

ECIU input to the upcoming micro-credentials Council Recommendation

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ECIU University welcomes the support for micro-credentials at the highest political level in Europe. Policy-makers at the European and national level have an important role to play in shaping and supporting the development of micro-credentials. In this document, ECIU University outlines its input for a possible Council

Recommendation on micro-credentials. We look forward to continuing dialogue and further contributions to the Council Recommendation, and the implementation of micro-credentials in higher education, industry settings and lifelong learning more generally.

Micro-credentials as an opportunity to innovate our education system

Micro-credentials are an opportunity to innovate higher education and deepen the relationship between universities and industry stakeholders. The micro-credentialing movement offers a way to fundamentally transform how universities provide learning pathways for upskilling and reskilling in response to Industry 4.0 and the rapidly changing nature of work. They also offer a promising means of more closely aligning universities offerings with broader societal priorities and valued social goals.

Micro-credentials are an innovation lever to develop human capital and deliver more flexible, stackable and transformative learning experiences for both employees and employers. Some of the benefits we have previously reported in the context of the ECIU University include:

- Because of their size, micro-learning opportunities can be tailored to learners' individual needs for skills and competences.
- Because of their flexibility, micro-learning opportunities can address major societal challenges in a very focused manner.
- Micro-learning opportunities provide

opportunities to learn other languages and recognize intercultural competence

- Micro-learning opportunities are perfectly placed to support challenge-based learning, whereby challenges are designed in co-creation with external stakeholders. This pedagogy also reflects a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity. Stakeholders provide relevant, real-life and meaningful challenges of global significance that require learners to work in interdisciplinary teams, which not only results in authentic solutions that can be implemented, but also promotes new knowledge as well as a wider variety of transversal competences and skills.

- Micro-learning opportunities enable learners to personalise their learning by choosing particular challenges and micro-modules, which ultimately can be used to earn micro-credentials as they develop knowledge, expand their skills and competences and build their own pathways.

- Micro-learning opportunities can be open to all learners and are therefore ideally placed to support people who wish to engage in life-long and life-wide learning.

Micro-credentials as a distinctive feature of the European Degree

The concept of the European Degree has emerged in recent discussions of the European Higher Education Area. The European Degree is an opportunity to innovate and re-imagine the traditional concept of degrees at the European level. For ECIU, a European Degree with stackable micro-credentials in its core is the

vehicle for flexible and personalized learning paths for work-ready and lifelong learning across Europe. Beyond the undergraduate degree, micro-credentials create new opportunities for universities to collaborate with industry partners in offering continuous professional development.

Need for an agile and trust-based European approach, including quality assurance

To fully harness their potential, it is essential to reach a **common understanding** and acceptance of micro-credentials both at the European and national levels. Joint actions throughout Europe are important to make the micro-credentials movement a reality leading to positive outcomes for learners and all stakeholders. We need a common living language that supports the disruptive and innovative dimension of micro-credentials. The work of the MICROBOL-project could support the alignment of micro-credentials with the Bologna process.

Promoting **European cooperation on quality assurance and automatic recognition** in higher education is essential to support European flexible learning paths. Accreditation systems must move even more to a pan-European level enabling and stimulating a truly European Education Area through greater collaboration and alignment of national qualification

frameworks. Quality assurance must be based on a culture of trust instead of control: Trust in institutions, university alliances, and other education systems and countries. We need to ensure that the micro-credentials derived from educational offerings of one of the ECIU member universities – who are quality assured in their own country irrespective of how it is done per country – are treated equally throughout Europe without any additional process to assure their quality.

We should also ensure that of micro-credentials from a range of providers, co-constructed with a range of stakeholders can leverage European qualification frameworks where academic, industry-led or co-created micro-credentials can be externally recognised in European qualification frameworks as well as being valued and incentivised in professional competence frameworks.

Need for flexibility and funding to foster innovation

Targeted funding to foster innovation, also in the field of research, is needed, both at the national and European level. **National funding** enables collaborations with government agencies under the same National Qualifications Framework. **European funding** can pressure national regulations and frameworks and push and stress tests what is possible under the current rules. For example, additional funding would enable the ECIU University to dedicate more targeted resourcing to the collaborative development of a signature collection of ECIU Creds which seek to break new ground in terms of how micro-credentials are designed and delivered in Europe. This funding for collaborative development would help to ensure that

micro-credentials have a clear value proposition and do not merely lead to a micro version of existing qualifications.

Not only funding is needed. We also need a significant investment in **institutional taught leadership and awareness building amongst the myriad of stakeholders to progress and harness** the micro-credentials movement further. Support for a sustained and focused campaign of awareness building and piloting of micro-credentials is key. The successful infusion of micro-credentials into the current credential ecology depends on greater shared understanding of why the current recognition model needs to be expanded to accommodate more flexible learning pathways.

Micro-credentials in ECIU University

A basic tenet of the ECIU University is that Europe is in high need of more flexible learning paths and life-long learning. Agile, flexible and personalized learning paths help respond to the ever-accelerating changing needs of skills and competence development of the European society and the labor market. New mechanisms must be harnessed to ensure that higher education can respond to the new needs and stay competitive. ECIU University is committed

to developing stackable, credit-bearing and quality assured micro-credentials which help to build human capital and respond to the challenges of Industry 4.0. More specifically, we support an open co-creation model and challenge-based learning approach enabled by interoperable digital platform solutions for the storage, sharing and portability of micro-credentials.

For ECIU University, we have adopted the proposed European Commission (2020) working definition of a micro-credential—that is, a micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes (skills and competence recognition) that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards.

ECIU University's micro-credentials relate to learning offerings from 12 ECIU University partner institutions from all over Europe. These include a range of challenge-based learning offerings that are associated with micro-modules that support learners to bridge important knowledge gaps and boost their capabilities in order to be work-ready and active and contributing members of society. These ECIU University offerings are underpinned by a **Learner Transformation Framework** that articulates how we are seeking to develop life-long learners capable of shaping a better future for all. Many of the offerings promote to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 and harness

of affordances of new digital technologies by being available to learners in an online or hybrid format.

ECIU University is actively contributing to the development of a range of digital credentials and to ensuring new ways how learners can collect the proofs of their learning outcomes and newly acquired skills in a digital competence passport. ECIU University is collaborating with Europass to jointly develop a proof-of-concept for the competence passport that will be validated in large-scale field trials organized by ECIU University.

Our Resources

ECIU University committed itself to many actions to support the micro-credentials movement in Europe. We highlighted our ambitions and the planned actions in the recently published ECIU University White Paper on Micro-credentials.¹

Together with its partner Dublin City University, ECIU University launched a free online course "MOOC" - Higher Education 4.0: Certifying your Future" - through the FutureLearn² platform. Almost 1000 educators from around the world have participated in this course.

A third resource that could be of interest, is ECIU University's Research Observatory on Micro-credentials³ that we developed together with Dublin City University. Here you can find a unique collection of major reports, policy initiatives and research-related publications related to micro-credentials.

We have several experts on micro-credentials who are willing to present our approach towards micro-credentials (Professor Mark Brown (Director National Institute for Digital Learning, Dublin City University), Professor Mairéad Nic Giolla Mhichíl (Dublin City University), Associate Professor Henri Pirkkalainen (Tampere University)).

We are eager to continue the dialogue with you to bring the micro-credentials movement further in Europe to transforming higher education towards future needs.

1 <https://www.eciu.org/news/paving-the-road-for-the-micro-credentials-movement>

2 <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/higher-education-certifying-your-future>

3 <https://www.dcu.ie/nidl/micro-credential-observatory>