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Analysing and mapping of current institutional qualifications for continuing education and professional development and micro-credentials in the partnership



UNIVERSITÀ TELEMATICA
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Executive summary

In a rapidly changing world, lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways are crucial. More and more small learning opportunities, so-called micro-credentials, are being developed across Europe and the world. Yet, to date, a common definition and standards to describe, design, and recognize micro-credentials are missing. What is more, higher education institutions act within very different contexts and may aim to achieve various objectives relating to micro-credentials.

The ten project partners were asked to fill out a comprehensive questionnaire on institutional, quality, and funding policies regarding micro-credentials. In this deliverable, we map and analyze existing institutional qualifications for continuing education and professional development (CEPD) and depict learners' preferences based on the data collected on the institutional level. These preferences are labeled as 'assumed' in this document because learners were not part of the study.

Six out of ten partners already use the term 'micro-credential'. In addition, a variety of other designations are used for short learning opportunities: 'certificate', 'short learning program', and 'professional course' are the most widespread, along with eight other denominations, e.g., 'diploma', 'continuing education with certificate of attendance', 'certified continuing education program', 'MOOC', and 'open teaching'. All these terms are understood quite differently with regard to the number of ECTS credits, number of study hours, EQF level, diploma supplement, stackability, etc.

In anthesis to the heterogeneity of answers regarding current institutional qualifications, there is relative consistency in relation to the assumed motivations of learners. Most of the partners maintain that the majority of their micro-credential students are lifelong learners. The main motivations – in line with the European Commission Recommendation – are expected to be the wish to ensure employability and career progression and to use the micro-credential for up- or reskilling to better fit labor market needs. This result is correspondent with the findings of Bruguera, Fitó, Pagés and Antonaci (2022), *Meta-research on the learner perspective on micro-credential formats and learning services for continuing education and professional development*, which has shown that “satisfying work-related skill needs and satiating one’s curiosity for new knowledge as the most common motivations for enrolling in micro-credentials” (Bruguera et al. 2022, p. 31).

In light of the varying denominations and diverse characteristics, a narrow definition of what micro-credentials actually are still seems challenging or even impossible. Broad definitions and umbrella of opportunities for individual institutions and countries that come with micro-credentials are still good starting points for further development of micro-credentials.

The *European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability* presents a wide definition of micro-credentials, it is up to each institution to take this definition and make it meaningful and operational, by connecting it to the unique characteristics of their population, countries, institutions, and national law they have.

“Micro-credential’ means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning” (EC 2022f, p. 13). This broad definition is based on the urgency to serve all the member states and can be understood as a basic guideline to set a minimum standard for European micro-credentials.

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1. Introduction

In a world that is rapidly changing, investing in lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways is swiftly becoming an issue of key importance. Increasing numbers of compact learning opportunities, nowadays called micro-credentials, are being developed across Europe and around the world.

In the past years, many EU funded projects and experts have focused on the topic. The Micro-Credentials Higher Education Consultation Group and the MICROBOL project, for example, have endeavored to describe and define what micro-credentials are. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) as the leading institutional university network for online, open, and distance higher education launched a project on European Short Learning Programs (E-SLP) in 2018. This three-year project developed SLP characteristics and guidelines as well as recommendations for quality assurance, recognition, etc.

In December 2021, after numerous discussions and consultations, the Council of the European Union published its “Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability” (EC 2021b) to member states. It was adopted in June 2022 and “seeks to support the development, implementation and recognition of micro-credentials across institutions, businesses, sectors and borders” (EC 2022c). By the end of 2023, the recommendation is supposed to be implemented at national level. It was published alongside another proposal on individual learning accounts (EC 2021d) and shows the growing importance of flexible and inclusive learning opportunities as well as lifelong learning. The recommendation involves a common definition and presents European standard elements to describe micro-credentials (annex 1) alongside “principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials” (EC 2021b, annex 2). These building blocks are considered important because “without common standards ensuring their quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition and portability, micro-credentials cannot reach their full potential” (EC 2022b). Hence, building trust in micro-credentials and enhancing their flexibility is one of the Council Recommendation’s aims that has been highlighted (EC 2022b).

In order to contribute to the further conceptualization of micro-credentials in the context of national and EU-level policies and frameworks, and to support respective transformative institutional developments, the Erasmus+ funded MCE project started on 1 April 2022 (MCE 2022). Under the coordination of EADTU, for the next three years, the ten partners will be working on topics such as the learners’ perspective and contexts of micro-credentials and modular education. The partners are Università Telematica Internazionale UNINETTUNO, UNED, Universidade Aberta, FernUniversität in Hagen, Hellenic Open University, Open Universiteit, Open University of Cyprus, Kaunas University of Technology, Open University of Catalonia UOC, and KU Leuven.

The project outcomes will provide an important evidence base and will support further institutional developments for the transformations needed to ensure high-quality, trusted, and widely recognized micro-credentials.

As one of its starting points, the project seeks to map and analyze existing institutional qualifications for continuing education and professional development (CEPD) and micro-credentials in the partnership in relation to assumed learners' aspirations and motivations. In the following, we describe the partners' institutional frameworks for non-standard programs and analyze them against the backdrop of the most relevant definitions of micro-credentials. In the second step, we concentrate on learners' motivations as assumed by the partners.

2. Background

In recent years, micro-credentials are gaining prominence across sectors of education within EU as well as national strategies. A plethora of attempts have been made to explicate, define, and standardize the fuzzy field of non-classical learning experiences usually defined as small or short in comparison to traditional macro-credentials such as degrees, diplomas, etc., which may take a number of years to complete. There are several definitions on what micro-credentials are (compare for example T. Melai et al. 2020, E-SLP 2020, EC 2020, MICROBOL 2020).

The EU, in its attempt to establish a European approach to micro-credentials, defines micro-credentials in its recommendation to member states in the following way:

'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. (EC 2022f, p. 13)

Despite the broadness of definitions, certain ideas and criteria become apparent: Quality and transparency are prominently placed as the two first principles, reflecting the demand for fit-for-purpose, clearly documented internal and external quality assurance as well as clear information on learning outcomes, workload (ECTS credits), content, level (European Qualification Framework, EQF/National Qualification Framework, NQF), and the learning offerings. An assessment is clearly still needed. Micro-credentials should be relevant, i.e., they should be designed as distinct, targeted learning achievements that meet identified learning needs. The EU believes that micro-credentials will help to create flexible learning pathways, which include the possibility to stack/combine, validate, and recognize micro-credentials from across different systems.

3. Survey of institutional strategies on micro-credentials

Within the MCE project, the FernUniversität is leading a work package on institutional leadership and micro-credentials (WP3). The objective of WP3 is to support university leadership in the development and progressive implementation of transformative institutional policies, strategies, and institutional preconditions for forward-looking CEPD and micro-credential programs and qualifications in response to the demands and expectations of learners, the economy, and society. Specifically, the objectives include comparing institutional policies, strategies, and frameworks for CEPD and micro-credentials in light of new perspectives on the transformation of higher education and “the future of Europe's universities (Europe's Universities 2030)”, taking the learners’ perspective into account (mainly dealt with in the work package on investigating modularization and micro-credentials from the learners’ perspective WP2) as well as analyzing and mapping the current institutional qualifications for continuing education and professional development and micro-credentials within the partnership. Further goals are to harmonize and align micro-credentials with EU policy and build an institutional ecosystem for continuing education.

In order to accomplish the first two of these objectives, the FernUniversität asked all of the project partners to fill out a comprehensive survey in May to July 2022. The survey was composed of the following three sections: Institutional Strategy and Frameworks (a), Quality Policies (b), and Funding Policies (c). It was created as an online form using the open-source tool LimeSurvey and was mainly made up of single- or multiple-choice questions as well as a small number of open-answer questions (examples are given in Table 1, Table 6 and Table 7). Ten out of ten partners contributed to the collection of data, not all of the partners were able to respond to all the questions in the survey. The participants were invited to base their answers on all the institutional offerings that might fall under the definition of the EC Recommendation, irrespective of whether they already call them micro-credentials. As the partners are mainly distance-learning institutions, the offerings are (mainly) blended or digital micro-credentials. This report focuses on the findings on current institutional qualifications, taking into account learner status, aspirations, and preferences as seen by stakeholders.

4. Mapping and analyzing current institutional qualifications in the partnership

Within the institutional strategies part of the survey, one of the questions aimed at the current institutional qualifications in the partnership, i.e., if the partners already have a structured framework for non-standard programs. The aim was to get an overview on the offerings that exist today at the different higher education organizations and how these are specified. The following table represents the question (Q) 7 asking partners about qualification structure for micro-credentials at their institution:

Q7- Qualification structure of micro-credentials at your institution:

Table 1: Question 7 of the questionnaire on qualification structure of ‘micro-credentials’ in partnership

Name of the offering	Award given	Integration/stackability options	Volume of learning (hours of study)	ECTS	EQF/NQF level	Diploma supplement provided
<i>micro-degree, micro-credential, nano-degree, certificate, diploma, short learning program, professional course, other (please specify)</i>	<i>certificate, ECTS, badges, other (please specify)</i>	<i>standalone/independent micro-credential, or integrated/stackable towards another credential – if stackable, up to (number of) ECTS</i>		1–59	<i>4/5: foundation, 6: Bachelor’s, 7: Master’s, 8: doctoral level</i>	<i>yes/no</i>

4.1 Denominations used

As represented in figure 1 six out of ten partners already adopted the term ‘micro-credential’. In addition, a variety of other acronyms are used for describing short learning opportunities such as ‘certificate’, used by seven partners; ‘short learning program’, used by six partners; and ‘professional course’, used by six partners, are the most widespread, along with eight other denominations, e.g., ‘diploma’, ‘continuing education with certificate of attendance’, ‘certified continuing education program’, ‘MOOC’, and ‘open teaching.’ All these terms are understood quite differently with regard to the number of ECTS credits, number of study hours, EQF level, diploma supplement, stackability, etc.

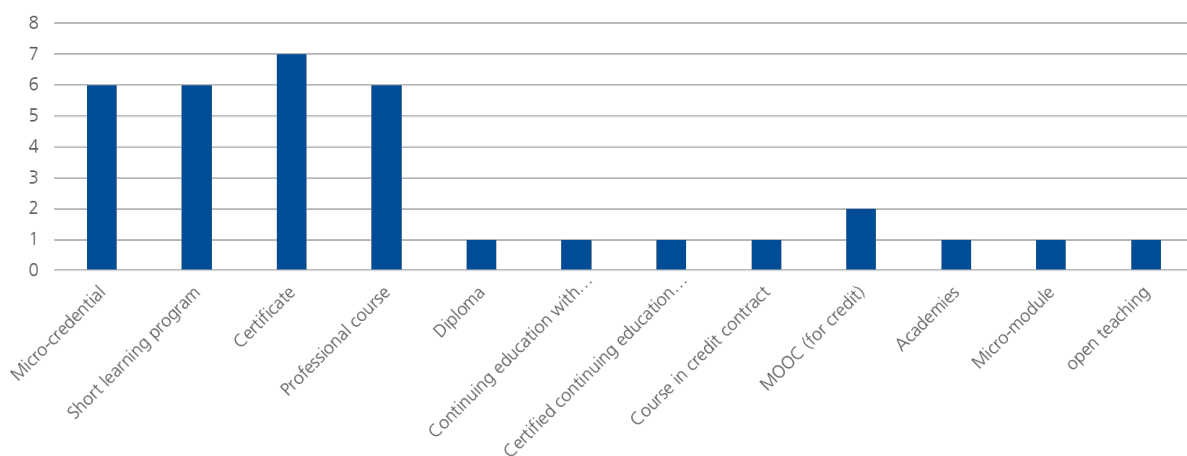


Figure 1: Denominations currently used by MCE’ HEIs, in relation to short learning opportunities

The terms ‘micro-degree’ and ‘nano-degree’, often found in the literature, are not adopted within HEIs part of the MCE partnership.

4.2 ‘Micro-credential’

Six out of ten partners already use the term ‘micro-credential’. However, what is meant by that varies greatly from institution to institution. The most significant variation is the range of ECTS credits from 1 to 30, or 26 to 420 hours of study (table 2). The academic level of study lies mostly at EQF level 6 or 7 (i.e., Bachelor’s or Master’s), sometimes also at level 5 or 8 (preparatory or doctoral level) (figure 3). ECTS and certificate combined is the most common award. Half of the partners report that the micro-credentials offered are (mostly) stackable; one university offers only standalone courses. Half of the partners issue a diploma supplement for students who have successfully completed their micro-credential.

Table 2: ‘Micro-credential’ characteristics in MCE’ HEIs

Award given	Integration/stackability options	Volume of learning (in hours)	ECTS	EQF/NQF level	Diploma supplement provided
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECTS and certificate (3) • ECTS (2) • certificate based on ECTS (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • standalone (2) • stackable (2) • mostly stackable (1) • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26–158 • 28–420 • 100–170 • 150–300 • n/a (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–6 • 1–15 • 1–30 • 4–20 • 5–20 • 6–12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–7 (2) • 6–7 (2) • 6–8 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes (3) • no (2) • n/a (1)

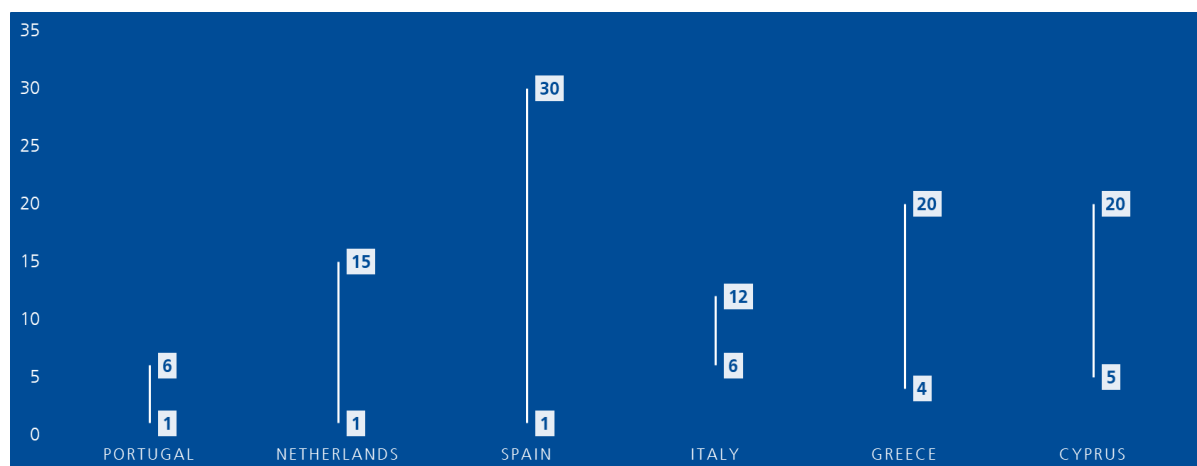


Figure 2: ECTS-range of ‘micro-credentials’ (selection)

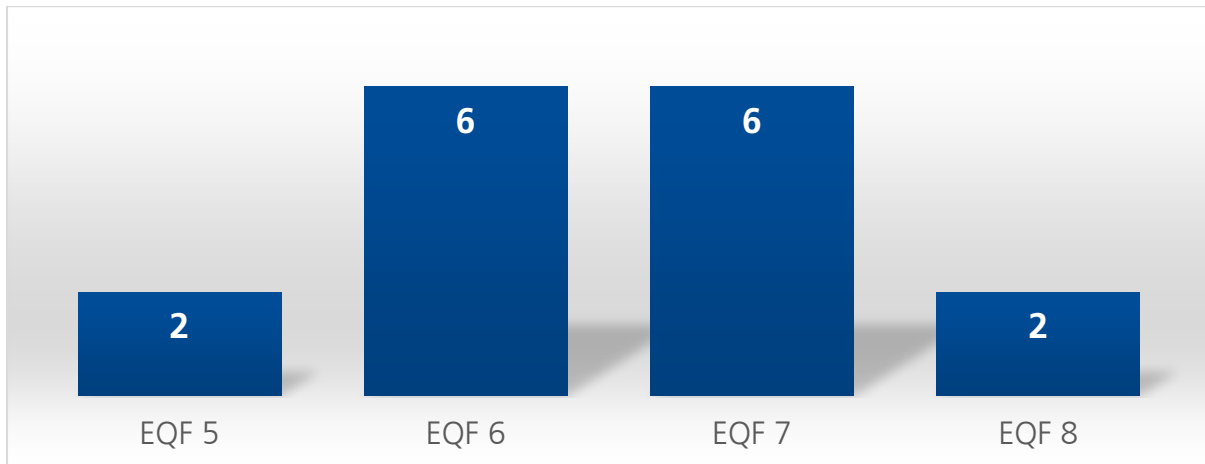


Figure 3: EQF level of the ‘micro-credentials’ at the moment of this research (2022) within MCE’ HEIs

4.3 ‘Certificate’

The terminological fuzziness is noticeable when it comes to the usage of the denomination ‘certificate’, which can signify the learning experience itself, the award given for a learning experience called ‘certificate’, or the award given for a learning experience labelled differently (such as ‘micro-credential’, ‘short learning program’, or ‘professional course’). Seven out of ten partners use the term ‘certificate’ for learning experiences; one university offers a ‘post-graduate certificate’. In two cases, ECTS are earned by finishing a certificate; another university uses ‘ECTS and certificate’ as an award; yet another uses ‘certificate based on ECTS.’ In the remaining cases, the proof of learning is called ‘certificate’ or ‘post-graduate certificate’. The range of ECTS points varies from 0 to 60. The academic level of study lies mostly at EQF level 6 to 7 (i.e., Bachelor’s or Master’s); in one case it is 7 to 8 (doctoral level). At one partner university, there is a tendency to use more and more often the structure of ‘Certificate of Advanced Studies’ (CAS; 10–30 ECTS) and ‘Diploma of Advanced Studies’ (DAS; 30–60 ECTS). Diploma supplements for students who have successfully completed their certificate are issued by some universities in the partnership.

Table 3: ‘Certificate’ characteristics in MCE’ HEIs (The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of partners)

Name of the offering	Award given	Integration/stackability options	Volume of learning (hours)	ECTS	EQF/NQF level	Diploma supplement provided
certificate (thereof one “post-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECTS (2) • ECTS and certificate (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stackable (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28–420 • 40–200 • 600–1500 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–15 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6–7 (4) • 7 (1) • 7–8 (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes (2) • no (2) • n/a (3)

graduate certificate")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • certificate based on ECTS (1) • certificate (1) • certificate/CAS/DAS (1) • post-graduate certificate granted by the university (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mostly stackable (1) • stackable or standalone (1) • standalone (1) • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 ECTS = 25 • n/a (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–30 (CAS)/30–60 (DAS) • 15 • >20 • 24–60 • no ECTS • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • n/a (1) 	
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4.4 'Short learning program'

Seven partners use the term 'short learning program'. In four cases, the term is used side by side with the denomination 'micro-credential', supposedly interchangeably; hence, in those cases, the micro-credential characteristics and heterogeneity mentioned above in chapter 4.2 apply. The variation is even bigger due to the fact that the term is used by one partner for bigger volumes of learning, i.e., 420 to 1820 hours of study awarded with 15 to 65 ECTS. Half of the partners report that the short learning programs offered are (mostly) stackable. (According to the answer from one university, awarding master/specialist/expert is possible, due to the stackability of short learning programs of up to 120 ECTS.)

Table 4: 'Short learning program' characteristics in MCE' HEIs

Name of the offering	Award given	Integration/stackability options	Volume of learning (hours of study)	ECTS	EQF/NQF level	Diploma supplement provided
short learning program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECTS and certificate (3) • ECTS (2) • certificate based on ECTS (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • standalone (2) • stackable (2) • mostly stackable (1) • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26–158 • 100–700 • 150–300 • 420–1820 • n/a (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–6 • 1–15 • 4–20 • 5–20 • 6–12 • 15–65 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–7 (2) • 6–7 (2) • 6–8 (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes (3) • no (2) • n/a (1)

4.5 'Professional course'

Six out of ten partners use the term 'professional course' (one of them uses the variant 'professional qualification course'). The category includes courses meant for continuous professional education for specific professional groups (such as lawyers, healthcare professionals, teachers, etc.). The aim of a professional course is – besides professional development – to make people more marketable in today's economy. What is meant by 'professional course' varies greatly from one institution to another. The ECTS values fluctuate between 1 (lowest) and 60 (highest). After completing a professional course, students of two universities get awarded with ECTS only; two other partners award

credits complemented by a certificate; one partner awards a certificate only; and one university uses the label 'professional course' for both the learning experience and the award given. Professional courses in the partnership are stackable in three cases; one university offers standalone courses while another offers mostly standalone courses. The academic level of study varies from 5 to 7 and 7 to 8. Diploma supplements are provided in three cases.

Table 5: 'Professional course' characteristics in MCE' HEIs (The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of partners)

Name of the offering	Award given	Integration/stackability options	Volume of learning (hours of study)	ECTS	EQF/NQF level	Diploma supplement provided
professional course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECTS and certificate (2) • ECTS (2) • certificate (1) • professional course (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stackable (3) • standalone (1) • mostly standalone (1) • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28–840 • 250–1500 • 780–1660 • 1 ECTS = 25 • n/a (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1–15 • 1–30 • 3–14 • 5–20 • 10–60 • 30–60 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5–7 (1) • 6–7 (1) • 6–8 (1) • 7 (1) • 7–8 (1) • n/a (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes (2) • yes, as digital certificate (1) • no (1) • n/a (2)

4.6 Further denominations

When asked to name the qualification structure for micro-credentials at their institution, the partners used nine other denominations besides the most frequent ones specified above: 'diploma,' 'continuing education with certificate of attendance,' 'certified continuing education program,' 'course in credit contract,' 'MOOC,' 'MOOC for credit,' 'open teaching,' 'academies,' and 'micro-module.'

The spectrum of meanings of the term 'diploma' is variable: 'diploma' is used for stackable, short learning experiences (30 ECTS; EQF level 7) as well as for (mostly) standalone, significantly longer learning paths (1680 to 5040 hours of study), awarded with 60 to 180 ECTS on EQF level 6 to 7.

'Continuing education with certificate of attendance' signifies a learning experience with an undetermined volume of learning (no ECTS), which is awarded with a certificate of attendance granted by the organizer, who can choose the enrollment requirements (no EQF). The offering functions as a standalone unit with no diploma supplement.

In the case of 'certified continuing education programs,' which require at least 90 hours of study and are not awarded with ECTS but a certificate granted by the faculty, stackability is possible and diploma supplements are optional.

Yet another variant is 'course in credit contract,' which is awarded with proof of credits (no certificate) which can be stackable (> 3 ECTS; EQF level 6 to 7; no diploma supplement).

In the case of 'MOOCs', certificates are possible. This learning experience has an undetermined volume. MOOCs are standalone units, credits are not awarded, the academic level of study (EQF) is not implemented, and the offering does not include a diploma supplement.

Another term used in the partnership is 'MOOC for credit', which is awarded with proof of credits (no certificate; > 3 ECTS; EQF level 6 to 7; no diploma supplement). MOOCs for credit can be stackable.

The short learning experience named 'academies' is awarded with a certificate granted by the faculty (> 3 ECTS; EQF level 6 to 7; no diploma supplement).

Last but not least, the term 'micro-module' is used in the partnership. It denominates a learning experience awarded with ECTS, with a volume of 160 hours, on EQF level 7, and without a diploma supplement.

4.7 Further characteristics of micro-credentials

In the survey carried out by FernUniversität in Hagen, one of the questions (Q4) aimed at specifying further characteristics of micro-credentials.

Q4- Micro-credentials at your institution ...

Table 6: Question 4 of the questionnaire on characteristics of micro-credentials in MCE' HEIs

All	Most	Some
are ECTS- and EQF-based (7)	are market-oriented/demand-driven (5)	are interdisciplinary (8)
are learner-centered (5)	are stackable (4)	are in English (6)
		have an academic orientation (5)
		originate from modularization of an existing program/course (5)

As table 6 shows, almost all of the micro-credentials offered at the partner institutions are ECTS- and EQF-based (seven out of ten); many are also learner-centered (five out of ten). Another similarity is that very few are interdisciplinary in nature and that English-language offerings are the exception.

However, there are major differences when it comes to other characteristics. Half of the partners primarily offer micro-credentials with an academic orientation, while the other

half focuses on labor-market/vocational-learning outcomes. At four out of ten institutions, all learners taking micro-credential courses have the same legal status as Bachelor's or Master's students; at some institutions, the students' legal status depends on the specific micro-credential they have registered to. The picture is similarly complex when it comes to the origin of micro-credentials: Half of the partners offer micro-credentials that result from the modularization of existing programs or courses. Four partners do so with many or all of their micro: investigation of -credentials. At one partner institution all micro-credentials are explicitly set up from scratch.

All of the abovementioned findings refer to all the courses or programs that the institutions understand as being a micro-credential according to the definition in the EC Recommendation. But that does not necessarily mean that these offerings are titled as such.

5. Learners' drivers from institutional perspective

To time, there is not much data on micro-credential learners' perspective and what motivates them to sign up for a micro-credential. The institutional perspective surveyed could only give good guesses based on universities daily experience in offering micro-credentials. The findings from the MCE project work package 2, namely the results of the questionnaire and focus-groups carried out at the moment by the partner Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), which already substantially contributed to the field by a meta-research on the learners' perspective (Bruguera et al. 2022), will deliver a reliable evidence base in this regard. Nonetheless, this study could capture the institutional perspective on possible students' drivers (motivations) engaging in micro-credentials via the following question:

Q5- Students of micro-credentials at your institution ...

Table 7: Question 5 of the questionnaire on institutional perspective on the learners within MCE partnership

<i>All</i>	<i>Most</i>	<i>Some</i>
have the same legal status as students enrolled in Bachelor's/Master's programs (4; 4 none)	wish to ensure their employability and career progression (8)	belong to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (9)
	use the micro-credential for up- or reskilling to better fit labor market needs (7)	use the micro-credential as preparation for a specific study program (8)
	wish to learn for their own personal development (7)	use the micro-credential to meet regulatory requirements in their job (8)

Most of the partners report that the majority of their micro-credential students are lifelong learners. Five out of ten partners state that most learners already have a Bachelor's degree when enrolling; seven out of ten indicate that some students already have a Master's degree before they delve into a micro-credential. Five out of nine partners assume that micro-credential learners are likely to study again at their institution. In contrast few micro-credential learners are believed to belong to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

Regarding the assumed learners' drivers, the answers are also relatively consistent. The main motivations – in line with the EC Recommendation – are expected to be the “wish to ensure employability and career progression” and to “use the micro-credential for up- or reskilling to better fit labor market needs.” Likewise, students wishing “to learn for their own personal development” has a high score. In contrast, students wishing “to orient themselves regarding studying” and students who “use the micro-credential to meet regulatory requirements in their job (e.g. mandatory training)” are expected to play only a marginal role. These results are correspondent with the findings of Bruguera et al. (2022) which has shown that “satisfying work-related skill needs and satiating one's curiosity for new knowledge as the most common motivations for enrolling in micro-credentials” (Bruguera et al. 2022, p. 31).

Interestingly, it seems that learners' lack of time or money are not factors that impact on an institutional plan in relation to micro-credentials offering.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the survey clearly show how differently each institution defines and understands short learning opportunities. Considering the variations regarding denominations and diverse characteristics a suitable approach, for the time being, seems to be to value the umbrella of opportunities for individual institutions and countries that comes with micro-credentials. The *European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability* presents a wide definition of micro-credentials, it is up to each institution to take this definition and make it meaningful and operational, by connecting it to the unique characteristics of their population, countries, institutions, and national law they have. “*Micro-credential* means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning” (EC 2022f, p. 13). This broad definition is based on the urgency to serve all the member states and can be understood as a basic guideline to set a minimum standard for European micro-credentials.

However, it is possible to find some common patterns among our HEIs. For instance, the term ‘short learning program’ tends to be used for smaller units in terms of ECTS (partners use it for courses with less than 20 ECTS); the term ‘certificate’, by contrast, is rather used for larger units (three more partners indicate more than 15 ECTS). Almost all the micro-credentials offered at the partner institutions are ECTS- and EQF-based (seven out of ten). The differences emerge the most in relation to the volume of learning that characterize this short learning opportunity (ECTS) and its stackability and desing

(modularization of existing programs vs. newly set up courses). The European Commission points out the importance of the size and cost of micro-credentials:

To date, there is no common definition of micro-credentials and there is a lack of standards to describe and recognize them. This causes concerns about their value, quality, recognition, transparency and “portability” (portability between and within education and training sectors, portability on the labour market and portability across countries). This limits the trust, understanding, wider acceptance and uptake which in turn limits the potential of micro-credentials to support flexible learning and career pathways. (EC 2021b)

This corresponds with the results of the survey. It is becoming apparent that, within Europe and at a national level, there is an urgent need for standardization of micro-credentials. Clear parameters would also facilitate aspects such as permeability, portability and stackability not only within national institutions but also within Europe. Distinct criteria regarding the term micro-credential will also be necessary, since the results of the survey clearly show that many institutions already seem to offer micro-credentials but are using different terms for certification.

The results of the survey clearly show that all participating European institutions are dealing with the issue of short, flexible tailored learning opportunities (and some of them have been for several years). Even though there are some commonalities, as described above, the differences are very striking. The explanation of this differences is quite simple: The processes of national and transnational standardization are still in their early stage.

In comparison to the heterogeneity of answers regarding current institutional qualifications, there is relative consistency when it comes to the assumed preferences of learners. Most of the partners maintain that the majority of their micro-credential students are lifelong learners. The main drivers – in line with the EC Recommendation and the first findings of the work package WP2– are “wish to ensure employability and career progression” and to “use the micro-credential for up- or reskilling to better fit labor market needs”. Likewise, students wishing “to learn for their own personal development” has a high score. However, regarding students’ motivation to sign up for a micro-credential, the partners surveyed presented in this study could only give good guesses based on their daily experience in offering micro-credentials.

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