

# European Students' Union (ESU)

## Fighting for students' rights since 1982

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## Statement on Micro-credentials

Micro-credentials have attracted recent interest in the discourse on Higher Education as a possible way to increase the flexibility of higher education and to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for the labour force. However, micro-credentials are not a new phenomenon but rather an existing concept, albeit recognised differently in different countries within the EHEA. They should not substitute but rather complement the current conventional learning opportunities and serve as a lifelong learning opportunity to all.

ESU believes that the development and implementation of a framework for micro-credentials must be followed in parallel by sufficient supportive systems and funding mechanisms. It may also serve to support the evolution of the role of education in (all of) the EHEA-countries to recognise lifelong learning and short learning opportunities as a complementary part of learners' development. ESU believes that micro-credentials should be developed by putting learners' perspective at the centre. The framework for micro-credentials should enable opportunities for recognised short learning in both formal and informal environments, offered by both higher education institutions and other providers.

As reflected in ESU's Policy paper on Quality Education, a high-quality higher education system is characterised by removing all obstacles to access, facilitating progress and completion, implementing a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, developed recognition procedures, and fairly assessing students. ESU believes that the same set of requirements and principles must apply to any high-quality learning offerings, including micro-credentials.

## European Education Area and EHEA

The *European Approach to Micro-credentials* was announced by the European Commission in the European Skills Agenda. The traditional university degree has been in place for more than a century. ESU believes that academic degrees play a formative role for learners and the development of democratic societies. However, we also acknowledge that there is a gap to fill between the current status quo and the societal needs for pursuing various education paths. In the Rome Ministerial Communiqué adopted by the Ministers of Higher Education in Rome in 2020, micro-credentials are included in the forward-looking part of the document concerning the future of the European Higher Education Area. It is stated that “*Flexible and open learning paths, part of the original inspiration for the Bologna Process, are important aspects of student-centred learning and are in increasing demand in our societies*”. Therefore, a more visible need for rethinking how we develop and recognise future skills and competences has provided a basis for the current discourse on the flexibility of education and development of micro-credentials.

Acknowledging the diversity of existing frameworks, ESU, as well as other stakeholders, needs to be involved in every stage of the development of the initiative at the European level, and similarly national stakeholders in the national settings. The crucial and most uncertain part of the process will be related to the implementation phase. In order to successfully facilitate the system’s development, specific implementation guidelines for national levels should be provided to reach a common understanding among stakeholders linked to higher education, governance, the labour market and the youth sector (both on the institutional and national levels). The initiative should aim to serve the interlinked societal needs such as reskilling, upskilling, flexible and inclusive access to learning opportunities while maintaining a high quality of learning content.

## Micro-credentials system behind the scenes

Along with the policy side of the micro-credentials, the infrastructure side, which aims to connect issuers, learning platforms, learners and all other stakeholders, needs to ensure its transparency, interoperability, recognition and safety for all users. ESU believes that

micro-credentials infrastructure should be designed to support the storage and portability of the achieved learning credentials, but at the same time, it is necessary to avoid creating pressure on learners to collect certain credentials, to avoid “tokenisation” of their education path. The currently proposed EU standard for constitutive elements of micro-credentials contains a list of critical information elements. ESU believes that regardless of the final set of elements, the process of issuing the credentials should not create an additional administrative burden for learners, issuers and any administrative staff, which is especially important in the case of informal learning offerings but should be rather automatized and issued in the digital format.

The development of micro-credentials would require an interconnected infrastructure that allows exchanging the data with various institutions, employers, and platforms. As a basis for the infrastructure, the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI) linked to the EUROPASS initiative is at the centre of the discourse. Currently, only qualifications in national qualifications frameworks can have a Europass Digitally Signed Credential, so further work is needed in order to use this infrastructure for micro-credentials. Regardless of the final approach that will be taken, learners should be the owners of their own data. When digital tools are used in education, measures should always be in place to ensure the privacy and digital security of students, using the principles of “privacy by design”.

## **Micro-credentials as flexible learning opportunities**

On the national level, ESU finds it important to advocate for a central approach to the matter, including working groups and advisory committees at the ministerial level, to ensure credibility and uniformity. There must be a common understanding of the definition of micro-credentials in order to avoid legislative obstacles when implementing and recognising them. Micro-credentials should lead to clear learning outcomes and be coherently linked and correlated to national provisions for traditional degrees, in order to ensure their complementarity.

One of the ideas behind micro-credentials is to provide additional flexible learning pathways in an effort to provide the learners with more freedom when choosing and developing their

own skills and competencies. Micro-credentials can serve as a supporting system at HEIs for providing more flexible and interdisciplinary learning opportunities. The additional learning opportunities shall not create additional workload within the study programmes but rather be its complementary part through, e.g. widening and enhancing the quality of elective courses.

Micro-credentials should also support lifelong learning opportunities by allowing learners to gain a more diverse skills portfolio when entering or when already active in the workforce and might be essential for further development of professional competencies, even after graduation with a traditional university degree.

Micro-credentials can also be used to transfer skills and competencies from outside of the current formal education system. Thus it can also be used to certify competencies and skills acquired previously by learners of non-traditional background and simplify their return to the job market or academia.

## **Applicability of micro-credentials to Bologna tools**

ESU believes that micro-credentials should be aligned with National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) through defined levels and standards for describing learning outcomes. That approach should also aim to enhance the quality of those. It is often the case that quality assurance of micro-credentials does not yet hold ground in the national framework and is thus expected to be carried out by the providing institution itself. Regardless of the mechanism in place for quality assurance of micro-credentials, ESU highlights that it should stem from and be an adaptation of the ESGs. ESU encourages further development of micro-credentials quality assurance processes by assessing the process of their implementation during the programme and institutional QA evaluations.

Moreover, ESU finds it of the utmost importance that for the provided and recognized micro-credentials - regardless of the issuer which is providing those - a feedback system needs to be developed with learners directly engaged in the process. It is necessary to have learners involved in the quality assurance of micro-credentials in all cases in which they are

provided. That is to say that they must be developed with, offered for, and assessed by the learners.

Micro-credentials can also provide a format to recognise non-formal learning as a part of the formal education system. Being the converter of non-formal education, they can be used to transfer non-formal learning outcomes to formal learning. ESU sees a space to provide an opportunity for various actors offering learning opportunities such as NGOs, youth organisations and student unions to recognise and support their contribution and work on building active citizenship. ESU recommends that the *European Approach to Micro-credentials* addresses the link between micro-credentials provided by these important actors and the traditional degree and how to fully ensure their recognition on the European level, together with the enhancement of their quality system.

Micro-credentials can also be considered as the means for recognising and accrediting non-formal education with ECTS credits, especially when the learning outcomes might be used as a prerequisite to access or complementary part of higher education. In line with the *European Approach to Micro-credentials* by the European Commission, ESU also finds that regardless of the provider, micro-credentials should be measured in ECTS wherever possible in order to have universal recognition opportunities. On this matter, ESU encourages the promotion of the ECTS Guide and support for providers to determine the allocation of ECTS.

ESU believes that there is also a threat of micro-credentials being exploited for commercial purposes. Their main goal must always be the opportunity for learners to further shape their own education. ESU stands against the commodification of higher education in all forms, as stated and elaborated in the Commodification Statement of ESU; therefore stresses the importance of creating and implementing micro-credentials with learners' needs in mind first and foremost, and not for the financial benefit of the institution or with the sole objective of meeting the needs of the labour market.

## **Opportunities from a learner's perspective**

Taking a step back, ESU sees a range of opportunities from diverse learners' perspectives, which might broaden access to education, provide upskilling and reskilling pathways for

learners and let them adapt to the fast-changing reality and societal needs. Developing and mainstreaming shorter and flexible learning offerings should, as follows:

- Create possibilities to acquire interdisciplinary knowledge and skills that will play a complementary role in curriculum development and lifelong learning;
- Open studying/learning opportunities for new learners who are being left out of the traditional educational systems;
- Allow learners to diversify their portfolio without additional requirements for traditional degree completion;
- Foster the elective courses offerings done by HEIs, which may also contribute to their sustainability by attracting a more diverse group of learners;
- Offer valuable possibilities of recognised reskilling for NEETs (people Not in Education, Employment or Training);
- Serve as an equalising mechanism to the education systems for learners coming from different non-traditional backgrounds;
- Support the automatic recognition of formal, informal, and non-formal learning opportunities acquired by lifelong learners;
- Support the portability of the earned credits achieved by learning opportunities in a transferable digital format;
- Ease up cross-border recognition of skills and competencies gained through formal and non-formal education;
- Not create an additional administrative burden for learners, higher education systems or other providers;
- Acknowledge existing pathways for short-learning opportunities which must be incorporated into the framework of further development of the *European Approach to Micro-credentials*.