MICROBOL Working Group on recognition
Input document for the 2nd WG meeting – 11/05/2021

1. Introduction

The MICROBOL project engages ministries and stakeholders involved in the Bologna Follow-up Group to explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used and/or need to be adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials. For this reason, the project looks at recognition from the Higher Education perspective, focusing mainly on academic recognition.

The first meeting of the working groups on QA, recognition and ECTS and QF was focused on identifying challenges in the applicability of Bologna tools to micro-credentials, and the second meeting will focus on tackling these challenges and identifying possible solutions.

This document is meant to:

- serve as a common input basis for the meeting of the MICROBOL Working Group on recognition on 11/05/2021;
- provide a comprehensive overview of the main points and challenges emerged in the Working Group meeting held in January 2021;
- provide input on possible solutions and recommendations to overcome these challenges, highlighting way forward for micro-credentials in general.

2. Obstacles and challenges in applying Bologna tools to micro-credentials: outcomes of the Working Group on recognition meeting held in January 2021

The main challenges for recognition highlighted in the WG meeting in January are the following:

- need for revision of the legal framework(s) related to micro-credentials at national or regional level;
- in principle, micro-credentials are recognizable, but Bologna tools have to be used and fully applied (at the national level);
- transparent information provision is among the keys to recognition and must include the elements that are needed for recognition and this should be addressed both to higher education institutions and to other formal and non-formal providers;
- ENIC-NARICs, as a network, should be involved in the developments related to micro-credentials and review existing practices, in order to contribute to setting common criteria;
- a how-to-do guide could be developed on how to give information and which information is to be given (main target audience: higher education institutions);
- recognition of prior learning and other tools should be fit-for-purpose when it comes to micro-credentials;

- the real challenges are related to stand-alone micro-credentials rather than to micro-credentials that are part of a full-degree program, especially for those awarded by non-formal providers (e.g. use of learning outcomes; ECTS-credits/workload, Quality Assurance);
- linked to the last bullet point, the QF-level of stand-alone micro-credentials and their stackability have also been highlighted as a challenge; on this, also the need of coordination among different stakeholders (national authorities, Higher Education Institutions, ENIC-NARIC centres, etc) was raised.

Here are the topics touched upon during the conclusive part of the meeting that can be of help in sketching some possible solutions:

- consensus on the possibility of recognizing micro-credentials;
- the importance of recognition of micro-credentials to improve access to Higher Education and to enhance the inclusive nature of higher education;
- the importance of transparency of the information provided on micro-credentials;
- the importance of effective and proportionate QA;
- the possibility of elaborating guidelines for information provision on micro-credentials;
- the need for a common definition and standards to be used when addressing the topic of micro-credentials and the need for it to be as inclusive as possible;
- stackability is a responsibility of HEIs but it would be interesting to discuss this topic with HEIs, registrars and national authorities.

3. Way forward

The starting point is that generally speaking it seems to be a "two-track approach" to recognition of micro-credentials. One track is a procedure in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This first track is possible when the credential offers in a transparent way the reliable and accurate information needed for the credential evaluation, regarding quality assurance, QF-level, workload, learning outcomes, etc. The other track is recognition of prior learning, applicable in cases when the credentials itself does not provide enough information to be a guarantee of the competences gained. As a general reflection, the main objective would be to go beyond this two-track approach, and work in the direction that recognition of micro-credentials could be as "automatic" as possible, starting from cases when all the elements and information needed to conduct a fair assessment are available.

In order to support fair and smooth recognition of micro-credentials, possible steps on the way forward are outlined below.

3.1. Common awareness/knowledge/consensus of what a micro-credential is

The very first step for having a standardised approach for recognition of micro-credentials is to build a common understanding of what is considered a micro-credential, and what should be the main characterizing elements (a "standard").

Within the MICROBOL project we have the following working definition:

"A micro-credential is a small volume of learning certified by a credential. In the EHEA context, it can be offered by higher education institutions or recognised by them using recognition procedures in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention or recognition of prior learning, where applicable. A micro-credential is designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs. Micro-credentials have explicitly defined learning outcomes at a QF-EHEA/NQF level, an indication of associated workload in ECTS credits, assessment methods and criteria, and are subject to quality assurance in line with the ESG" ("European project MICROBOL. Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments", August 2020, p. 7).

Later on, a second definition was developed and presented in the report "A European approach to micro-credentials", as final output of the micro-credentials higher education consultation group:

"A micro-credential is a proof of the learning out-comes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. The proof is contained in a certified document that lists the name of the holder, the achieved learning outcomes, the assessment method, the awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and the credits gained. Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications. They are under pinned by quality assurance following agreed standards".

The proposed EU Standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials are: identification of the learner; title of the micro-credential; country/region of the issuer; awarding body; date of issuing; notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS, wherever possible); level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the micro-credential (EQF and/or national qualifications framework; Overarching Framework of Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area); learning outcomes and form of participation in the learning activity (online, onsite or blended, volunteering, work experience).

Possible other proposed elements are: prerequisites needed to enroll in the learning activity; type of assessment (testing, application of a skill, portfolio, recognition of prior learning, etc.); supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online or onsite with identity verification); quality assurance of the credential and, where relevant, of the learning content; grade achieved and integration/stackability options (standalone, independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable towards another credential).

This definition and proposed standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials are a starting point to explore to what extent we can enhance academic recognition of micro-credentials and contribute to inclusiveness of Higher Education.

Recommendation: support knowledge and enhance awareness of the importance of the European definition and standards for the academic recognition of micro-credentials, create consensus on these, contribute to their implementation and develop good practices.

3.2. Coverage/link with Lisbon Recognition Convention

As far as possible, micro-credentials should be assessed according to the principles and procedures of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. This is easier and more "natural" for micro-credentials awarded in the formal context of the Higher Education sector, but it would still be important to make explicit to what extent micro-credentials awarded by Higher Education institutions can fall in the LRC definition of period of study, or, as long as they are awarded as a stand-alone credential, they can fall in the LRC definition of qualification:

- Period of study: "Any component of a higher education programme which has been evaluated and documented and, while not a complete programme of study in itself, represents a significant acquisition of knowledge or skill".
- Higher education qualification: "Any degree, diploma or other certificate issued by a competent authority attesting the successful completion of a higher education programme" (*LRC section I - Definitions*).

There are a number of initiatives in the field in the framework of the ENIC-NARIC networks that could constitute background for recognition of micro-credentials, and that could be looked at to explore synergies, integration, or to take inspiration for principles and practices already used. One example is the E-valuate project, and its seven principles for recognition of non-traditional learning.

Recommendation: make explicit to what extent micro-credentials can fall within the scope of the Lisbon Recognition Convention; clarify what could be legal ground for the academic recognition of micro-credentials; explore the need for a subsidiary text to the LRC to support their fast and fair recognition; consider the possibility to include a chapter on micro-credentials in the revised version of the European Area of Recognition (EAR) manual and of the EAR HEI manual, to support the development of day-to-day recognition practices.

3.3 Validation of non-formal and informal learning[1]

Validation of non-formal and informal learning can be seen as an opportunity for Higher Education Institutions to standardise the recognition of industry types/other types of micro-credentials. Certainly, where it is not possible to have sufficient information on the main elements of the credential, the credential itself is not enough reliable about competences gained and it is awarded outside the formal context of Higher Education.

Recommendation: use validation of non-formal and informal learning only in cases where a formal credential is absent or it does not provide enough, reliable evidence of the competence gained, and

---

[1] In the context of this document, the term recognition of prior learning refers to the definition contained in the Council of the European Union Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning: "Validation means a process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard and consists of the following four distinct phases: 1. IDENTIFICATION through dialogue of particular experiences of an individual; 2. DOCUMENTATION to make visible the individual's experiences; 3. a formal ASSESSMENT of these experiences; and 4. CERTIFICATION of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification".

develop RPL procedures that are fit-for-purpose and that are low threshold for Higher Education Institutions and learners.

3.4 Legislation

In some countries legislation may present some obstacles, for instance if recognition of non-formal and informal learning is not possible either for access to Higher Education or to the labour market. Another possible issue regards recognition of online/distance learning programmes. It is always important to explore whether a change in legislation is really needed or other ways are possible. When it is not possible to move in other directions it is important to explore changes in legislation, and exchange information with other countries that could have the same issues or that already solved these.

Recommendation: explore whether a change in legislation is really needed, and if this is the case, plan the relevant changes in legislation, exchanging information with other countries and keeping into account good practices and experiences at international level.

3.5 Quality and transparency of information

Quality of a micro-credential represents one of the main elements to be assessed in the recognition procedure. It is relevant that higher education institutions offer transparent information about the quality assurance policies and processes applied to the micro-credentials they award (e.g. part/unit of an accredited study programmes, and in this way indirectly covered by external QA, or stand-alone credential covered by internal QA, etc.).

To further enhance transparency, providing information on the micro-credential, such as the proposed standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials, could be a very helpful tool to facilitate recognition and to create a shared (and commonly recognized) format to understand better what the credential is worth.

If transparency is ensured there might be less need for external quality assurance procedures because data can be easily collected, trusted and used for recognition.

Recommendation: HEIs should provide information on the micro-credential, such as the proposed standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials and the quality assurance mechanism for awarded micro-credentials. In particular, this should be included on the HEI website and in the micro-credential.

3.6 Register of quality assurance providers

Quality and quality assurance are central elements for recognition. A register of providers and of micro-credentials awarded could represent a tool for supporting acceptance and recognition of micro-credentials.

Recommendation: explore the possibility at national/regional level to offer a register of providers of quality assured micro-credentials.

3.7 Digitalisation

There is a general agreement that the original certificates of micro-credentials should be in digital format and should be learner-owned. Depending on the national regulatory framework, it can in addition be provided in paper form. This is linked to the fact that digitalization can facilitate portability, transparency and reliability of information and verification of authenticity, and as such supporting a fast and fair recognition process and enhance stackability. If this could be true for all qualifications, it is particularly relevant for micro-credentials, where the digital format could support a fit-for purpose recognition approach, with the credentials itself containing all the needed information. It would be also relevant to explore synergies with existing initiatives, such as DEQAR database, that could potentially contain also reference to quality assurance schemes for micro-credentials in place at national level, and initiatives that goes in the direction of the digitalization of credentials in general, such as Europass, just to mention few of these.

Recommendation: explore to what extent micro-credentials should be digitally awarded and learner-owned, as a means to support portability, transparency and reliability of information and verification of authenticity, and build a clear digital strategy in line with other ongoing initiatives e.g. EDCI (Europass Digital Credentials Interoperability), EDSSI (European Digital Student Service Infrastructure), and EBSI (European Blockchain Services Infrastructure). Start from project and experiences already live (e.g. DEQAR) and scale it up, taking inspiration for next steps. Develop and improve experiences already available.

3.8 Involvement, knowledge and consensus among all actors

It is important that all the relevant stakeholders (HEIs, ENIC-NARIC centres, ministries) are involved in the discussion about recognition of micro-credentials, and can work in the same direction and deploy a common approach to recognition of micro-credentials.

Recommendation: support knowledge sharing activities about on the topics of micro-credentials, involving relevant stakeholders, both at a policy level and at a "practictioner" level; development of a practitioner's guide for recognition of micro-credentials for HEIs and ENIC-NARIC centres.

3.9. Peer exchange and support, guidelines

Exchange of experiences and practices at international, national and regional level, inputs from experts, occasion to share information on legislative and policy development are essential for the uptake and recognition of micro-credentials both at national and international level.

Recommendation: create occasion for peer support and exchange of practices among stakeholders at international level.

4. Reference materials

- Materials of the kick-off meeting: report and presentations
- Desk research: "European project MICROBOL. Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments"
- Survey Report "Micro-credentials and Bologna Key Commitments. State of Play in the European Higher Education Area"
- Outcome of the first meeting of working groups held in January 2021 (see above and see the minutes of each group: QF&ECTS, Recognition, QA)

Last update 29/04/2021