

IUA Submission to the European Commission consultation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability

The European Commission launched a 12-week public consultation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability on 20 April 2021. The public consultation seeks to collect ideas for the development of a common definition for micro-credentials, European Union (EU) standards for their quality and transparency and the next steps to be taken at the institutional, national and EU levels. The consultation will contribute to the preparation of a Council Recommendation on micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability by the end of 2021.

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the consultation and strongly endorses the very positive and timely developments at the highest political and policy levels within the EU on micro-credentials. This is reflected in the high priority placed on micro-credentials within Irish universities as evidenced by the Multi-campus Micro-credentials project.

Our submission will detail the following:

- 1. An overview of priorities and progress under the Multi-campus Micro-credential project;**
- 2. A high-level summary of the key benefits of micro-credentials and**
- 3. An examination of what EU level actions and measures would facilitate and support the realisation of the potential of micro-credentials?**

1. Overview of priorities and progress under the Multi-campus Micro-credential project

Project Priorities

Multi-campus Micro-credentials is an ambitious 5-year, €12.3 million project (2020-2025) led by the IUA in partnership with the seven founding IUA universities: Dublin City University (DCU), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Maynooth University (MU), NUI Galway (NUIG), University College Cork (UCC), University College Dublin (UCD) and University of Limerick (UL). The project funding was awarded following a competitive process under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's (DFHERIS) Human Capital Initiative, with funding drawn from the National Training Fund.

Multi-campus Micro-credentials has four interlinked strands:

Strand one: the development of a National Framework for micro-credentials.

Strand two: the creation of a dynamic and sustainable model of enterprise engagement for micro-credentials.

Strand three: the design and development of a digital Discovery Platform for accredited micro-credentials, linked to a digital credentialing solution. The on-line portal will drive awareness of, and support learner access to micro-credentials and stacked micro-credential pathways.

Strand four: an agilely developed and flexibly delivered suite of micro-credentials across the partner universities.

Multi-campus Micro-credential partners are collaborating to develop, pilot and evaluate the building blocks required for a transformation in lifelong and life-wide learning through micro-credentials. We

are working in partnership with learners and enterprise to change thinking about and engagement with university learning. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (2021) has set a target of at least 60% of adults participating in annual training every year by 2030. The scale of increased uptake will be challenging; 2016 data indicates that only 37% of adults were participating in learning activities every year across the EU, compared with only 12% of Irish adults in 2020. We are focusing on learners who are seeking to upskill or re-skill, return to employment or change careers.

It is our ambition that the project will leave a legacy framework and infrastructure for micro-credentials which will support engagement with wider cohorts of learners such as undergraduate students, learning for personal interest and those accessing higher education for the first time.

Progress

We have adopted a phased, iterative approach to the development of Multi-campus Micro-credentials with an initial pilot phase running from Q2 2021 to Q2 2022. During this period, a four-element universal vision frames our work.

Element One: Working Definition for Micro-credentials

Multi-campus Micro-credentials has adopted a working definition for micro-credentials aligned to the European Commission draft definition. Aligning closely with the European Commission draft definition is a considered approach, highlighting that this project aims to strongly reflect the EU-wide developments around micro-credentials.

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes 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. (European Commission, 2020, p10).

Element Two: Values underpinning the vision for Multi-campus Micro-credentials

Seven core values underpin Multi-campus Micro-credentials, as described in Figure 1 and the summary descriptors below.

Leadership in Lifelong Learning

- Multi-campus Micro-credentials universities are leading new thinking in lifelong and life-wide learning.
- Cultural change in how and when learners engage with university learning.
- Cultural change in how universities, enterprise and community partners collaborate.

Tackling Economic and Societal Challenges

- Micro-credentials developed in close collaboration with Enterprise, Public Sector and Civil Society partners.

- Designed to address economic needs and respond to societal and developmental challenges.
- Dynamic suite of micro-credentials.

Dynamic Enterprise Collaboration

- Meaningful and sustainable model of enterprise partnership.
- Enterprise-informed micro-credentials.
- Supporting the work force of the future with design approach which fits around work and life commitments.
- Identifying emergent job and skills needs, informing and evolving the suite of micro-credentials available.

Excellence and Innovation

- Innovative teaching, learning and assessment approaches enhancing learner success.
- Quality assured by IUA universities.
- Research led and discovery focused micro-credentials.

Flexible and Agile

- Unlocking established programmes to support learning through discrete, short credentials.
- Developing a suite of new, cutting edge micro-credentials in emerging fields and high demand skills.
- Delivered online, in person or blended depending on the discipline content and stakeholder needs.
- Learning in a range of locations: on campus, off-site, in the workplace.

Learner Focused

- Learners may choose to undertake a micro-credential as a standalone award or stack credentials to form a major award.
- Facilitates learner journey autonomy; learners may stack learning at their own pace.
- Wide range of learners: pre-entry, under-graduate, post-graduate.
- Different motivations for study: upskilling, re-skilling and career change and evolution, responding to legislative, regulatory, economic and professional demands.
- Agency for learner to embrace innovation and technological change and pursue personal interests.

Inclusive

- Designed to support alternative pathways to, progress through and journeys in higher education nationally and across Europe.
- Encouraging widest possible participation in micro-credentials by eliminating unnecessary barriers to access.
- Underpinned by different approaches to communication, engagement and learner support.
- Opens up professional learning journeys and lifelong learning.



Figure 1: Seven core values of Micro-credentials developed in Multi-campus Micro-credentials

Element Three: Constitutive Elements of Multi-campus Micro-credentials

Our partner universities are developing a suite of micro-credentials across levels 7-10 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (levels 6-8 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)). Each micro-credential will have a specified credit size drawn from a sliding scale of 1-30 ECTS. The micro-credentials are standalone awards or may be stacked into larger qualifications. During this pilot phase, the project team will develop guidelines and best practice approaches to support stacking of micro-credentials into larger qualifications and the recognition and portability of micro-credentials. A process of mutual recognition of Multi-campus Micro-credentials by partner universities for the purposes of access, transfer, progression and accumulation will be implemented, using the Bologna processes and tools.

All micro-credentials will be developed by each university’s internal quality assurance (QA) system (including accreditation by professional bodies, where relevant), and external QA by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). It is important to note in this regard that Irish universities have the power to issue their own awards, which are included on the Irish NFQ. Micro-credentials may be delivered in a range of modes and location from on-line, blended or face-to-face and on-campus or in the work-place. The mode and location of delivery will vary as appropriate to the pedagogical priorities determined by the disciplinary area, sectoral requirements and learner context. Irish university micro-credentials will be included on the NFQ.

Element Four:

The project partners will work to agree a common supplement for Multi-campus Micro-credentials during pilot phase one so that information is easily accessible to all stakeholders.

Enterprise Engagement

The project has established a high-level Enterprise Advisory Group (EAG) comprising senior representatives from business representative organisations, enterprise agencies, private sector companies and state bodies with responsibility for skills. The EAG provides advice and guidance on enterprise priorities for current and future skills needs. Central to the work of the EAG is the development of a dynamic and sustainable model of enterprise engagement for micro-credentials. The project phase one has developed a pilot model which will initially trial engagement focused in three areas: digital transition and transformation, the green economy and the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) sector. (Figure 2).

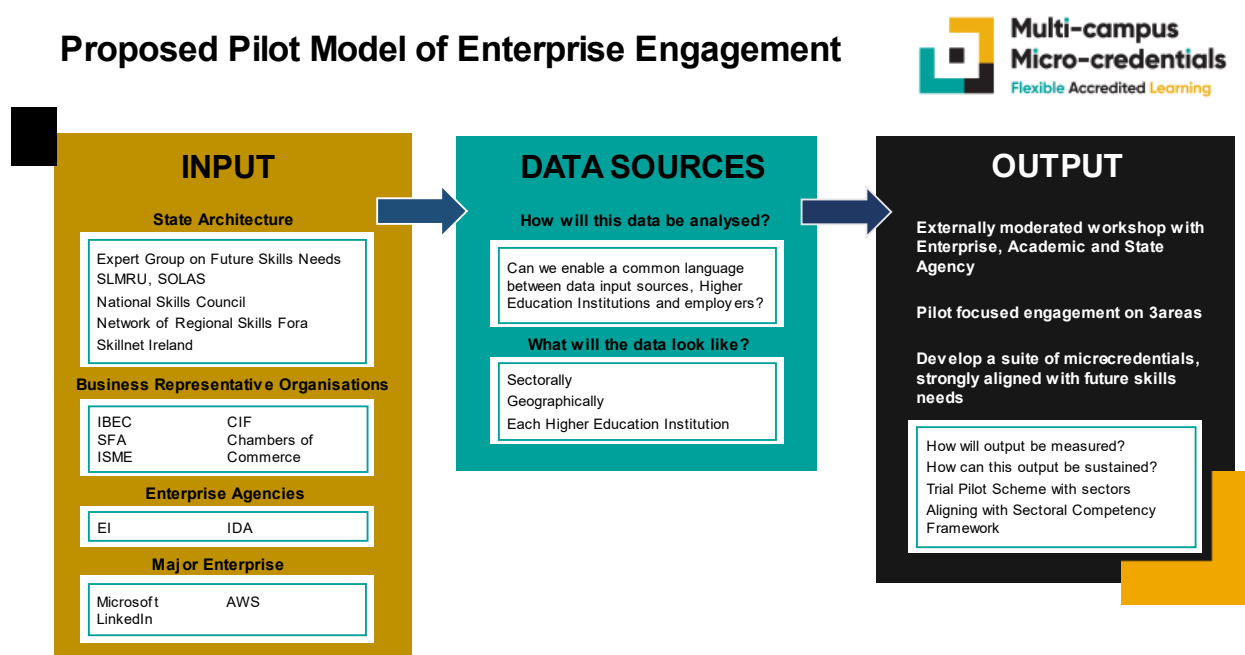


Figure 2: Proposed pilot model of enterprise engagement.

2. Summary of Key Benefits of Micro-credentials

- *Learner focused*

Micro-credentials have the potential to reimagine and reframe the relationship between learners, universities, enterprise and civil society partners, generating a step change in lifelong and life-wide learning. Micro-credentials can address many of the barriers to participation in lifelong learning such as time constraints for learners and the inflexibility in current programme provision and delivery. The inherent flexibility in micro-credentials means that learners can access learning in discrete, small units

at a time and pace which allows for greater balance with life and work commitments. A fully developed framework for micro-credentials could provide learners with agile pathways from stand-alone awards to larger credentials which allow learning to align with and adjust to changes in learner priorities over time. In summary, micro-credentials can improve accessibility to life-long learning, enhance professional identity and self-efficacy, through learning that is closely linked to professional work practices and enables an agile response to labour market needs and technological, economic and social change. The IUA is working closely with a parallel HCI-funded project on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the context of wider lifelong learning.

- *Quality of provision and understanding of the benefits of lifelong learning*

Micro-credentials provide an opportunity to create greater understanding of the benefits of lifelong learning as well as improving awareness of the lifelong learning opportunities available in our universities. By increasing the transparency of the nature, scope, quality and potential impact of available micro-credentials on professional and personal development through a process of open and on-going partnership with enterprise and societal partners, both learners and enterprise will gain an increased appreciation of the value of lifelong learning. The initial market research conducted by IUA has indicated a strong enterprise appetite for this, with the trustworthiness and quality of the university “brand” seen as particularly attractive.

- *Responding to enterprise skills priorities*

Agilely-developed micro-credentials, aligned to identified skills priorities will support employees and enterprise to adapt to fast changing labour market requirements. Micro-credentials support learners in upskilling and reskilling in areas of high skills demand. Our partner universities, as leading higher education providers in Ireland, are developing targeted micro-credentials in highly skilled and specialised fields such as digital transition and transformation and responding to climate change and societal challenges. It is expected that the micro-credentials approach will increase the visibility and attractiveness of existing lifelong learning offerings by the university sector, which tend to operate “in parallel” to the “mainstream” offerings. Micro-credentials can therefore also form a key pillar in the training required to support economic recovery, nationally and across the EU, post COVID.

- *Innovation in teaching and learning*

Micro-credentials provide universities with an opportunity to explore and pilot new approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Close engagement with enterprise and societal partners can promote co-creation and co-design of new micro-credentials, which will bring rich learning and understanding of work-based learning and the needs and priorities of the micro-credential learner. A strong focus on the understanding of pedagogy for inclusion will be required to ensure that micro-credentials support the success of the widest group of learners. Micro-credential development teams will work closely with learners to develop and trial imaginative and creative approaches to effective and impactful learner engagement and partnership.

3. An examination of what EU level actions and measures would facilitate and support the realisation of the potential of micro-credentials?

The IUA values the work which has been undertaken at European level to date including the MICROBOL project (Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments) and the 2020 Final Report from the Micro-credentials Consultation Group (European Commission, 2020). A cohesive and unified approach to micro-credentials at European level will empower individuals, enterprise and economic sectors to participate and invest in upskilling and reskilling in a flexible and agile way.

We believe that the following EU actions and measures would facilitate and support the realisation of the potential of micro-credentials at national and EU levels:

- *Clear definition, common understanding and communication with wider range of stakeholders*

Our research with stakeholders, which includes enterprise, employees, senior level university administrators, academics and learners, has identified that there is a lack of consistent and comprehensive understanding of micro-credentials. The term is often confused with other concepts such as digital or open badges, short courses, digital credentials, MOOCs and certificates of attendance. It is important that there is a clear definition of micro-credentials which supports a common understanding of their value, understood by a broad group of stakeholders. It is also noteworthy that a degree of scepticism permeates throughout higher education around the disruptive potential of micro-credentials, a sample (and frequent) query concerns the capacity of stacked micro-credentials to undermine the integrity and 'value' of traditional degrees.

Multi-campus Micro-credentials has aligned the pilot phase working definition with the European Commission working definition of micro-credentials. This approach has assisted greatly in developing a clarity and consistency between stakeholders which is crucial to encourage confidence and participation in micro-credentials.

- *Actions to support mutual recognition*

Action at EU level to promote and support the mutual recognition of micro-credentials by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and agencies, where appropriate, for the purposes of access, transfer, progression, and credit accumulation (including stacking into larger awards) will be required to fully realise the potential of these credentials for learners and enterprise. The Bologna tools and the existing Qualification Frameworks (national and European) provide appropriate and effective methodologies and architecture to build solutions. Central to this will be agreed minimum EU Standards elements to characterise a micro-credential. Consideration must also be given to the development of EU level guidelines and good practice approaches to quality assurance in the context of the micro-credential awards and in scaffolding learner pathways to stack credentials into larger awards. This will include the need for proportionate but effective approaches to learner engagement and partnership. The enhanced visibility and transparency proposed by ENIC-NARIC and the recent Europass developments will be of significant assistance in encouraging and supporting higher levels of mutual recognition across HEIs and national HE systems.

- *Digital infrastructure to increase the uptake, storage and recognition of micro-credentials*

If micro-credentials are to support learning, professional development and progression in a digital age, EU level support for appropriate digital infrastructure and tools will be essential. The groundbreaking work of the European Commission in developing the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI) is key to realising this ambition.

The development of digital infrastructure which will facilitate a positive learner experience from the initial interaction, application to a HEI, undertaking a micro-credential, awarding of a micro-credential, storing digital credentials acquired in a 'digital rucksack,' right through to curated intelligent stacking pathways is not easily achievable. Optimising the interoperability of the EDCI with existing university and national systems and our planned micro-credentials Discovery Portal is of fundamental importance. This will require on-going commitment at EU level beyond the existing Europass "EDCI project" phase. Irish universities have a relatively good awareness so far of digital credentialling, with many implementing this relatively new technology and developing this as part of future scoping plans, although concerns have emerged surrounding security, data sharing, authentication, etc.

- *Funding to support innovation, development, research and stimulate uptake*

EU wide micro-credentials development will require funding to innovate, develop and deliver them at sufficient scale to impact lifelong learning. The development of micro-credentials touches on almost every aspect of universities including academic programme development, quality assurance, learner recruitment and registration, IT systems, teaching, learning, staff development and the student experience. At every touch point, universities will be required to consider how the creation and delivery of new stand alone and stackable awards impact on existing practices and what changes may be required. This range of complexity demands significant and sustained investment to bring about the cultural and organisational change required.

Research and evaluation supported by EU level funding would provide important insights and understanding into progress made and the impact of micro-credentials allowing for synergies of approach in support of lifelong learning. Research is also required to critique successful models of enterprise engagement, including actions to incentivise enterprise support for micro-credentials, particularly in relation to staff recruitment and retention.

The cost to the learner and lack of employer support for participation in micro-credentials may act as a barrier to the uptake of micro-credentials. A number of countries, including Scotland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada have introduced state funding for both employer-linked micro-credentials and for qualifying learners. A voucher-style system directed at both learner or employer may stimulate interest in micro-credentials, help target particular priority sectors, and mitigate against inequality of opportunity.

- *Unlocking EU lifelong learning and skills forecasting data in support of micro-credential development.*

It has become apparent during the scoping phase of Multi-campus Micro-credentials that for the project to fully address future skills needs, current skills gaps, skills mismatches, and the relatively low rates of adult participation in lifelong learning in Ireland and across Europe, there is a strong need for good quality data. The pace of change in labour market underscores the importance of dynamic skills

demand forecasting which can be interpreted and understood at a level which facilitates the development of appropriate micro-credentials, rather than using labour market evidence which is already out of date. It is not desirable for learners (and employees) to undergo learning solely to address current acute skills deficiencies. Through transversal skills, learners must also develop capabilities to pursue learning throughout their lives and adapt to an ever-changing economic and social landscape.

Clarity around the terminology and language is also required, an example is the use of 'digital skills' as an umbrella term for such skills needs. In reality this highlights a lack of specificity, potentially leading to an increase in learners or employees with mismatched skills from the employer perspective, despite the resources invested. Traditional labour market "occupational groups" will also likely require a measure of attention: are such groups considered up to date and consistent with new emerging roles and functions? The proposed model of enterprise engagement in Multi-campus Micro-credentials offers a way of understanding what data is required and what level of analysis can support both university and enterprise to work together to create high quality, in-demand micro-credentials.

Appendix



Universal Vision for Multi-campus Micro-credentials



What are Microcredentials ?

- A proof of learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience.
- Learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards.
- Proof is contained in a certified document listing; name of the holder, achieved learning outcomes, assessment method, awarding body and, where applicable, the qualifications framework level and credits gained.
- Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications.
- Underpinned by QA following agreed standards. (Aligns with European Commission draft definition, 2020).

Constitutive Elements of our Micro-credentials include;

- Levels 7-10 on National Framework of Qualifications.
- Credit range of 1-30 ECTS.
- Relationship with formal qualifications Standalone qualifications which are portable and may be stacked into larger qualifications.

Multi-campus Microcredentials at (*insert university name*)

(University) is offering (x amounts) microcredentials from (insert month, year) as part of the initial portfolio of Multi-campus Micro-credentials. Provide institutional information on links with enterprise, target learners, ECTS range, mode of delivery, etc. If you would like to learn more about this transformative IUA project at (University name) as an academic content provider or interested learner, please contact (University name)'s Project Lead, (contact details, email, etc.).



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This project is funded under Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3, Innovation and Agility.



Summary factsheet of Multi-campus Micro-credentials. This is editable by each of the IUA partner universities (NUIG, UL, UCC, TCD, UCD, MU and DCU) to reflect their micro-credential offerings during the pilot phase.