

## **MICROBOL Working Group on Qualifications Framework and ECTS**

27 January 2021, 09.00-16.00h, Central European Time (CET)

[Link to the meeting](#)



### **Preparatory note**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Our overall objective is to see whether and how the existing Bologna tools can be used and/or whether they need to be adapted to be used for micro-credentials. Furthermore, the project has the goal of exploring a need for a “common European framework for micro-credentials”. Our context is the EHEA and its 49 countries.

The draft ‘Report’, based on the replies of 34 of our countries to the questionnaire circulated in October/November 2020, shows that the situation with regard to microcredentials is currently very fluid, and many different understandings of the main issues co-exist. Under these circumstances, we have an optimal opportunity to discuss freely, making use of existing experiences but without being constrained by them. The development of a shared understanding of microcredentials can be of great value in ensuring that our HE systems can benefit fully from the new developments which can contribute to making our HE systems more flexible and more responsive to the changing needs of our future lifelong learning societies.

#### **AIM OF THE MEETING**

The main aim of the meeting is to look at the challenges to be tackled in the application of the Bologna tools -- the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (and the NQFs adopted by our countries and referenced to it), and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System -- to micro-credentials. This also includes challenges linked to certain possible solutions.

#### **WHAT TO PREPARE?**

##### **Session II: From theory to practice**

A few case examples of microcredentials will be presented by education providers show-casing different types of microcredentials that may be for example organised in cooperation with other stakeholders, as separate learning module or in online formats.

The floor will be open to all countries to comment on and complement the discussion from their national perspective and in the light of the results of the survey. Countries that did not participate in the survey are asked to prepare and give a short input from their side.

### Session III: Challenges and obstacles to be considered

The objective of this discussion session is to examine the existing tools, and see whether they are already adequate for the description of microcredentials.

#### - Discussion questions on indication of level (MCs and qualifications frameworks)

In the answers to the 'Survey' questions relating to the QF-EHEA and NQFs, it appears that situations in our countries are quite varied, and also that our understandings of what it means to refer a microcredential to a QF level vary greatly. For some, the QF levels are general boxes which can give an indication of the level of complexity of the learning achieved, for others they can only be used to describe full degree programmes.

- **Can a microcredential be described as lying within the range of activities that lead to the award of a degree (a cycle level), in the same way as would any single course unit/individual learning component in a full degree programme?**
- **Would it be necessary to include them specifically in the NQF? What would these mean in practice and what would be the possible consequences?**
- **What about the countries that already have micro-credentials without their being specifically described in their NQF? Is this problematic?**

Some have expressed concern that a QF level would be 'filled up' if a learner has already obtained a certain degree, and that he/she could not add a microcredential of the same level.

- **Do you think this is a relevant objection or cause for concern? Or would this be a normal situation, in which a learner could add to his/her competences (as would be the case in gaining a second degree)?**

#### - Discussion questions on indication of Learning Outcomes and volume of learning (ECTS):

According to the 'Survey', countries currently offer learning experiences that they consider compatible with the MICROBOL MC definition having a broad range in volume of learning as described by ECTS -- from 1 to 60 ECTS credits.

- **Do you think that it is necessary/advisable to use ECTS for micro-credentials? Is this possible in all circumstances?**
- **In view of developing a Common Framework for MCs in the EHEA, do you think it would be useful to keep such a broad range or to narrow it down? (For example, 1-2 credits could be a 'nanocredential'; 3-10 a 'microcredential'; 11-30 a 'minicredential'.)**
- **Or should all small standalone learning experiences be considered under the same name?**

In the EHEA, any existing course module or 'individual learning component' should already be described according to the format suggested in the 2015 ECTS Users' Guide\*.

\*[https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/ects/users-guide/course-catalogue\\_en.htm#ectsTop](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/ects/users-guide/course-catalogue_en.htm#ectsTop)

- **If such a course unit of module is considered a standalone, would any other elements be needed to certify it as a micro-credential? Which, if any?**

## WHERE WERE WE WHEN WE LAST MET?

### Summary of points that emerged from our previous discussion: questions and challenges to be addressed

- The current working definition is workable, but there may need to be room for improvement as the project and understanding of the topic evolves. The discussion and comments made during the kick-off seminar should be also taken into account for its revision.
- As to whether the final definition should indicate a certain number of ECTS credits, the participants seemed to prefer a range instead of fixed number. Some participants thought that this range should however be rather limited, as a larger range would generate confusion about the actual value of the micro-credentials. The notion of nano-degrees led to a discussion on the possible need for different categories.
- Micro-credentials are an emerging topic within the higher education sector at national level. According to the Mentimeter question directed to the WG participants (n=35), 15 respondents answered that they have had some discussion on the topic, while 16 said that they had not yet had any discussion. Four did not know whether the topic is discussed or not.
- The Bologna tools are fit for purpose also when addressing micro-credentials. However, further work is needed to explore the opportunities and possible challenges when applying them to micro-credentials. This work should be supported by discussion at the national level.
- According to the Mentimeter survey, only half of the respondents thought that the levels of programme learning outcomes indicated in the QF-EHEA are known well enough in their country (9 yes, 10 yes probably), whilst 13 thought they are probably not. Four thought that they are not known at all (n=36).
- The Bologna tools include ECTS, which means that learning outcomes must be attached to indications of volume of learning for micro-credentials as well as any other award in order to make the value they represent understandable and transparent for the wider public, including employers.
- The value of the micro-credentials will also be determined by their quality and there should be further work to see how to express this.
- Instead of concentrating on the definition, the work should address how to incorporate the microcredentials in the existing QF systems, as a common approach to this is needed.
- To do this, sectoral qualifications frameworks were seen as useful in identifying the levels of micro-credentials within the QFs.
- It was also noted that connecting existing tools (such as descriptors) to microcredentials may in some contexts require a change in the mindset.
- The discussion on micro-credentials should be therefore linked to a wider discussion on skills and opportunities for access to the labour market as well as to other learning opportunities, also on national level, and by other providers. Various stakeholders need to be involved in the discussions.
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) by higher education institutions can connect micro-credentials offered by other providers to the Bologna system: the ECTS guide indicates how. But the question is whether the procedures are clear enough and sufficiently well known.
- Clear and transparent definition of the elements and format used to describe microcredentials will be necessary so that providers can correctly describe them and document their value.