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## Follow-up and analysis of national and EU policy developments on micro-credentials



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## Executive Summary

*D6.1: Report on the Analyses of National and European Policies on Continuing Education and Professional Development Related to Micro-Credentials* provides a comprehensive analysis of the policy environment surrounding micro-credentials within the context of European higher education. Produced as part of the MCE (Modularisation of Continuing Education and Professionalisation by Micro-credentials) project, this document offers a detailed exploration of both national and EU-level approaches to micro-credentialing, focusing on the potential of these credentials to foster lifelong learning and enhance employability across diverse sectors.

The study carried reveals that while micro-credentials are increasingly viewed as critical tools for upskilling and reskilling, particularly in response to the evolving demands of the labour market, their implementation across European countries is uneven. Despite the European Commission's recommendation in 2022 to adopt a unified approach to micro-credentials, granting autonomy to member states has resulted in a patchwork of national strategies. Some countries, such as Spain and Portugal, have made significant strides by integrating micro-credentials into their education and training systems. Spain, for instance, has developed the "Plan Microcreds," a comprehensive initiative that includes significant financial support and a clear framework for the implementation of micro-credentials. Portugal's "Adult Impulse Initiative" similarly seeks to modernize continuing education through partnerships between higher education institutions and employers, although its approach to micro-credentials remains less defined.

Conversely, many other EU member states have yet to establish specific policies or frameworks that directly address micro-credentials, often subsuming them under broader lifelong learning policies. In countries like Germany and the Netherlands, the absence of targeted legislation has led to fragmented practices, with individual institutions developing their own internal quality assurance measures without national oversight. This lack of standardization poses challenges for the recognition and portability of micro-credentials across borders, which is a key objective of the European Commission's recommendations.

The report also highlights the role of quality assurance agencies in shaping the development of micro-credentials. While the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) standards provide a foundation, the report emphasizes that quality assurance systems for micro-credentials are still in their infancy. Countries like Spain and Portugal have started integrating micro-credentials into their quality assurance frameworks, but external quality assurance for these credentials remains limited across much of Europe. The inconsistent approach to quality assurance has significant implications for the credibility and acceptance of micro-credentials by both employers and educational institutions.

One notable gap identified in the report is the absence of centralized portals or repositories for micro-credentials in most EU countries. Although the European Union has encouraged member states to develop transparent systems for the recognition of micro-credentials, very few countries have implemented national platforms. Exceptions include Ireland, Finland, and

Germany, which have established portals that provide comprehensive information about micro-credential programs. These platforms serve as models for how micro-credentials can be made more accessible and comparable across national borders.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing momentum in the adoption of micro-credentials, with multiple countries initiating pilot programs and funding mechanisms aimed at expanding their use. However, the lack of a clear, universally accepted definition of micro-credentials, coupled with variations in their design, duration, and level, complicates efforts to establish a cohesive European framework. This inconsistency is likely to hinder cross-national recognition and the broader integration of micro-credentials into traditional education systems and the labour market.

In conclusion, while the potential for micro-credentials to enhance lifelong learning and address skills gaps is widely recognized, their successful implementation across Europe will require coordinated policy development, robust quality assurance systems, and sustainable funding. The report underscores the importance of continued dialogue among policymakers, educational institutions, and employers to ensure that micro-credentials can fulfil their promise as flexible, accessible tools for professional development in an increasingly digital and rapidly changing economy.

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## 1. Introduction

The European Commission has issued a series of recommendations to member states regarding micro-credentials, granting each state the autonomy to formulate its policies while adhering to the guidance provided by the Commission. On June 16, 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted this Recommendation, instituting a European approach to micro-credentials focusing on lifelong learning and employability (CE, 2022). The objective is to facilitate the development, implementation, and recognition of Micro-credentials across diverse entities such as institutions, businesses, sectors, and borders.

As part of this recommendation, member states are encouraged to endorse and implement this recommendation. Simultaneously, the member states were advised to formulate policies that facilitate the effective design, issuance, and utilisation of micro-credentials. Additionally, member states were encouraged to integrate micro-credentials into education and training systems, skills policies, and employment and active labour market policies. The recommendation to member states is to expedite the implementation of these guidelines. To monitor ongoing progress, member states were asked to inform the Commission by December 2023 about the measures they plan to take to further the objectives of this recommendation.

Micro-credentials go beyond Higher Education and should not be limited to this context, as they have the potential to drive lifelong learning in a labour market that increasingly values upskilling and reskilling. They can be aligned with any level within a European qualifications framework and are offered by a diverse range of education providers, including Higher Education and Vocational Education. Therefore, micro-credentials are not inherently tied to Higher Education, and there is no evidence that micro-credentials offered by Higher Education institutions are more successful than those provided by other types of education providers. However, it is important to note that this report focuses solely on the Higher Education sector, collecting data directly from Higher Education institutions and indirectly from quality assurance agencies in HE.

As part of the MCE project (Modularisation of Continuing Education and Professionalisation by micro-credentials) one of the objectives is to provide empirical evidence for dialogues with policymakers at both national and EU levels, contributing to the formulation of policies for continuing education and professional development, as well as European frameworks for micro-credentials. As a consortium comprising eleven partners across nine European member states (plus three associated partners) with a shared interest and experience in developing and offering micro-credentials, the MCE consortium surveyed existing partners with the following aims:

1. To create a comprehensive mapping of existing policies in each EU member state.
2. To generate a detailed comparative report on the status of micro-credentialing (MC) policies in partner countries.

## 2. Methodology

With the above objectives in mind, UAb and EADTU, co-leaders of work package 6, conducted a survey, using Google Forms, to collect data from the consortium partners about existing national policy on micro-credentials.

The survey was designed as an iterative instrument to accommodate the dynamic nature of policy development throughout the project's duration, which concludes in 2025. This approach was adopted to ensure the data remains current and relevant, as opposed to a single-delivery model that risks obsolescence.

The initial survey was conducted in December 2023, with ten partners representing nine different countries participating in the MCE project. A follow-up survey is scheduled for November-December 2024. This second iteration aims to:

1. Update the existing data
2. Provide fresh insights into the evolving landscape of Micro-credential policies
3. Offer evidence of progress in policy development among EU member states

This two-phase approach allows for a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of micro-credential policies across participating countries, reflecting the rapidly changing educational and professional landscape in the European Union.

*Table 1: institutions participating in the first iteration of the survey*

<b>Higher Education Institution</b>	<b>Country</b>
Fernuniversität in Hagen	Germany
Hellenic Open University	Greece
International Telematic University UNINETTUNO	Italy
Kaunas University of Technology	Lithuania
KU Leuven	Belgium (Flanders region)
Open Universiteit (NL)	Netherlands
Open University of Cyprus	Cyprus
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia	Spain
Universidade Aberta	Portugal
Universitat Oberta de Catalunya	Spain

In addition to this survey, three other significant reports on the adoption of micro-credentials at EU and international levels were published in 2023. These include:

- "Quality Assurance of micro-credentials: Expectations within the Context of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" by ENQA (Greere, 2023).
- "Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability: Uses and Possibilities" by the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills (OECD, 2023a).
- "Public Policies for Effective Micro-credential Learning" by the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills (OECD, 2023b).

This report aims to triangulate findings from our 2023 survey with the insights presented in these ENQA and OECD publications, providing a comprehensive analysis of the current Micro-credential landscape.

### 3. Existing policy on micro-credentials

The survey first addressed whether countries or federal states have specific policies and documentation supporting micro-credentials in Higher Education, recognising that some nations (e.g., Germany, Spain, or Belgium) may have regional education regulations. Only partners from Spain and Portugal reported having policies supporting micro-credentials, though the reported approaches differ.

Spain has implemented a comprehensive micro-credentials strategy called the "Plan Microcreds." This initiative, developed by the Ministry of Universities, is a key component of the country's broader Recovery, Transformation, and Resilience Plan. The Spanish government has allocated a substantial fund of 50 million euros to support this program<sup>1</sup>.

The "Plan Microcreds" has several primary objectives:

1. Finance the development of micro-credentials
2. Provide scholarships and assistance to vulnerable groups, including:
  - Unemployed individuals
  - Low-income earners
  - Socially vulnerable populations
3. Foster stronger connections between universities and productive sectors

The strategic approach demonstrates Spain's commitment to modernising its Higher Education system and addressing socioeconomic challenges through targeted educational initiatives. University micro-credentials are defined as brief courses (less than 15 ECTS credits) that emphasize the acquisition of specific knowledge, skills, or competencies. They are flexible, adaptable to diverse needs, and can be delivered in virtual or semi-virtual formats. The modular structure allows each micro-credential to stand alone while accumulating and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.universidades.gob.es/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/DOC-planmicrocreds\\_SIN-MARCAS.pdf](https://www.universidades.gob.es/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/DOC-planmicrocreds_SIN-MARCAS.pdf)

combining into broader credentials, such as degrees or master's programs, enabling a personalised educational path.

The OECD report indicates that modularisation and stackable credentials can motivate students to complete their degrees. This approach allows students to earn smaller, incremental qualifications that can be combined over time to achieve a full formal degree (OECD, 2023a).

The Microcreds Plan, which is part of Spain's university system, is reinforced by the Organic Law of the University System, which reinforces universities as institutions for all ages and making lifelong learning a basic university function<sup>2</sup>. As the only country, within the MCE partnership, with a specific existing policy in micro-credentials, Spain already established the requirement of micro-credentials including:

- references to learning outcomes/competencies;
- assessment requirements;
- required elements as part of the certificate;
- ECTS to measure student workload in each micro-credential (including specific ECTS interval for micro-credentials workload);
- the N/EQF level of the micro-credential;
- the target audience for micro-credentials (including reference to reskilling/upskilling);
- quality assurance information (including principles for internal and external Quality), reference to modularity and reference to the accreditation process.

In Portugal, a similar scheme exists with an overall budget of 130 million Euros: *The Adult Impulse initiative*<sup>3</sup>. This program aims to help active adults update their skills through short learning programs at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels in all fields. The goal is to support programs created and implemented by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in partnership with companies and public or private employers, such as local, regional, and national entities. This initiative, designed for adult learners, involves 33 consortia consisting of 75 Higher Education institutions and companies focused on reskilling and upskilling.

This initiative does not exclusively target micro-credentials, but early results suggest an increased adoption of micro-credentials in both development and enrolment compared to traditional programs which are also part of this initiative. By the end of 2025, it is expected that approximately 100,000 adults will have participated in reskilling and upskilling courses, and over 200 micro-credentials courses will have been developed. However, no specific policy or guideline has been provided to individual Higher Education institutions as part of this project/initiative, which is being coordinated by the Directorate General for Higher Education.

Portugal's policy on the topic of Lifelong Learning in HE is broad, aiming to modernise the incentive structure for collaboration between Higher Education institutions, public

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<sup>2</sup> <https://boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2023-7500>

<sup>3</sup> <https://sites.google.com/view/prrprogramasimpulso/home>

administration, and businesses. It seeks to diversify training offerings and promote lifelong learning, encompassing short learning programs and micro-credentials. However, the policy's language remains vague, leaving room for interpretation in its implementation.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2023, the Ministry of Higher Education (MUR) in Italy issued a call for proposals to establish three Digital Education Hubs as part of the Next Generation EU initiative. Each Hub aims to serve 20% of the Higher Education student population, which amounts to 400,000 students per Hub. One requirement of the call is the establishment of an Observatory on Micro-Credentials that will be coordinated among the three Digital Education Hubs<sup>5</sup>. In the report “Italian report on referencing qualifications to the European EQF Framework”, signed by the ministers of Labour, Education, and Higher Education, there is a footnote with a definition of "micro-qualification", with references to the abovementioned EU micro-credentials recommendations. This definition states that micro-qualifications are qualifications, composed of one or more skills, constitutive of broader qualifications, following short-term courses, or even a flexible, personalised, and modular learning experience<sup>6</sup>.

Reports from both ENQA and OECD indicate that many EU member states are making progress in piloting micro-credential programs. These initiatives often come with additional funding and discussions about adapting national legislation and quality assurance systems, as seen in Portugal, Spain, and Italy. The OECD report specifically mentions existing pilot studies in Finland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, and Spain.

However, ENQA notes that in most European countries, micro-credentials remain a novel concept still under development. The report confirms that specific legislation for micro-credentials is largely absent across EU member states. Survey data reveals limited approaches:

- A few countries, like Spain, explicitly mention micro-credentials in their national legislation.
- Others, such as Sweden, don't explicitly reference micro-credentials in legislation but implicitly include them under existing quality assurance systems (Hidalgo & Jiménez, 2023).

## 4. The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies

During the consultation process, the MICROBOL project – one the first EU-funded projects that produced recommendations about micro-credentials adoption - looked into how tools within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) could be used or adjusted to support

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<sup>4</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/27-2021-161518656>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.mur.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-12/Decreto%20Direttoriale%20n.%202100%20del%2015-12-2023%20-%20Allegato%203\\_Lettera%20di%20impegno\\_13.12.2023.pdf](https://www.mur.gov.it/sites/default/files/2023-12/Decreto%20Direttoriale%20n.%202100%20del%2015-12-2023%20-%20Allegato%203_Lettera%20di%20impegno_13.12.2023.pdf), page 3

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita-orientamento-e-formazione/normativa/di-del-15062023-adozione-rapporto-eqf.pdf>

micro-credentials. The project emphasised that micro-credentials, as part of Higher Education programs, should adhere to the institutions' internal quality assurance measures based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Cirlan & Loukkola, 2020). The project concluded that it is the responsibility of education providers to ensure the quality of micro-credentials, regardless of their form or stage in the education process. It was also suggested that external quality assurance processes should include micro-credentials to guarantee that the institutions offering them have effective and well-structured internal quality monitoring systems (Manatos, Curto & Maniaci, 2023).

Furthermore, the recommendation emphasises the role of external quality assurance of the providers (and not individual courses) and of providers' internal quality assurance mechanisms, which should ensure the quality of such micro-credentials, of the course leading to the micro-credential (when applicable), as well as feedback from learners and peers on the learning experience. Overall, the quality assurance of micro-credentials should be supported by increasing transparency through the application of the Bologna instruments, by European cooperation, and, consequently, through developing, more broadly, a sense of trust.

ENQA has established a working group to assess the status of micro-credentials in member and associate states. In this regard, a survey was conducted with 64 respondents representing 53 Quality Assurance (QA) Agencies at the European level. Only nine of these respondents reported having experience in quality assurance of micro-credentials. They offered diverse opinions on which specific external QA methodological features could be used for micro-credentials. Additionally, they expressed moderate expectations about the relevance of the ESG (European Standards and Guidelines) in this context.

The survey results indicate that more than half of the respondents (54.7%) depend on internal QA setups within Higher Education institutions to fully (28.1%) or partially (26.6%) cover micro-credentials. However, this finding is not very convincing because less than half of the respondents (43.8%) stated that their agencies currently do not validate or review the recognition of micro-credentials offered by Higher Education institutions or other providers. Furthermore, 21.9% reported that they do not engage, at all, in any recognition activities. Additionally, less than half of the QA agencies (43.7%) do not currently quality assure micro-credentials, but they intend to do so in the future, while 23.4% have no plans to quality assure micro-credentials. Currently, only 15.6% of the QA agencies quality assure micro-credentials, and 12.5% are in the process of developing QA approaches (Hidalgo & Jiménez, 2023).

The participants in the MCE survey were queried about the involvement of QA agencies and External Bodies in accrediting micro-credentials. Notably, in Lithuania, there is currently no external accreditation process for micro-credentials. Similarly, the Netherlands accredits based on entire programs, lacking an external QA system for individual learning units such as micro-credentials. However, many institutions have internally instituted QA systems for this purpose. While there is ongoing acceptance regarding a QA system for individual learning units, progress is incremental. In the Netherlands, a proposed law aims to facilitate the

evaluation and classification of individual learning units under the Dutch Qualification Framework NLQF.

In Flanders, the option for external quality assurance of open courses exists when they are part of existing Bachelor/Master programs, as they are presented to lifelong learners through a 'credit contract', presenting them as micro-credentials. The accreditation for Bachelor/Master programs is overseen by the NVAO (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders). As for micro-credentials offered independently of regular programs, discussions are still in progress.

In both Portugal and Spain, QA agencies have the role of monitoring the internal quality processes of MC providers. Furthermore, they are encouraged to evaluate the robustness of institutions' internal quality assurance systems and how they address micro-credentials. In Cyprus, there is no external accreditation for micro-credentials. A similar situation occurs in Greece and Italy.

The ENQA report provides four different experiences and approaches to the external quality assurance of micro-credentials in Spain (Catalunya), Estonia, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya) recognised the importance of upskilling and reskilling in the region. In 2021, they introduced an accreditation methodology for short learning programs at bachelor's and master's levels, specifically targeting fields relevant to the regional job market.

Meanwhile, the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) has been addressing the quality of micro-credentials in non-formal education since 2022. Their approach involves piloting quality assessments for study program groups among 120 non-formal education institutions. This ensures that these institutions can only offer micro-credentials in fields where they've demonstrated competence through a rigorous quality evaluation process.

Quality Qualifications Ireland (QQI) took a different route, initially responding to urgent training needs during the pandemic. They developed a method to document and evaluate micro-credentials derived from modules of previously validated programs. After a successful pilot and evaluation phase, this initiative has now become a standard practice and has expanded to include new programs.

The external quality assurance of micro-credentials encounters several challenges that largely fall outside the jurisdiction of QA agencies and organisations. These challenges are closely linked to the need for developing specific national frameworks, fostering international agreements, and establishing clear definitions and shared understanding of what constitutes a Micro-credential, especially across the Higher Education sector.

This inconsistency complicates the application of standard QA practices. Moreover, many countries either lack supportive national legislation or have gaps in their legislation that impede the effective regulation and QA of micro-credentials. Additionally, the absence of universally accepted definitions and descriptors for micro-credentials makes it difficult to

establish quality assurance standards. Without these foundational elements, it becomes challenging for QA bodies to develop appropriate criteria and requirements for consistently and reliably evaluating the quality of micro-credentials (Hidalgo & Jiménez, 2023) . It is important to note that this lack of consistency is evident not only at the national level but also across the European Union, as the EU recommendation offers only a very loose framework. This will inevitably cause limitations in national and cross-national recognition of micro-credentials generating possible misinterpretations from not just the education sector but also employers and the students of the micro-credentials.

## 5. The existence of a centralised portal/repository for micro-credentials managed by a national body

The EU recommendations for member states on micro-credentials state that to achieve transparency members should develop systems that provide transparent and clear information to support guidance for learners, aligning with national practices and stakeholder needs. Key considerations include:

- **Provider Information:** Information about micro-credential providers should be published in existing relevant registers whenever possible. Higher education institutions and other relevant providers should be included, where feasible, in the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), which is based on quality assurance practices aligned with the ESG.
- **Learning Opportunities:** Information regarding learning opportunities that lead to micro-credentials should be easily accessible and exchangeable through relevant platforms, including Europass.

There is currently limited progress in creating a centralised portal/repository for existing micro-credentials that can be accessed by students, employers, and institutions across the countries and provide transparent information about micro-credentials.

The Netherlands does not have a centralised portal/repository, but there have been some experiments using a platform called Edubadges, which allows Higher Education Institutions to register their micro-credentials<sup>7</sup>. Portugal, Flanders, Lithuania, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, and Italy partners have reported that there is no centralised portal/repository, and there are no plans to develop one. In Spain, there is no centralised portal/repository at the moment, but there is a provision in law for its development. Lastly, the Ministry of Higher Education in Italy has recently committed to creating an observatory for micro-credentials, which may provide more information about the micro-credentials offered in the country.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.edubadges.nl/>

According to the recently published report from the OECD (2023b) only three countries at a European level have implemented national Micro-credential portals to publicise and cover Micro-credential provisions:

- Ireland: Dedicated exclusively to micro-credentials, as required by funding agreements. The platform includes program information and a definition of micro-credentials.
- Finland: Offers programs from formal education and training providers on a voluntary basis. The platform provides program information and an overview of the Finnish education system, including continuous learning provisions.
- Germany: Features further education programs offered by public and government-recognised Higher Education institutions on a voluntary basis. The platform includes program information, an overview of university continuing education, and guidance tailored to adult learners.

## 6. Questions about existing policy for short learning courses and lifelong learning and short learning courses in general

At the time of the data collection, member states participating in this project (with the exception of Spain) still lack specific policies and developments to support nationally the development of micro-credentials. According to the main objectives of this report, we also asked whether there was a policy that, though not referring to micro-credentials, could be used to frame it as part of a wider lifelong learning policy for the Higher Education sector. At this level, Germany, the Netherlands, and Greece did not present any specific policy for lifelong learning in Higher Education. As we previously mentioned, Spain has a specific policy for micro-credentials which includes a strategic approach for Higher Education institutions to address lifelong learning. Lithuania<sup>8</sup>, Flanders<sup>9</sup>, Cyprus<sup>10</sup> and Portugal<sup>11</sup> have either policy (Flanders and Portugal) or strategic guidelines (Lithuania and Cyprus) for embedding lifelong learning and short courses into Higher Education.

Italy has made significant efforts to integrate European Union inputs into the development of lifelong learning programs within its active welfare system. While Higher Education is nationally regulated, the Italian State shares jurisdiction with its regions in matters of education, vocational training, and employment, as established by Constitutional Law no. 3/2001, article 3.

Formally, Short Learning Programs (SLPs) are not recognised within lifelong learning programs (LLPs) or continuing education programs in Higher Education. However, there is an

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<sup>8</sup> <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/TAIS.230967>

<sup>9</sup> <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=14650>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.moec.gov.cy/eiao/en/life\\_long\\_learning\\_strategy.html](https://www.moec.gov.cy/eiao/en/life_long_learning_strategy.html)

<sup>11</sup> <https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/27-2021-161518656>

opportunity to earn ECTS credits by participating in specific supplementary courses organised by universities to meet emerging public needs. These programs must undergo formal accreditation by third parties, provide ECTS credits, and serve as integral components of broader, formal programs such as Bachelor's or Master's degree programs.

## 7. Other findings

Although very few developments have been made regarding the development of new policies and mechanisms to support micro-credentials in Higher Education at a national level, there is evidence that national countries and individual institutions are making efforts to discuss and develop such instruments.

Lithuania has already established links and interconnections between ESCO and qualifications databases. Vocational training programs in Lithuania are modular, enabling students to receive a certificate of completion for individual modules within a training program. In adult education, the Labour Market Exchange office provides a broad range of short-term training for job seekers to facilitate entry into the labour market. In the Higher Education sector, Kaunas University of Technology (KTU), a member of the Consortium of Innovative European Universities (ECIU), offers micro-modules based on a set of learning outcomes, which can be recognised as part of a study program. Other Lithuanian universities also have similar initiatives.

The Ministry of Education in Flanders is currently engaging in discussions with stakeholders to formulate a vision and to design a framework for the implementation of micro-credentials. Additionally, the Flemish Ministry of Education published a vision paper entitled "Advancement Fund Higher Education" in 2021<sup>12</sup>. Through this fund, the Flemish government has allocated an additional 60 million euros for the academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23 to expand lifelong learning.

The three main focuses of the Advancement Fund are:

- The development of a future-proof training portfolio in Flanders.
- The promotion of Lifelong Learning within Higher Education.
- The complete integration of digital education and teaching.

Within this initiative, institutions such as KU Leuven, have been developing several projects, including those related to micro-credentials<sup>13</sup>.

In Spain, two regulations have been put in place to establish micro-credentials within the Spanish Qualifications Ecosystem. However, the regulations are ambiguous about the definition of micro-credentials. In 2023, the Ministry of Universities released a plan for Micro-

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<sup>12</sup> available in Dutch at <https://beslissingenvlaamseregering.vlaanderen.be/document-view/6037B2B4339140000800036B>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.kuleuven.be/english/education/higher-education-advancement-fund>.

credential development, which seemed to adopt the European Framework as the reference. However, the document lacks specificity about the definition of a Micro-credential, other than it being an accreditation following a training of less than 15 ECTS. This plan outlines a series of measures aimed at developing micro-credentials in Spain and provides funding for their development in a project that appears very similar to the Flemish one.

In Portugal, the QA Agency (A3ES) mentions for the first time the topic of micro-credentials in the 2023 activity plan: "micro-credentials have also attracted attention from the Agency. One of the A3ES employees joined a Working Group organized by ENQA. The Final Report will be published in 2023 and will be the subject of a public debate to be organized by the Agency"<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, although there is evidence of growing interest by adult learners and increasing offers in each Higher Education institution, as a result of the funding stream available, there are no clear guidelines from the government concerning a strategy for the implementation of micro-credentials.

Lastly, in Germany, there is noticeable reluctance at the political level to create a policy that supports micro-credentials. The vocational training circles, for instance, convey a negative stance regarding micro-credentials adoption. Moreover, in Higher Education, the classification of micro-credentials remains uncertain, specifically whether they are intended solely for further or vocational education or are applicable to undergraduate teaching as well. The decentralised nature of educational responsibility across states complicates the search for a resolution, as the federal level appears disinclined to assume responsibility in this regard.

## 8. Final considerations

The development and implementation of micro-credentials present a range of opportunities and challenges that policymakers must carefully consider. Micro-credentials are not a standardised form of education or training, as they vary significantly in duration and in the International Standard Classification of Education levels at which they are offered (OECD, 2023b) This variability complicates efforts to generalise their impact or draw comparisons to traditional academic degrees. Preliminary findings from the study conducted in MCE, as well as the reports published by ENQA and by OECD, present a picture of the diversity of national approaches and the lack of national policies regarding micro-credentials. This lack of standardization will inevitably have a negative impact on attempts to recognise national and international certifications obtained in these programs at an educational or labour market level.

To fully realise the socio-economic benefits of micro-credentials, especially in initiatives designed to integrate non-traditional students and marginalised individuals into the labour market, it is essential that these programs are both affordable and accessible. Eliminating financial barriers is critical to encouraging disadvantaged learners to engage in lifelong

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.a3es.pt/pt/o-que-e-a3es/plano-de-atividades>

learning. While various forms of financial support are available for unemployed individuals, low-income and marginalised workers often face significant challenges in accessing these opportunities. Additionally, financial aid is frequently offered as a reimbursement upon program completion, which can discourage those who cannot afford the initial costs. Although funding to support disadvantaged learners appears to be available, the lack of effective dissemination at the national level suggests that this information is not reaching those who need it most. The OECD provides five key recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of micro-credentials and assist national governments in developing robust policies in this area (OECD, 2023b) :

- **Clarifying Purpose and Target Population:** Micro-credential initiatives must clearly define their goals and target populations to ensure they meet their intended objectives.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Funding support for both learners and providers of micro-credentials must be sustainable to maintain accessibility for all.
- **Quality Assurance and Recognition:** To fully realise the potential of micro-credentials, changes to quality assurance processes and academic recognition policies will be necessary.
- **Articulation Between Education Levels:** Improving the pathways between upper secondary education and Higher Education can help create alternative routes for learners to advance their education and career prospects.
- **Information Dissemination:** Information about micro-credentials must be effectively communicated to a broad audience, extending beyond the creation of online information portals to reach underserved populations.

As we can conclude from this report, while funding appears to be available through EU funding streams, there is uncertainty regarding the sustainability of these resources and whether the business models supporting micro-credentials within the Higher Education sector are sufficiently appealing to institutional management. Additionally, these funding streams are often tied to the need for upskilling and reskilling the workforce in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the criteria are somewhat vague, with little specific information on how they can be leveraged to benefit non-traditional students and marginalised individuals (the exception being the Spanish model). Furthermore, as highlighted throughout the text, there is a significant lack of information on QA mechanisms, accreditation processes, and the dissemination of information through national or international portals, which would enhance transparency and comparability.

Finally, there appears to be ongoing tension between Vocational Education and Higher Education when addressing the issue of micro-credentials. In several member states, different ministries regulate these two sectors, while in other regions, Vocational Education may operate with a degree of autonomy concerning its regulation. This separation often extends to QA, where distinct bodies oversee standards in Vocational and Higher Education. Such a two-tier system is likely to create challenges in establishing consistent policies at both

national and regional levels, potentially complicating the alignment and articulation between these educational pathways. Additionally, there are numerous unresolved questions regarding the role of alternative providers, such as industry, tech companies, and the services sector, in the development and accreditation of micro-credentials. These complexities highlight the need for a more cohesive approach to ensure that micro-credentials can effectively bridge the gap between vocational and Higher Education.

In conclusion, while micro-credentials offer promising avenues for enhancing lifelong learning and labour market integration, their success will depend on careful policy design, sustainable funding models, and robust support systems that ensure equitable access and quality.

This study was conducted in November and December of 2023. Since then, it is likely that new policies and regulations have been developed by member states. An updated report, reflecting the most current data, will be published at the beginning of 2025.

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