles in Annex V to the EQF Recommendation.

Qualifications framework/systems

- Micro-credentials may be included in national qualifications frameworks/systems, where relevant, and in line with national priorities and decisions. National qualifications frameworks/systems are referenced to the European qualifications framework and, for higher education qualifications, self-certified to the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area, which can further support the transparency of, and trust in, micro-credentials.

Information on the offer of micro-credentials

Systems for micro-credentials should provide transparent and clear information, to underpin guidance systems for learners, in line with national practices and stakeholders needs:

- Information on providers of micro-credentials is published where possible in existing relevant registers. Higher-education providers (and other relevant providers) should be included, where possible, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), based on quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);
- Information on learning opportunities leading to micro-credentials should be accessible and easily exchanged through relevant platforms, including Europass.

3. Relevance

Micro-credentials should be designed and issued as distinct, targeted learning achievements and learning opportunities leading to them are to be updated as necessary, to meet identified learning needs.

Collaboration between education and training organisations, employers, social partners, other providers and users of micro-credentials is encouraged to increase the relevance of the micro-credentials for the labour market.

4. Valid Assessment

Micro-credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent criteria.

5. Learning Pathways

Micro-credentials are designed and issued to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to validate, recognise and 'stack' micro-credentials from across different systems.

Stackability

Micro-credentials are designed to be modular so that other micro-credentials may be added to create larger credentials. Decisions to 'stack' or combine credentials lie with the receiving organisation (e.g. education and training institutions, employers, etc.), in line with their practices, and should support the goals and needs of the learner. Stacking does not create an automatic entitlement to a qualification or a degree. Such decisions are made by regional and national authorities or institutions in line with their awarding processes.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Micro-credentials may potentially be issued based on validation of prior informal or nonformal learning. Obtaining micro-credentials is possible following assessment of learning outcomes, obtained either through a specific course leading to a micro-credential, or on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes resulting from non-formal and informal learning.

6. Recognition

Micro-credentials have a clear signalling value of learning outcomes for smaller modules of learning. Recognition paves the way for a wider offer of such learning experiences in a comparable way across the EU.

Micro-credentials are recognised, where possible, by the competent authorities, for academic, training or employment purposes, based on the information provided according to the European standard elements and the principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials.

When micro-credentials are issued by formal education providers, they are recognised, where possible, based on standard recognition procedures used in recognising foreign qualifications and learning periods abroad. This is without prejudice to the right of the competent authorities to define recognition procedures or to verify the authenticity of documents.

7. Portable

Micro-credentials are owned by the credential-holder (the learner) and may be stored and shared easily by the credential-holder, including through secure digital wallets (e.g. Europass), in line with the General Data Protection Regulation. The infrastructure for storing data is based on open standards and data models. This ensures interoperability and seamless exchange of data, and allows for smooth checks of data authenticity.

8. Learner-centred

Micro-credentials are designed to meet the needs of the target group of learners. Learners are involved in the internal and external quality assurance processes and their feedback is taken into account as part of the continuous improvement of the micro-credential.

9. Authentic

Micro-credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credential-holder (learner), the legal identity of the issuer, the date and place of issuance of the micro-credential.

10. Information and guidance

Information and advice on micro-credentials should be incorporated in lifelong learning guidance services and should reach the broadest possible learner groups, in an inclusive way, supporting education, training and career choices.

Final Notes

The shift towards micro-credentials is a key development in education, responding directly to the rapid changes in today's job market and the ongoing need for up-skilling. The EU's guidelines have set the framework for their adoption, ensuring they are credible and aligned with both educational and professional standards

Our platform not only ensures simplified issuance, management, and validation of credentials, but that they are recognised across borders by meeting European standards.