Implementation and Innovation in QA through Peer Learning (IMINQA)

WG on QA of Micro-credentials

Meeting 1

Draft Report – 02/09/2022

Welcome and introduction, tour de table

Elena Cirlan, chair of the Working Group on Quality Assurance of Micro-credentials, opened the meeting and welcomed all participants.

She invited all participants to briefly present themselves.

The working group consists of 32 participants from 25 EHEA countries. It includes representatives from 10 ministries, 16 QA agencies, 2 consultative members (EUA, ESU) and the European Commission.

Overview of the IMINQA project & presentation of the WG on QA of micro-credentials

IMINQA project

The IMINQA project will support the work of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C on QA). The project foresees the organisation of TPG meetings, offer a staff mobility scheme, organise three peer learning activities and work on three thematic work packages: QA of micro-credentials, QA of European Universities, and digitalisation of QA processes.

IMINQA work package 5 focuses on the QA of micro-credentials. It builds further on the previous MICROBOL project. A WG is set up to address the recommendations of the MICROBOL project related to internal and external quality assurance and on the establishment of a register and catalogues of providers and micro-credentials. As such, it has strong links with IMINQA WP 2 (TPG C), WP 3 (staff mobility) and WP6 (QA of European Universities).

The work of the WG will consists of the following tasks:

- Desk research to collect and analyse different approaches to QA of micro-credentials
- Production of guiding documents on IQA of micro-credentials and the use of the ESG for micro-credential evaluation through institutional external QA approaches
    - For HEIs
    - For QA agencies
- Key Considerations for non-HEI providers

- Inclusion of MC providers in DEQAR
- Feasibility assessment on quality label and recommendation on use of DEQAR
- Harmonised data standard for information on micro-credentials

The key outcomes of the WP will feed into the reporting to the 2024 EHEA Ministerial Conference and, as appropriate, into the 2024 Ministerial Communique.

Micro-credentials: presentation & plenary discussion on state of play and challenges in participating countries

The Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability[1] provides the following definition of a micro-credential:

> 'Micro-credential' means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes will have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined criteria. Learning experiences leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared and are portable. They may be stand-alone or combined into larger credentials. They are underpinned by quality assurance following agreed standards in the relevant sector or area of activity.'

This definition will be taken as a basis for this group work.

Concerning the quality assurance of micro-credentials, the MICROBOL project concluded that the ESG principle that they apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA, in whatever format, duration or mode of delivery is also applicable to micro-credentials. National governments should explore whether a change in legislation is needed to accommodate for micro-credentials, and if so, take the necessary steps. The main project outcomes can be found in the meeting slide deck.

The group continued to discuss the state of play and challenges regarding micro-credentials in their country. Some key elements of the discussion:

- A poll during the meeting showed that in the majority of countries present in the working group, discussions about policies related to QA of micro-credentials have just started. Several members mentioned that they are working on this issue within working groups and/or by conducting research.
- In some countries, micro-credentials already fit into the existing system (although they might be called differently), in this case there is nothing in the existing legislation that would not support development and provision of micro-credentials.
- Common understanding on the definition of micro-credentials is key.

Internal QA of micro-credentials: presentation and discussion

The group discussed internal QA (IQA) of micro-credentials, taking into account a few baselines:

- As stated in the ESG the primary responsibility for the quality of provision lies with the higher education institutions.

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[1] https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf

- All micro-credentials should be subject to internal QA with well-built system to monitor their quality internally. It should be considered that stand-alone micro-credentials may require more elaborate QA procedures.
- HEIs should publish clear policy and information on how they approach the quality of micro-credentials.
- Learners must be included in all steps of the development, implementation and QA process of micro-credentials.

The group discussed several topics in relation to IQA. Some key elements brought forward:

- Stackability
  - Stackability is not the main aim of micro-credentials.
  - There may not be so many problems stacking within a provider, but =across providers.
  - There is also concern regarding to what extent a degree is more than the sum of its parts. There is a fear that stackability may be harmful to traditional degrees.
  - In some countries stackability of micro-credentials is forbidden by law.
  - The European Commission highlighted that when talking about stackability, this does not necessarily mean the stackability of micro-credentials would reach to a full degree. This is up to countries to decide. The stacking of micro-credentials could potentially lead to a full degree, but they may also just feed into a programme.
  - There might even be a demand for micro-credentials to be stacked.
- Non-HEI providers & partnerships
  - For those micro-credentials offered in partnership by HEIs and other non-HEI partners, QA should be ensured by the HEI.
- Digitally delivered micro-credentials
  - Some equity concerns were expressed, as some groups (depending on socio-economic status, geographically remote areas, etc.) may have limited access to necessary sources (stable internet connection, access to a good library, etc.).
  - In some countries, initiatives are being taken up regarding, digital badges, Europass or other types of creation of a digital offer.

External QA of micro-credentials: presentation and discussion in break-out groups

The group discussed external QA (EQA) of micro-credentials, taking into account a few baselines:

- QA agencies' role is to support higher education institutions in developing policies and processes for QA.
- They are also to ensure the public and stakeholders about the effectiveness of these.
- QA agencies should also explicitly address internal QA of micro-credentials.
- The application of programme level evaluation procedures should not be encouraged for each micro-credential course.
- The institutional evaluation approach is better fit to cover also micro-credentials.
- Different types of micro-credentials might require different evaluation approaches:
  - stand-alone micro-credential vs micro-credential that is part of a bigger degree programme;
  - online mode vs the face-to-face.

The group discussed several topics in relation to EQA. Some key elements brought forward:

- EQA approaches in place
    - From an organisational and workload perspective, it is impossible for QA agencies to evaluate all micro-credentials provided by all HEIs in a system.
    - The ESG apply to both EQA and IQA. It is highlighted that IQA and EQA are strongly interlinked and that they cannot be separated.
- Non-HEI providers
    - QA agencies generally only focus on HEIs, not on alternative providers. Some countries, are however developing approaches to provide optional QA evaluations for non-HEI providers.
    - It is highlighted that it is not so important that the EQA is carried out by the same agency, but that there should be a system in place to assure the quality of provision, in order to ensure trust.
    - Regarding the use of labels, caution should be taken when labelling only micro-credentials provided by HEIs. They should not be portrayed as somehow better than the ones offered by non-HEI providers.
    - HEIs do not have the monopoly on offering micro-credentials and we should not give the impression that we consider HEIs to be superior in offering them.
    - It is expressed that there should not be a separation between micro-credentials offered by HEIs and by other providers, as this goes against the policy of recognising informal and non-formal learning.

Exchange of ideas on the QA of micro-credentials offered by non-HEI providers

The group discussed several topics in relation to the provision of micro-credentials offered by non-HEI providers. Some key elements brought forward:

- It is mentioned that it would be good to be more open-minded and flexible towards alternative providers. Non-HEI providers are able to provide something that HEIs are not doing yet and we need to think about how we value this.
- There should be more transparency regarding micro-credentials. Learners must be able to know what they get out of a certain micro-credential, including for example what the possible recognition pathways are.
- Non-HEIs might be interested in a QA procedure if it contributed to recognition.
- QA of non-HEI providers may simplify recognition of prior learning procedures. It is however expressed that this decision should remain with the HEIs.
- We can play a role in information provision to non-HEI providers.

Way forward & Division of tasks

The participants are grouped into four writing groups:

- Desk research
- IQA guidance
- EQA guidance
- Key Considerations for non-HEI providers

The members of the writing groups are expected to actively participate in the though by writing and revising documents relating to their topic. Below, an overview of the tasks is provided, together with the members who volunteered to be part of the writing group. The composition of the writing groups

remains open to members of the working group that were not present. Current members that would like to change groups can contact Elena Cirlan.

Task	Description	Timing	Members writing group
Desk research	Desk research to collect and analyse different approaches to QA of micro-credentials. The desk research will be based on research carried out in the MICROBOL project, broadening it to the regulatory frameworks, practices and processes in place at QA agency and HEI levels as well as to legal and other frameworks at system level (i.e. for EQA and IQA, and in particular how QA agencies can ensure, through EQA, that institutional IQA systems address micro-credential QA explicitly and systematically). The analysis will also benefit of the work of an ENQA working group on micro-credentials which is carrying out further analysis of existing QA approaches in 2021-2022. The desk research will be followed by semi-structured interviews of specific cases, leading to a collection of good practice cases and analysis of different models in use in Europe. The desk research will also look into and consider the feasibility to widen the European framework for micro-credentials to alternative providers. The analysis will serve as a basis for the preparation of the guidance key considerations by the working group. The desk research outcomes will be presented to the TPG-C.	Now – May 2023	Austria Croatia Czech republic Germany Hungary Italy
IQA guidance – Guiding document for HEIs	Production of a guiding document that covers "key considerations" on IQA of micro-credentials. The document is based on the desk research above, as well as on the outcomes of the MICROBOL project. The key considerations will be a practical guidance document for HEIs in the EHEA. The draft "key considerations" will be presented to the TPG-C and discussed with the TPG on recognition, as micro-credential quality assurance is very closely connected to their potential to be recognised across the EHEA. The work on the key considerations will draw on ENQA's previous work on key considerations for e-learning (https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/Considerations-for-QA-of-e-learning-provision.pdf).	January 2023 – September 2023	EUA Hungary Iceland Slovakia UK

EQA guidance – Guiding document for QA agencies	Production of a guiding document that covers "key considerations" on the use of the ESG for micro-credential evaluation through institutional external QA approaches. The document is based on the desk research, as well as on the outcomes of the MICROBOL project. The key considerations will be a practical guidance document for QA agencies in the EHEA. The draft "key considerations" will be presented to the TPG-C and discussed with the TPG on recognition, as micro-credential quality assurance is very closely connected to their potential to be recognised across the EHEA. The work on the key considerations will draw on the work of ENQA's working group focusing on the same topic.	January 2023 – September 2023	Cyprus ESU EQAR Georgia Iceland Malta Slovakia Turkey
Key Considerations for non-HEI providers	Prepare a set of key considerations for non-HEI providers that could lead to facilitating the process of recognition of micro-credentials offered by non-HEI providers.	April 2023 – September 2023	Cyprus EQAR ESU France Malta UK

The next meeting of the WG on QA of Micro-credentials will take place online in February 2023.