Micro-credentials in Professional Higher Education[1]

EURASHE statement within the European Open Public Consultation[i]

EURASHE, as the European representative of more than 600 universities of applied sciences (UAS) and professional higher education (PHE) institutions, welcomes the European discussion on micro-credentials. EURASHE recognises the opportunity and potential micro-credentials bring to Professional Higher Education (PHE), particularly due to its role in connecting various regional and national innovation actors, fostering a close link with the world of work, emphasizing the applied sciences and profession-relevant competences and future skills. In these, higher education institutions (HEIs) are often the knowledge creators, helping to move forward the integration between HEIs and the industry.

Challenges & Opportunities

In the field of professional higher education, micro-credentials are viewed as flexible, less-time-consuming, quickly-developed, up-to-date and affordable short courses addressing some coherent set of competences and particularly skills embedded in the newest applied sciences environment. Micro-credentials may provide opportunities for reaching better the existing target groups, attract learners from less traditional cohorts and strengthen links to alumni. While recognising the potential of alternative forms of credentialling and specifically digital credentialling there is a gap between higher education policy objectives, especially at the European level, in some member states which aim to utilise micro-credentials to support higher education innovation and flexibilisation and institutional realities both within higher education institutions and large parts of the labour market. EURASHE and its related stakeholders from the world of work firmly believe that decisive action is necessary to install a cluster of European experimentation and practice laboratories. In these, multistakeholder groups of actors from research, practice and policy will work together to close this gap through developing demonstrable good practices for a set of defined contexts. We urge the European Commission to take decisive steps to implement such action as soon as possible.

Additionally, a lack of a legal framework, regulations and standard definition for micro-credentials can be an obstacle in their further development and full understanding and stand in the way of their implementation supported by relevant internal quality assurance processes and (automatic) recognition.

EURASHE also recognises the challenges HEIs face with their implementation. While the topic is widely discussed, only about a half of EURASHE members[2] seem to have some experience with the provision of micro-credentials within their institution. With these findings comes a lack of understanding of the full potential and scope of micro-credentials. In addition to that, questions were raised on the institutional

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[1] Professional higher education is a form of higher education that offers a particularly intense integration with the world of work in all its aspects, including teaching, learning, research and governance, and at all levels of the overarching qualifications framework of the EHEA. Its function is to diversify learning opportunities, enhance the employability of graduates, offer qualifications and stimulate innovation for the benefit of learners and society. The world of work includes all enterprises, civil society organisations and the public sector. The intensity of integration with the world of work is manifested by a strong focus on the application of learning achievements. This approach involves combining phases of work and study, a concern for employability, cooperation with employers, the use of practice-relevant knowledge and use-inspired research. (EURASHE Definition, Erasmus+ HAPHE project, 2013)

[2] Based on the results of an online EURASHE survey filled in by 216 respondents in the second half of April 2021 feeding also into views on the concept and potential of micro-credentials for PHE and its learners

capacity, not only administratively and financially, but also in the readiness, availability and willingness of teaching staff and their possible (re)training.

Actions

The concept of micro-credentials bears several constructive promises which need to be pursued further for a large-scale implementation.

I – EURASHE calls for Practice Laboratories: Micro-credentials as a tool for innovation and flexibilisation of pathways within life-long learning can realise their potential only in contexts where large scale alliances of various educational sectors and labour market organisations reach jointly a consensus on awarding and recognition practices. In this regard, the currently established European practice projects[3] serve as practice laboratories which form a nucleus for further for European policy formulation. However, actions need to be reinforced on a larger scale with sector specific programs encouraging institutions at a national and European level to develop micro-credentials, structures and capacities which technically and conceptually support their awarding and recognition in a secure space for learners, employers and other relevant stakeholders.

II – EURASHE calls for a European standard and framework: It is essential to build trust in, and create awareness and a common understanding of micro-credentials through the creation of a European standard that will embed micro-credentials into the relevant qualification frameworks. In view of that, EURASHE suggests that the European definition of micro-credentials is complemented by a comprehensive guideline document with additional information on the principles of quality and course size (in terms of volume of learning and associated workload), intra-European stackability, support and the engagement of learners, their assessment and criteria, reflected in national and regional implementation regulations and measures. Alongside a list of trusted providers, a European database of established and quality assured micro-credentials can facilitate the building of trust and recognisability.

III - EURASHE emphasises a potential for social inclusion through micro-credentials: Micro-credentials need to be shaped and implemented with strategies supporting social and inclusion agendas, addressing specifically various learner groups, including those from non-traditional backgrounds. This objective has to be made more explicit through policy and practice examples and cases.

IV – EURASHE views a better alignment of HE programmes to micro-credentials essential: We recognise that micro-credentials can help open up higher education by paving the way to open, multidisciplinary, competence-based approaches and more versatility in learning and teaching methods through the increased personalisation of learning, flexibility, autonomy and portability in learning pathways. HEIs are challenged to continuously update their curricula and modularise programme structure even more, as well as to develop suitable awarding and recognition practices in order to address current and future societal and market needs.

V – EURASHE underlines the specific impact of micro-credentials on PHE: Micro-credentials will enhance flexibility and access to higher education, transfer and permeability with other educational sectors and various learning pathways. Stackable and transportable alternative credentials can serve specifically those learning experiences that can be incorporated into the traditional degree structure, always referring to

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[3]   E.g. Erasmus+ supported former projects MicroHE, OpenPass, as well the currently running MicroBOL

the National and European Qualification Frameworks (the NQF and EQF respectively). Allowing the stacking of micro-credentials to a full degree, does not only allow learners to undertake a traditional degree in a flexible way, it will also create opportunities for personalised, innovative, up-to-date, competence-based degrees or bridging programmes, yet within the concept not endangering the values and key principles of higher education qualifications, their complexity and contribution to the learner's personal, professional, civic and democratic profile.

VI – EURASHE calls for a reinforced innovation agenda for digital and future PHE to implement micro-credentials: it is important to understand that credentialling is shaping teaching and learning. With its long-term support for transparency of learning outcomes and flexibility of pathways, EURASHE would like to underline the importance of the reference to these frameworks for easier recognition of shorter, flexible forms of learning, including the recognition of prior learning (RPL). Within the discussion, EURASHE wishes to advocate for a new diversity and innovation of teaching and learning methods and digitally transformed forms of delivery (digital, on-site, and blended), as well as a focus on a variety of active, problem- or work-based learning approaches which are so vital in PHE and its response to future skills. Therefore, EURASHE welcomes all the future steps taken in the further clarification of the concept, which we hope to see developed with a learner-centred focus, highlighting the importance of learning outcomes in the development of a European approach to micro-credentials.

Therefore,

we would like the European Commission to further develop the concept with the Member States for the creation of joint structures that help remove obstacles for the development of micro-credentials, including an overview of (national) regulations, incentives, and funding for inclusive lifelong learning initiatives.

Furthermore, while strongly supporting the initiative, EURASHE believes that the forthcoming Council Recommendation should extensively discuss the opportunities for higher education institutions' support from the European Commission, addressing the worries that they may face on a national level regarding the implementation and financing of micro-credentials, as well as support for institutional capacity development for full use of micro-credentials potential. In line of this, EURASHE is ready to contribute to the further harmonisation and coordination of the European standard of micro-credentials across Europe and engage with relevant stakeholders, as well as to commit to the further activities developing the concept and capacity-building of the PHE institutions for various flexible provisions within the life-long learning concept.

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[i] Based on results of consultation within the EURASHE Task Force on Microcredentials: Anne Marie O'Brien, Athlone Institute of Technology, Ireland; Christina Paulus, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), Austria; Gearoid O'Suilleabhain, Munster Technological University, Ireland; Jan Beseda, National Centre for Distance Education, Czechia; Katalin Szondy, St. Pölten University of Applied Sciences, Austria; Sanna Brauer, Oulu University of Applied Sciences, Finland; Teresa Pereira, Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo, Portugal, Ulf-Daniel Ehlers, Baden-Wurttemberg Cooperative State University, Germany coordinated by Tess van den Brink, EURASHE policy officer.