# Minutes 2ⁿᵈ meeting Working Group on Quality Assurance

**6 May 2021, 09:00-15:30h**

This meeting was attended by the members of the Working Group on Quality Assurance (one of the working groups in the project MICROBOL) and chaired by the group chair, Magalie Soenen.

Objectives and expected outcomes:

The aim of this meeting was to discuss the input document prepared by the writing team in order to come up with final recommendations on QA of micro-credentials in the EHEA. These recommendations will be later merged with the ones on Recognition and Qualifications Frameworks & ECTS and sent to the European Commission by end of June. The working group addressed the nine topics outlined in the input document.

Methodology:

The working group followed the following structure:

1. State of play on the project by the coordinator
2. Morning & afternoon sessions followed the same structure:
    - Presentation of the input document & country example
    - Reflection by the experts
    - Discussion in 2 breakout rooms
3. Reporting on the discussions
4. Final remarks and roadmap for the future

All the presentations are available on the project's website.

The chair of the Working Group on Quality Assurance welcomed all participants to the meeting, provided the state-of-play of the MICROBOL project and explained the agenda and aim of the WG meeting. The meeting was divided in a morning and afternoon session. In the first session, topics 1-4 of the input document were presented and discussed; the second session focused on topics 5-9. This was followed by country examples, reflections on the input document by the experts and discussion time with the participants.

Reflection on the input document by experts

The two sessions of presentations on the input document were followed by reflections by experts Anthony Camilleri and Peter van der Hijden, with a particular focus on **alternative providers**. Peter van

der Hijden believes that micro-credentials will have a revolutionary effect and will allow for an exponential growth of higher education. He thinks that **QA for micro-credentials can be self-disciplinary** and that there will be a 'Bolognising' effect on alternative providers: they will adhere to the standards if they want to be taken seriously. Anthony Camilleri reacted that alternative providers may not want to be 'Bolognised' for two reasons: 1) they may be interested, but **do not have the capacity** to keep up with higher education institutions; or 2) they are not interested, because **the system they are in is already working and is faster**.

Van der Hijden continued by saying that it would be useful to produce a **guidebook for universities on how to deal with micro-credentials**. Universities should not only offer BA and MA programmes, but also micro-credentials in their offer. They should also make clear how a learner can get recognition for the micro-credential. Camilleri noted that external quality assurance for micro-credentials is impossible, taking into account the large volume of micro-credentials. Therefore, he believes that it is important that internal quality assurance is trustworthy and called for **public publishing of internal quality assurance information and data**.

Camilleri added that we should **start thinking of platforms (e.g. Coursera) as alternative providers** in their own right. US platforms are much ahead of Europe. However, a strong QA approach on micro-credentials can be a unique selling point for Europe.

Breakout discussions in groups

The participants were divided into two groups to discuss the proposed recommendations. Remarks made by the participants in both breakout groups are compiled under the nine topics as outlined in the input document.

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

- Many participants agreed that it is important to find **one clear and common definition for micro-credentials**. This is essential to ensure that micro-credentials will be portable and stackable. Currently, two definitions coexist: one by the MICROBOL project and one by the Consultation Group set up by the European Commission. The two definitions are complementary, so it is possible to align them. Further remarks were made on the two definitions:
  - The MICROBOL definition has a certain **duality**: it looks at micro-credentials as a volume of learning, as well as a qualification. The MICROBOL project partners appreciate the duality, stressing that micro-credentials encompass both.
  - The partners agreed that there is a preference for defining the **learning experience as 'small'** rather than 'short', as a micro-credential can be spread out over a longer period of time, but still be small.
- It is a useful exercise to clarify whether micro-credentials can be considered **qualifications** or not. The benefit of seeing a micro-credential as a qualification allows for the use of all the existing qualifications infrastructure, and if so, the definitions that already exist regarding qualifications could then also be applicable to micro-credentials. Qualifications can be broken down into a qualifications standard (what should be learned) and a qualifications award (what has been learned). A similar approach could be taken for micro-credentials.

- **Language and translation** should also be taken into account: we need to be mindful of differences between concepts such as micro-credentials and micro-qualifications. When translating these into languages other than English, this may even become more confusing.

*3.2 Internal and external quality assurance*

- If **external quality assurance is applied at institutional level**, then micro-credentials can be part of the same process. However, if quality assurance is being carried out in the form of **programme-accreditation**, this raises an issue for micro-credentials. It was suggested that if this is the case, there should be a separate approach for micro-credentials (that is preferably the same for academic and non-academic providers). Alternatively if this is not possible, micro-credentials that are offered by HEIs, could potentially be taken on board in the evaluation of programmes in the given field.

*3.3 Learners involvement*

- An aspect that should be taken into account is that learners of micro-credentials do not necessarily have a clear **status** (as opposed to full degrees, where students are registered as 'students' in their HEI). Furthermore, it may be challenging to **identify who the potential learners are**: in the micro-credentials setting, anyone can be a potential learner.
- The Guide for effective stakeholder' involvement in quality assurance, carried out by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research in the framework of the 'Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities' (ESQA) project, was shared with the group. The guide refers to regular study programmes and not to short courses, but could nevertheless provide insights for short courses too. A main issue when involving learners is that **they do not have much time**. It is also **difficult to find an inclusive group** of learners (including non-traditional students, working students, different ages, etc.) that can be involved in the process. In addition, it was emphasised that learners should be included in a way that is fit for purpose. The guide provides recommendations, starting from having a common vision on what QA means, to training them to take part in QA processes, and how to continuously collaborate with them.
- Especially for **stand-alone micro-credentials**, it may be more difficult to organise learner involvement, as these are not linked to one specific field of study.
- **Traditional ways of gathering feedback**, such as a survey after the completion of a course, could continue in micro-credentials too.
- Next to learners, it is valuable to receive input from **graduates**, especially in the case of micro-credentials, which can play a particular role in filling the gap between education and emerging or new labour market needs in an increasing faster changing economy currently.
- As micro-credentials are a new phenomenon, students need more than just being engaged for providing input. We should also focus on **providing guidance to students** in their educational pathways.
- When designing a micro-credential, thought should go into the specific focus of the micro-credential. Specific micro-credentials would need to take into account **market needs** in that domain.

*3.4 Transparency of information*

- Building on the remarks made by the experts earlier, it was suggested that institutions could **provide open access to all IQA data**. The suggestion would be to provide access to external institutional QA and internal programme QA applied to the micro-credential. A credential issued to a student should link back to the relevant QA data.

- However, not everyone agreed with this idea, because it is too **prescriptive and should not be posed as a requirement**; HEIs themselves should decide on what they want to share. If HEIs want to, they can publicly provide this information on a voluntary basis.

*3.5 Legislation*

- There are several countries where the existing **legislation is not posing immediate obstacles** for micro-credentials, as is the case in Sweden, Italy, Flanders and Finland.

- In order to enable HEIs to indeed offer high quality micro-credentials, it is also important to think about **other aspects beyond legislation**, such as regulations around qualifications, funding and student guidance.

- In some countries, there is no **funding** for micro-credentials. It may be argued that the micro-credentials should not receive government funding and instead be subject to market rules. This does not mean that the students always have to pay; companies can also decide to pay for micro-credentials. In other systems, government funding can be used for micro-credentials. The question comes up whether there is a risk of **market interference** if HEIs use public funding to create micro-credentials in an area where there already is an offer in the private market. This was however also the case for already existing offers in lifelong learning. On the other hand, private providers have a competitive advantage in that they do not have to comply with the same strict rules that HEIs do. This aspect needs to be considered when opening up the system to alternative providers. It may be dangerous competition if alternative providers could easily adhere to the system, but do not have to apply to the same rules.

- It was argued that it may not be necessary to fund all micro-credentials offered by HEIs at institutional level, but to look at **funding at country level**: countries may want to make a selection on what micro-credentials to fund, so that not all universities across the country offer the same micro-credential.

- It was stressed that, if a country wants to **increase participation** in lifelong learning, government **funding should be provided**. At the same time, it is useful to think about where exactly micro-credentials fit in (e.g. lifelong learning at large, or adult education geared to re-skilling or up-skilling only) and whether it can be eligible for EU support in this area.

- In some countries, there may be **different systems that apply to micro-credentials**. In Romania, the Ministry of Education is responsible for HEIs and the Ministry of Labour is responsible for other providers. In the case of Germany and Switzerland, the education systems are fragmented across states/cantons. In several countries, there is also different legislation for higher education and adult education. This leads to different ways of QA, but also to possibilities for HEIs to get funding.

- The **definition of a higher education institution** may raise issues for the inclusion of alternative providers. For example, most countries have included a requirement for a minimum number

of faculties in their definition of a HEI. This makes sense for full degrees, but not necessarily for micro-credentials.

- For cross-border collaboration, it is important to think about a **European framework**. Particularly in relation to the European University alliances. These need more flexibility to increase mobility and enhance inclusiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to establish clear rules that guarantee the quality of micro-credentials offered by all different of providers.

*3.6 Register of micro-credentials and providers of micro-credentials*

- The question was posed whether the **Database of External Quality Assurance Results** (DEQAR) can be expanded to alternative providers.
    - On the one hand, it was responded that if the data exists, it should be included. One registry is better than two.
    - On the other hand, it is important not to mix up everything. DEQAR is fed with QA reports following an EQA process by EQAR-registered agencies. It is not feasible for national agencies to expand their scope to assess alternative providers.
- A decision needs to be made on **which providers of micro-credentials can be included**: a limit should be set on what is higher education and what is not. It may be difficult to make a decision of what data to include from providers that have an offer at HE-level as well as non-HE-level. At the same time, it cannot be expected from DEQAR to list all actual credentials. These considerations make it complicated to fit in alternative providers.
- An **online platform** (in the style of Booking.com or Trip Advisor) where users can provide comments on different aspects of the offering could be an idea.

*3.7 Digitalisation*

- In Europass, there is the **Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI)**, for which blockchain will be used. It will be interesting to see if micro-credentials could end up in this system. Under this system, credentials should be 1) in digital form (they have all the necessary security and signature features), 2) rich in meta-data, 3) owned and held by students and 4) easily shareable. Europass is an attempt at creating a single standard.
- It was noted that **DEQAR** can be easily linked with Europass.
- The possibility of using **badges** for micro-credentials came up. It was however argued by some that badges are not designed for formal education, nor to hold the detail of information that would be necessary for micro-credentials.

*3.8. Alternative providers*

- Adherence of alternative providers to QA should be on a **voluntary basis**. There seems to be a large interest in the public sector to join. What is lacking however, is a **common language**.
- The **pool of alternative providers is very large and diverse**. This should be taken into account. A different approach may be needed for NGOs and small SMEs or large global companies.
- When trying to include alternative providers in the QA system, the case of Estonia has shown that this is not a straight-forward process. The main issue to take into account is that HEIs have a long **tradition of QA procedures**, whereas alternative providers such as NGOs and companies generally do not. Therefore, they cannot be expected to be at the same level as HEIs. The

question is whether we can have one system for everyone, or if we need to work with different solutions.

- Alternative providers may however have to comply with standards other than the academic one, such as **industry or market standards**. For example, they may already be using ISO standards. It was argued that the use of this standard for educational offers should stop, because the co-existence of two quality assurance standards is posing problems. The ESG are specifically developed for education. **Expanding the ESG to micro-credentials and adopting it as a single standard** could help avoid many problems. This would also make it easier for potential learners to decide between the offers of different providers.
- QA should furthermore always be **research-based**, and not be based on market needs. This should apply to both HEIs and alternative providers.
- A solution to ensure that alternative providers fall under the same quality assurance standards, might lie in **collaboration between HEIs and alternative providers** for offering micro-credentials. This already exists in several places, for example in Ireland and Austria, as well as in some European University alliances. This could furthermore encourage conversation and co-design of QA standards between HEIs and alternative providers.
- When encouraging alternative providers to become part of the same QA system, it would be best to keep adherence to QA standards as **simple as possible**. When offering a micro-credential, they could be required to use the same definition to describe the micro-credential, along the lines of 5 to 10 features, including certification, learning outcomes and pedagogical aspects.
- There can also be more space for **recognition of prior learning** (RPL) if alternative providers align their micro-credentials under the Bologna Process.

*3.9. Peer exchange and support, involvement of all actors, guidelines*

- No further comments were provided.

Reporting in plenary of the discussions in the groups

Laura Sinóros-Szabó reported back on the discussion in group 1:

- We need clear language and terminology: when defining micro-credentials, the definition should be clear at both international and national level.
- Alternative providers should be able to join QA processes on a voluntary basis.
- Learners need guidance and support when going into the micro-credentials experience.
- In most countries, legislation is not posing difficulties for HEIs to offer micro-credentials, and in many countries a certain offer of micro-credentials-like programmes already exists. However, often there is no specific legislation or funding specifically targeted at micro-credentials.

Katalin Szondy reported back on the discussion in group 2:

- Ideally we would reach one single definition at EHEA level. However, the group can also live with a main definition and an additional sub-definition that provides more specification.

- There were different views on whether alternative providers can be included in QA systems. On the one hand, they lack the QA tradition and infrastructure. Moreover, it may be argued that it is better not to mix the sectors. On the other hand, they may need it to provide micro-credentials. The ESG could build a bridge.
- Flexibility for the term 'learners' is necessary. In the case of micro-credentials, it is not so clear-cut who the learners are and their diversity may raise difficulties for involvement.
- Transparency is essential: providers need to give clear information in particular on learning outcomes and recognition, as well as QA procedures.

<u>Final remarks and roadmap for the future</u>

The chair briefly charted the next steps for the project and thanked everyone for their presence and contributions. This was the second and last meeting of the working group on QA.

Based on the input provided, the project partners will prepare a joint input paper for the European Commission, ahead of the Commission Proposal for Council Recommendations that are due to be published later this year.

The final conference of the MICROBOL project will take place in January 2022. During this conference, the suggested final "framework for Micro-Credentials in the EHEA" by the MICROBOL project will be presented.