



Implementation and Innovation in QA through Peer Learning (IMINQA) WG on QA of Micro-credentials Meeting 2 Draft Report – 27/02/2023

Welcome & starting of the meeting

Elena Cîrlan (ENQA), chair of the Working Group on Quality Assurance of Micro-credentials, opened the Teams meeting and welcomed all participants.

Overview of activities (completed and ongoing)

Elena gave us an overview of the activities that have been done, which programmes are work in progress and the ones that are planned in the future.

Task	Status
1. Desk research	
a. Survey preparation, launch and analysis of data	✓ Done
b. Interviews with stakeholders	
○ Preparation of Case study form & Interview questions	✓ Done
○ Collect materials from EHEA countries	✓ Done
○ Interviews with QA agencies	✓ 9 are Done; 2 more to take place
○ Interviews with HEIs	✓ 2 are Done; 8 more to take place
○ Interviews with non-HEI providers	✓ None is Done and none is planned
c. Desk research 1 st draft	✓ Done
2. Guiding document for HEIs	Planned
3. Guiding document for QA agencies	Planned
4. Key considerations for non-HEI providers	Planned
5. Inclusion of MC providers in DEQAR	✓ Done – 1st draft of the Data model
6. Feasibility assessment on quality label	Planned
7. Harmonised data standard for information on micro-credentials	Planned
8. Input to the 2024 Ministerial Conference	Planned

The interviews focus mainly on three groups: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), QA agencies and non-HEI providers. Preparations are made for the interview questions and the case study form. The case study form is sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, on which they can put key information about their approach to the QA of micro-credentials. Through this case study form, the interview questions can be tailored, and the interview can be limited in time.

- Some good interviews have already taken place. The interviews took about one hour.
- Several interviews are still (being) planned with HEIs and QA agencies.
 - o No interviews have been planned yet with non-HEI providers or alternative providers.
- The members of the writing group have been asked for help and to suggest, if possible, contact details of non-HEIs.
- The creation of the guiding documents has been planned.

Presentation & discussion of the Quality assurance of micro-credentials desk research 1st draft

The first draft of the desk research is done and was discussed in the meeting. Elena presented the aim and outcomes of the survey.

The aim of study is:

- To provide an overview on the state of play of policy developments.
- To present information on various activities and initiatives:
 - o present their findings and conclusions related to quality assurance of micro-credentials in the EHEA
 - o present examples – for countries it is important to know that for example country X deals with the same issues and that countries can contact each other.
- To provide a basis for the guidance documents for IQA, EQA and the key considerations for non-HEI providers.

Data from the survey

The survey was launched in November 2022 to the members of the TPG C. From the 47 EHEA countries, 31 countries answered the survey, resulting in response rate of 66%. Several suggestions for interviews with QA agencies and HEIs were received as well as links to materials were collected from 16 countries.

Activities or discussions that have taken place related to the development/revision of policies for QA of micro-credentials, primarily involve ministries of education, quality assurance bodies and HEIs or national higher education institutions associations. In some countries, a larger group of stakeholders is involved, including other ministries such as the ministry of labor, student unions, employment organisations, representatives of ENIC/NARIC centers, continuing education providers, employers' representatives and specifically those involved in the development of educational programmes. In most cases, the activities are led by the ministry of education.

The work is organised in similar ways across the countries. The status of the activities, however, varies from country to country. Judging by the level of their development, following three stages can be identified:

Stage 1:

- countries follow the ongoing trends and participate in national and international working groups on the topic;
- they organise workshops for higher education institutions;
- they conduct nation-wide research and there are consultations with stakeholders and draft position documents related to quality assurance of micro-credentials.

Stage 2: based on the information they gathered from in the activities of stage one, countries work on:

- defining criteria;
- procedures and timelines for the implementation of micro-credentials;
- a strategic plan for QA of micro-credentials and on developing processes and procedures to evaluate micro-credentials, on nation-wide pilots focused on the development of a quality framework for issuing of micro-credentials, on recommendations for changes to the higher education law and on drafting policies.

Stage 3:

- countries work on updating the national qualification framework and work on including micro-credentials in their framework;
- some countries have already included MCs in the higher education law.

In most countries, the discussions or plans regarding the development of a national register for micro-credential providers are led by the ministry of education. In some cases, this is done in collaboration with other stakeholders such as QA agencies and HEIs. Responses vary regarding the types of providers to be included in the register. In some countries, these registers will include higher education and non-higher education providers; in others, all providers with accredited MCs will be included in the register.

In most cases, there is no view on the discussions or plans regarding the development of a national catalogue of MCs. Many countries indicated that they are (still) in the early stages of developing micro-credentials, in which is it too early to think about catalogues.

When asked whether QA agencies have developed a quality assurance approach for micro-credentials, 19 countries have answered 'no' and 11 'yes'. This was commented as a very good finding, as it is in line with what the interviews have shown so far. It is important to note that the answer 'no' does not mean that MCs are not covered by quality assurance, but that countries are considering how the existing mechanism can be used to cover MCs, rather than developing a new or a specific approach to MCs.

The group discussed the information and shared some thoughts:

- It was stressed that help with the interviews is appreciated but not required. It takes some detective work to find the right person or contact details for the interviews, since there is not a lot of information on the alternative providers.

- The difficulty in defining which institutions can be part of the category of non-HEIs or alternative providers that offer MCs was addressed. The emphasis should be on institutions that offer courses/continuing education to a large audience.
 - The example was given of VDAB in Flanders, who offers courses for people that want to reskill or upskill or seek jobs.
- There are many countries where there are alternative providers, but they are not allowed to use ECTS because they are not accredited as an institution.
 - The suggestion was made to make a distinction in the key consideration document between institutions that allow the use of ECTS criteria and others that do not.
- Our key aspect remains how non-HEIs and alternative providers assure the quality of their provision and not how well they meet all the criteria or the definition on MCs.
- It should be noted that many countries do not use the term MCs as people/students may not understand its meaning (yet). However, courses or modules of existing programmes can be considered as MCs.
- The deadline for the interviews and data collection was set for the end of March because there needs to be sufficient time to analyze the data from the interviews.

Desk research report structure

The desk research report structure has not been finalized but the report is currently structured as follows:

- Foreword
- Introduction
- European policy context (all important updates will be mentioned)
- Policy level developments in the EHEA countries
 - National registers and catalogues
- External quality assurance – how has it been being looked at from a national perspective?
 - Institutional and programme accreditation/evaluation
 - External evaluations of each micro-credential
 - External evaluation of the micro-credentials offered by alternative providers (still empty as more information needs to be retrieved form interviews)
- Internal quality assurance – HOW Providing the MCs (by unpacking and repacking the existing program or standalone courses)
 - Online and hybrid mode of delivery
 - Stackability
- Non-Higher Education providers (still empty as more information needs to be retrieved form interviews)
- Conclusion
- Acknowledgements
- References

The group discussed the report structure and content and offered feedback. Some key elements brought forward:

- Everyone was pleased with the draft report structure and content so far.

- One element missing in the report, is the connection to Lifelong Learning opportunities in general. MCs are not used by everyone, so it may be that courses have been around for some time, but people are unaware of them. Representatives interviewed mentioned that MCs or LLL are in the NQF, and the learning outcomes are the basis for external QA procedures
 - It was agreed to include this in the introduction of the report.
- There was some confusion about the DEQAR database: How is it possible to have a register with all MCs if we do not ask QA agencies to evaluate all MCS?
 - It was explained that DEQAR is not a database for MCs but for their providers which are externally evaluated.
 - It is currently not on the table to evaluate every MC separately.
 - It depends on the country as well; in Estonia, MCs are grouped together based on the topic and then evaluated.
 - There is a wide variety of micro-credentials and of combinations and arrangements in MCs, so some flexibility is necessary.
- Most countries have already a lot, but do not use the term MC. They have these kinds of courses, with a focus on lifelong learning. They also have agencies that are taking care of the quality.
- The Swedish HEIs were mentioned as very course-based, so they must have some MCs or programs that meet the definition of a MC. Therefore, interest is low, as those courses already exists. The grey area between higher education and higher vocational educations institutions was also mentioned in the case of Sweden.
- Reference was also made to the boundary that is not established in all countries between institutions of higher education and ‘something else’.
 - For the interviews, a selection is made based on the profiles of institutions (technical or vocational institutions, science- or research-oriented universities and institutions or institutions that are part of alliances) to interview a mix of institutions. So far, however, positive answers for interviews have come mainly from universities.
- CEPEFOP and their plan to publish case studies of countries and their approaches in MCs were mentioned as a potential source for the report. Also the final report of UNICA was mentioned, which could be shared within two weeks.
 - It was asked to share the reports with the group when they are available.
- As for Flanders, the comment was made to ask in the interviews about the courses that are being offered in their Lifelong Learning provision. The Flemish system is very flexible, all courses of regular degree programmes can be seen as MCs (certificates are offered) but it is unclear what is beyond that.
 - For example, there are postgraduate courses and very specific courses for some companies or professions. HEIs have a flexibility regarding these initiatives and there is no clear view on how the quality assurance of these initiatives is managed.
- It was noted that the interest is more on LLL and MCs as standalones. The ones that are part of an existing program, are already addressed in QA because they are part of an existing program. The idea that HEIs should look carefully at the existing programs and at those that can be offered as MCs has surfaced from the interviews.
 - Remarks were made that the ones out of existing programs are not always MCs because they do not always focus on specific skills or on re/up-skilling purposes. Not everything will be MCs, and MCs are only one part of a lifelong learning provision.

- It was noted that HEIs are regulated by national authorities, but non-HEIs are not regulated in the same way, so they cannot be forced to quality assure their provision.
- There is also no trademark on the term 'Micro-credential' meaning that there will probably always be MCs that are not included in QF or not quality assured.
 - The objective is and should be to have a tool and to demonstrate a number of MCs that have received quality guarantees. We can only inform them of the possibility. This was mentioned as another reason as to why it is important to distinguish between alternative providers and institutions of higher education.

Upcoming activities and timeline for each writing group

Desk research report timeline:

Done:

1. Analysis of survey data – January
2. Early report draft – end of January
3. Meeting of the WG – end of January
4. First full report draft – by mid- February
5. WG meeting – 27 February – discussing the draft

To do:

6. Incorporate feedback and make changes to the report: March
7. Desk research 2nd draft of the report ready: beginning of April (will depend on the progression interviews)
8. WG short meeting/sending written feedback on the 2nd draft: mid-April
9. Finalize the report: by beginning of May
10. Edit and publish the report: by end of May

The IQA & EQA guiding documents and Key considerations for non-HEI providers

To do:

1. Interviews and collection of case examples: February – March
2. Analysis of interviews and cast studies data: end March/beginning April
3. Based on the findings of the desk research and interviews, draw out what to include in each of the outputs: end March – beginning April
4. Meetings of the writing groups IQA/EQA/key considerations: mid-April
 - a. Discussion on the early drafts
 - b. Division of the tasks
5. First draft of the output ready: mid-May
6. Meeting with each writing group discussing 1st drafts: end May
7. Incorporate feedback and prepare the second drafts of the outputs: June – July
8. Meeting with each writing group/sending written feedback on the 2nd drafts: beginning of July
9. Finalize the outputs: mid-August - beginning of September
10. Next WG meeting in Belgium: 14 September
11. Edit and design of the publications & Publications: mid-end of September

Discussion on the upcoming activities

- It was agreed that it might be better to send feedback on the 2nd draft, as it will be easier to work with.

- In April, only meetings in the separate writing groups will be organized, so as to not overburden everyone.
- Given the summer period and the annual holidays of the members, it was agreed to be more flexible (to work with written feedback and emails) and to change the timing of two activities:
 - o The activity ‘Incorporate feedback and prepare the second drafts of the outputs’ should take place in June and July.
 - o ‘Meeting with each writing group/sending written feedback on the 2nd drafts’ should be the beginning of July.
 - o The April meeting was mentioned as a potentially good time to indicate and determine not only what section will be written, but also when everyone will be on vacation or available during the summer break.
- The next meeting of the WG in Brussels, September 14th, will take place back-to-back with the PLA on European Approach for joint programmes on 13th.

Writing groups

Elena took us through the different writing groups and will inform every group by email when planning the meetings. Marilena offered to help with the overall editing of the report when needed. Below an overview of the writing groups can be found.

Writing group	Members of each writing group
Desk research	Agnes Witzani (Austria) Josipa Češnovar (Croatia) Tereza Křepelová (Czech Republic) Katrín Mayer-Lantermann (Germany) Péter Levente Lakatos (Hungary) Marilena Maniaci (Italy) Maria Kelo (Expert) Romiță Lucu (Expert) Kevin Guillaume (Expert)
IQA guidance – Guiding document for HEIs	Péter Levente Lakatos (Hungary) Edda Hall Thorgerdur (Iceland) Peter Ondreicka (Slovakia) Demelza, Curno (UK) Maria Kelo (Expert) Romiță Lucu (Expert) Kevin, Guillaume (Expert) Ulf Hedbjörk (Sweden) Marilena Maniaci (Italy)
EQA guidance – Guiding document for QA agencies	Yiannis Kasoulides (Cyprus) Tanguy Guibert (ESU) Aleksandra Zhivkovikj (EQAR) Ketevan Panchulidze (Georgia) Edda Hall Thorgerdur (Iceland) Lawrence Azzopardi (Malta) Peter Ondreicka (Slovakia) Meryem Aysegul Kozak Cakir (Turkey) Maria Kelo (Expert) Romiță Lucu (Expert) Kevin Guillaume (Expert) Marilena Maniaci (Italy)

Key Considerations for non-HEI providers

Yiannis Kasoulides (Cyprus)
Aleksandra Zhivkovikj (EQAR)
Tanguy Guibert (ESU)
Solange Pizarz (France)
Lawrence Azzopardi (Malta)
Demelza Curnow (UK)
Maria Kelo (Expert)
Romiță Lucu (Expert)
Kevin Guillaume (Expert)
Marie-Jo Goedert (France)
Marilena Maniaci (Expert)

Presentation of the work done on the inclusion of Micro-credentials providers in DEQAR (i.e., the data model) & discussion

Aleksandra Zhivkovikj (EQAR) presented the proposed inclusion of alternative providers and Micro-credentials (MCs) providers in DEQAR.

The database DEQAR has been created for external QA reports made by EQAR-registered agencies. Currently, 83.301 QA reports and 3.441 HEIs can be found on DEQAR. The data module is being expanded to have equal information on Higher Education institutions and non-Higher Education institutions. The information on the HEIs in DEQAR is primarily collected from the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) and is updated on a daily basis.

During the presentation, there was a focus on three different views:

1. On HEIs and on alternative providers
2. On organizational and institutional level or on alternative provider level
3. On the program or on the micro-credential

The welcome page of the data module will provide a visual distinction between providers – HEIs or alternative providers. The field to search by alternative provider will be incorporated, next to the existing options to search by HEI or by report.

1. Providers/Organisations in DECAR

Elements such as the name of an institution, its location, the website and DEQAR ID can already be found in DEQAR. The same elements will be incorporated for the alternative providers, together with three additional elements:

- Identifier source
- Type of organisation: private company, public organisation, etc.
- Source of information about the provider

Information about the alternative providers is expanded to increase the trustworthiness or validity of the organisation. ETER has been used as an information source for HEIs, however there is not yet a database like ETER for alternative providers. All information on alternative providers has to be uploaded manually.

Discussion on organisations

The group discussed the three following questions:

- 1) What identifiers are used in your country for classifying educational providers?

2) In what form could an alternative provider be established in your country (e.g., private company, public – private partnership etc.)?

3) Are you familiar with any registries of alternative providers in your country?

The questions were stated to be not easy to answer.

It is difficult to know what is meant by an alternative provider. Some examples were mentioned:

- In Flanders, discussions on this topic still need to take place.
- As for the United Kingdom, there is a diversity of different providers, and it comes down to the having degree awarding powers. A provider could be a university, and university-college or an independent provider (they go separately through a cyclical review process).
 - The possibility exists that a provider has degree-awarding powers but is not an HEI. Dyson institute was named as an example. They have created an organisation in the Dyson organisation that has been given the degree-awarding power.
 - Further complicating matters are the four different nations in the United Kingdom and the different authorities for HEIs.
- In Germany, only HEIs can have degree-awarding power. Non-HEIs or alternative providers cannot have this power.

An alternative provider could also be offering courses or programmes in cooperation with HEIs.

- In Sweden, HEIs cooperate with the industry. For example, with Volvo. The main provider is still the HEI. However, if only the HEI is included in DECAR, valuable information could be missed.
- If a HEI can offer MCs, they do it themselves, if not they could work with partners.
- If an MC has multiple providers, there should be a way to make this clear to the viewers.
- Some providers work internationally, such as Red Cross or Microsoft and for these situations, the possibility exists to include multiple seats in the framework. The official seat can be presented, and the other seats can also be listed.

Given a potential ambiguity of the meaning of the identifier, it was suggested that a small explanation should be included.

- Aleksandra briefly explained the meaning of the identifier. Each institution has its own number (identifier) in the database and QA agencies can use this number. The number can be used to upload reports. It was introduced to avoid typing errors and to match with other databases such as ETER (ETER has its own system of numbering).
- Including a link to the data source to provide more information was also suggested.

National Qualification Frameworks were noted as a possible primary source that could be used to obtain more information on the alternative providers/non-HEIs.

There are currently three approaches to evaluate Micro-credentials:

- Micro-credential evaluated separately against ESG
- Micro-credential as part of programme offered by HEI
- Micro-credential as part of institutional accreditation.

It depends on the context or country as well, e.g., in Kazakhstan, alternative providers are being evaluated and not the micro-credentials.

2. External quality assurance of organizations - Institutional accreditation & certification of an alternative provider

For the institutional accreditation & certification of an alternative provider elements, the list of elements is quite extensive, with elements as the agency that has uploaded reports, status of decision (obligatory or voluntary), valid from/to and the report language. One additional element included, exclusively for HEIs, is whether the micro-credentials are part of the accreditation.

In most countries, there is no obligation to be ESG-aligned so the reports are voluntary, unless an alternative provider has to be ESG-aligned.

Discussion on validity date

The group discussed the validity date of reports of certified alternative providers, as some have no validity dates and others work within a period of 5 to 6 years.

- A remark was made about the difference between the QA of an alternative provider and a HEI and of being sensible to national differences. There should be a caution when using terminology as not everyone will use the term micro-credential.
- It was stated that alternative providers should not be treated in a different way. The reason for using DEQAR is just to have similar information between alternative providers and HEIs. The alternative providers will have gone through the same procedures.
- Concerning the validity date was remarked that it could be that, for example in the case of the Red Cross, multiple courses are being offered but only one of them has a specific term or they all have different terms.

3. External quality assurance of educational provisions - programme accreditation & certification of micro credentials

The report on single micro-credentials contains elements such as name, programme qualification, programme NQF and programme QF EHEA level. Additional elements have been added to give more clarity to what the programme and micro-credential are related to. Some elements are obligatory and some voluntary. The voluntary elements are:

- Degree outcome
- Learning outcomes
- Description of LO
- Field

The obligatory elements are:

- Programme QF EHEA level
- ECTS Credits
- Assessment and certification
 - For HEIs there is an option: assessment and certification
 - MCs have three possible answers:
 - Assessment and certification
 - Only attendance
 - No assessment or certification

A final new element added is Micro-credential as part of accreditation, which is only relevant to higher education institutions.

Discussion on obligatory and voluntary elements

The group discussed whether the information on the programme QF level and information on ECTS credits should be obligatory for alternative providers only or for both alternative providers and HEIs.

- It was mentioned that the workload of the MCs should be mentioned. The workload can be very different depending on the MC. Hours were mentioned as a logical way of working. The ECTS credits were also suggested as a possible way to quantify the workload.
- As noted earlier, higher education institutions and alternative providers should not be treated differently unless it is rational. Information about both providers is needed.
- An example was mentioned of a nursing school in Germany, in which a HEI cooperates with a non-HEI and recognizes modules offered by the non-HEI. While being in the HEI, students can follow the modules and they will receive a higher education award. They could be called modules or MCs and they are quality assured by the German HEI accreditation system.
 - This micro-credential could fit in the curriculum of the HEI, but the MC would not be put on DEQAR. It could be that the MC is not self-standing and is not quality assured. If it is a cooperation in which a MC is recognized, then the program will be quality assured and not the MC. The bachelors and masters will be credited but not the micro-credential.
- The QF Level field and the ECTS credits field should have a 'non applicable' option in the data model.
 - In the ESG is mentioned that an ESG quality assured program, its learning outcomes need to be matched against the EQF and otherwise you do not comply with the ESG. This raised the question how often it would be possible to have a MC that is not benchmarked by the levels of EQF.
- Given the level of detail, it was noted that the more details you give, the greater the risk that the details will no longer be valid and that the details should always be justified. Learning outcomes come from providers, and it is possible that by the time the details are placed in DEQAR, they may have changed. It must be ensured that the data in DEQAR is always relevant and current; the user must be able to find the right information to revisit DEQAR.
 - This also brought back the question about the validity period of a MC. MCs can change quickly and are short programs that respond to the labour market need. 'So should the validity period of a MC be shorter than of a program?'
 - The upcoming publication of the ENQA working group was mentioned as a possible source for this, as it discusses the life span of an MC as opposed to other programs.

Lastly, Aleksandra informed the participants about the activities that have already taken place and the ones that are planned:

- December 2022: EQAR went through the DECAR data model, selected elements that were applicable, went through frameworks and the MICROBOL project.
 - The first visual mock-up was created and presented at the Dialogue of EQAR in December.
- February 2023: Second mock-up has been created and was consulted with IMINQA WG.
- March 2023: EQAR will look for national and international databases of alternative providers and implement the feedback of the meeting with IMINQA WG.

- September 2023: launching of the section for AP&MCs in DEQAR will take place and the final model will be presented in at next WG meeting.

She asked the members to keep her informed about new proposals or developments in their national contexts regarding MCs (or on their providers).

- The groups discussed the plan to interview alternative providers in late spring:
 - A suggestion was made to integrate the interviews in the interviews planned by ENQA, to take part in the interviews and ask few questions.
 - Since the time for the interviews must be limited (to attract participants), it was suggested to select a few non-HEIs who were interviewed by then and have a separate conversation with them specifically on this topic.
 - Inviting providers (HEIs and non-HEIs) to the meeting in September, to consult them directly, is not an option for DEQAR as it will be too late; the final version will be presented in the same meeting.
 - It was noted that the non-HEIs or alternative providers are not stakeholders but rather colleagues. Therefore, perhaps the meeting in September could include an information session to inform the providers about DEQAR and how the framework might be useful for them. They should be asked if they are interested in an ESG-aligned QA and if they see any value in an external evaluation.

Plan the next meeting

- The next meeting of the WG on Micro-credentials will take place in Brussels on **14 September 2023**.
- Elena had two final questions to the members:
 - 1) to provide her with contact details of alternative providers or non-HEIs for the interviews,
 - 2) to contact her with written comments or remarks that had been made on the draft or if assistance would like to be provided with the interviews.