



Micro-credentials and Bologna Key Commitments

State of play in the European Higher Education Area



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This document was developed in the framework of the “MICROBOL Project – Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments”, co-financed in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union. The specific objective of this project is for ministries and stakeholders to explore, within the Bologna Process, whether and how the existing Bologna tools can be used and/or need to be adapted to be fit for micro-credentials. A common European framework for micro-credentials will be proposed.

Project partners

Belgium – Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (coordinator)

Finland – Ministry of Education and Culture

Italy – CIMEA

ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)

EUA (European University Association)

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List of abbreviations

The following list describes the significance of various abbreviations and acronyms used throughout the document.

BFUG: Bologna Follow-up Group

ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

EHEA: European Higher Education Area

EQF: European Qualifications Framework

ESG: Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area

EU: European Union

HEI: Higher Education Institution

LLL: Lifelong Learning

LRC: Lisbon Recognition Convention

MOOC: Massive Open Online Course

NQF: National Qualifications Framework

QA: Quality Assurance

QF: Qualifications Framework

RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning

VPL: Validation of Prior Learning

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Executive summary

The report presents the state of play of micro-credentials in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) relative to six dimensions: their development, legislation, digitalisation, and the applicability to them of the existing Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) and European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), recognition and Quality Assurance (QA). The study is part of the “MICROBOL - Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments” project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, in which ministries and stakeholders involved in the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used and/or adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials. In line with this objective, at the end of 2020 a survey was launched to the members of the BFUG as well as the nominated representatives in the MICROBOL working groups. This study presents the results of the survey, enriched by the inputs of the three MICROBOL working group meetings held in January 2021, and showcases the decisive points that the development and acceptance of micro-credentials in the framework of the Bologna Key Commitments entail. In this light, this document represents also a starting point whose results can highlight relevant insights for further use in other activities of the project that foresees the drafting of a document meant to provide input for the EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials.

The first results to emerge from the study are that the majority of the countries are already offering and/or developing micro-credentials, and that **the understanding of what constitutes a micro-credential varies greatly across the countries surveyed**. Most of the countries offer micro-credentials in the form of course units within a degree programme, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and special purpose awards. The second element to emerge is that there are very **different approaches to micro-credentials on the regulatory side**. While in the majority of the countries the national regulatory framework allows for the provision of micro-credentials, only in a few cases they are explicitly regulated or mentioned in legislation, and different typologies of qualifications that fall into the MICROBOL working definition can be offered and recognised. Many countries reported that the regulatory framework at national level needs to be adapted, and **express confidence in their efforts at integrating micro-credentials in national legislation**.

One key element for the portability of micro-credentials is digitalisation. According to the results of the survey, **the vast majority of countries do not have policies on digitalisation of credentials in general**. A small group of countries have such policies, and in a few cases micro-credentials are part of them.

National qualifications framework and ECTS

In the majority of countries there is no reference to micro-credentials in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In most cases, this is due to the fact that micro-credentials are **perceived as a new topic which requires further discussion at national level**. Nonetheless, most of the countries **do have micro-credentials expressed in ECTS, either in some cases or always**. The

number of assigned/estimated ECTS varies across countries and the range in number of ECTS credits varies from 1 to more than 100.

Even if the discussion on qualifications framework and ECTS is still ongoing, there is **consensus on the fact that, if micro-credentials are referred to the NQF, this supports transparency and recognition.**

Among the issues raised by the data on QF and ECTS, there is the fact that the term **micro-credentials refers both to the learning experience and to the qualification awarded.** A micro-credential certificate or “supplement” should include all the elements needed to better describe the micro-credential awarded.

Qualifications that are explicitly foreseen in the NQF generally have substantive sizes. Micro-credentials, when they are very small, may not be listed in the NQF, but they would nevertheless gain in transparency and relevance for personal and professional development if they were assigned to the QF by their respective providers.

Referring to the very varied landscape concerning the number of ECTS assigned to micro-credentials, data shows that micro-credentials are not or not always expressed in ECTS although this is perfectly possible, as explained in the Lifelong Learning (LLL) section of the ECTS Users’ Guide – an official EHEA document – using the same principles for credit allocation, award, accumulation and transfer accumulation as is done for component parts of programmes. Such coherent use of a key Bologna tool would greatly benefit learners, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers alike. Obviously, ECTS for micro-credentials would have to be used correctly and express both the volume of work needed and the learning outcomes, capturing the effort which is needed and the learning outcomes achieved.

Recognition

The majority of countries have implemented policies related to the recognition of micro-credentials, although many countries do not have specific policies. As for the **purpose of recognition** the data shows that most of the countries recognise micro-credentials with the aim of increasing learners’ competitiveness in the labour market, while **a slightly lower number of respondents to the survey recognise micro-credentials for academic purposes and for further study** (also in the form of recognition of credits and of prior learning). Looking at the stackability, in almost **half of the countries learners can accumulate micro-credentials to build up to a degree programme.** In some cases, stackability is not possible towards a full degree, nor to access to higher education, for which a formal entry qualification is needed. The data shows that several countries, but **still not the majority of respondents, do not recognise micro-credentials from providers other than HEIs.** This is mainly due to the regulatory framework or to the absence of QA mechanisms. In some cases, micro-credentials awarded by external providers are recognised only through using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or under certain conditions (for instance only in adult education).

Some considerations are outlined in the study with regard to recognition. One point that needs further deepening is to what extent the **Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) arrangements cover micro-credentials**, both as stand-alone qualifications and as periods of study. In the light of adapting the existing tools and building a common framework, **ENIC-NARICs, as a network, could play a key role in contributing to reviewing existing practices and to support fair recognition of micro-credentials**.

Another element that needs further discussion is if and to what extent micro-credentials can be used for **access to higher education**, i.e. as an entry qualification.

Transparent information provision is among the keys to recognition: it should include the elements needed for recognition and it should be addressed both to HEIs and to non-formal providers at national level.

Referring to stackability of micro-credentials, the **real challenge is with stand-alone micro-credentials rather than for micro-credentials** that are already part of a full-degree programme, especially for those awarded by non-formal providers.

Quality assurance

As for **QA**, in general terms, the majority of countries monitor the quality of courses through both programme accreditation/evaluation and institutional evaluation or audit, while in a lower number of countries it is monitored either through programme accreditation/evaluation or institutional evaluation. When talking about the inclusion of micro-credentials in the national QA systems, **the fact that they are not explicitly mentioned does not prevent most countries from considering them implicitly covered by their QA system**. A point that seems to come to light is that **ad hoc external quality procedures** (such as programme accreditation) **are considered too burdensome to be applied to micro-credentials**.

Analysing the sources of information on the QA status of the credentials awarded, in **most cases information is provided by the awarding institution itself**. The majority of the countries have **neither a record of the micro-credentials offered at national level, nor a register of providers**. Furthermore, **the majority of the countries have not implemented any other policies related to the QA of micro-credentials**.

According to the results of the survey some considerations are drafted in the study.

The first consideration is that it is largely agreed that the **Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) are a comprehensive and flexible tool that can be adapted to the assessment of micro-credentials**. The second point, which is closely linked to the first one, concerns the **excessive burden that would derive from the application of external and internal QA procedures to micro-credentials**. In this regard, it is possible to assume that if a micro-credential is offered by an institution subject to external and internal QA, the micro-credential itself would meet the required quality criteria. Therefore, **external QA is required to evaluate the**

institution and not each micro-credential. This can also be applied to micro-credentials offered in partnership with external providers, where the QA remains the responsibility of the HEIs.

A third point is that it is essential to **avoid the confusion and lack of understanding of this learning experience** that could result from the absence of specific QA mechanisms and sources of information, especially in the view of a possible growth of the phenomenon. To address this, **transparency is a key issue.**

Transversal issues

Analysing the results of the survey, a number of **transversal issues** emerge.

The first one is related to the need for further discussion at national and international level and to **reach a common understanding of micro-credentials.**

Together with a common definition, a **clear and transparent common framework is key**, with a balance between “standardisation” and flexibility to encompass diversity of experiences at national and international level.

The results show a very **dynamic picture with regard to the acceptance and uptake of micro-credentials at national level.** In many countries national discussion is ongoing, and it would be relevant to monitor developments in a diachronic approach, for instance repeating the survey a year later and comparing the results.

Internationalisation is a key topic, together with the discussion at national level: the aspect of **co-constructing micro-credentials with a transnational approach** must be kept in view and taken into account.

Micro-credentials are not a goal in themselves, but are at the service of the full educational and professional development of individuals. This learner-centred approach should be at the core of the discussion, and in this sense Bologna tools are now as always **levers for the training and development of individuals.**

The adaptation of Bologna tools (QF and ECTS, recognition, QA) to micro-credentials requires an effort and an administrative cost. For this reason this effort should be “proportional” and a **fit-for-purpose approach** could be most effective.

Digitalisation remains an open issue: in a context where the majority of countries do not have policies in the field, either for full degrees or for micro-credentials, there is a **huge space for development of digital instruments as a means to support portability, authenticity and transparency** of all types of qualifications, and more in general to underpin mobility.

A clear request for **support** on the topic emerges from the survey results. This support, that is mainly meant as peer support, collection of comparative experiences, exchanges of practices, also includes the need for contribution from experts in the field, the development of joint tools, and the exchange of information on legislation at national level. The need for targeted consultation, case studies,

support and information to national competent authorities, webinars and handbooks was also mentioned.

One of the scopes of the survey was to **encourage national discussion on micro-credentials and the applicability of Bologna tools in this context**. While this objective seems to have been reached according to the results, more discussion, consultation and exchange of practices at national and international level is called for in order to reach a common understanding and to place the development of micro-credentials in a common framework. In this sense this report is a starting point and constitutes a reference for further discussions, showcasing a very dynamic landscape where more developments are to be expected in the near future.

1 The context of the study

This study is a result of the MICROBOL project. This 2-year project, co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy reform, and more specifically “Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms” engages ministries and stakeholders involved in the BFUG to explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used and/or need to be adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials.

In the framework of the project a survey has been launched in order to collect information on the current state-of-play and developments with regards to the topic of micro-credentials in different member states of the EHEA. The focus of the survey was mainly from a higher education perspective, looking at micro-credentials offered by HEIs or recognised by them. In the context of the survey, respondents have been asked to consider any short courses, programmes, or learning experiences, whether they are offered as part of existing degree programmes or not, that currently exist in national systems today and correspond to the MICROBOL definition of micro-credentials, even if they are not specifically called “micro-credentials”:

“A micro-credential is a small volume of learning certified by a credential. In the EHEA context, it can be offered by HEIs 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 QA in line with the ESG”¹.

This publication presents the analysis of the answers collected and showcases the main highlights, issues and trends coming from such analysis.

¹ Definition of a micro-credential within the MICROBOL project, in Cirlan E., Loukkola T., “[European project MICROBOL. Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments. Desk research report](#)”, September 2020.

2 Data collection and objectives of the analysis

This analysis is built on the results of the survey submitted to the members of the BFUG as well as the nominated representatives in the MICROBOL working groups with the aim of gaining a picture on the state of play of micro-credentials in the targeted countries as well as encouraging national discussions on micro-credentials and their link to the Bologna Key Commitments. In this view, respondents were also asked to consult the different national stakeholders (HEIs, students, QA agencies, recognition centres, etc.) to include their perspective in the information provided. The survey was open from 15 October 2020 to 25 November 2020.

35 countries participated in the survey, the results were analysed and presented in the three sections of the study:

1. The first section gives an overview of the micro-credentials offered or being developed in different countries. Further detail on the current uptake of micro-credentials in national legislations and existing links with the digitalisation policy is also provided.
2. The second section goes more in depth into the applications of the Bologna Key Commitments to micro-credentials. This section analyses the integration of micro-credentials in the NQF and their expression in ECTS as well as the implementation of policies and/or practices related to recognition and QA of micro-credentials.
3. The last section of the study is devoted to reporting general comments and experiences mentioned by respondents.

This analysis presents the results of the survey with the main aim of gaining a picture on the state of art of micro-credentials and showcasing the essential cruxes entailed in the development and recognition of micro-credentials in the framework of the Bologna Key Commitments. In the view of proposing improvements and next steps based on the awareness about the starting situation, this document can also provide indications for the continuation of the project that foresees the drafting of a document meant to provide input for the EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials.

3 Section 1 – Investigating the use of micro-credentials

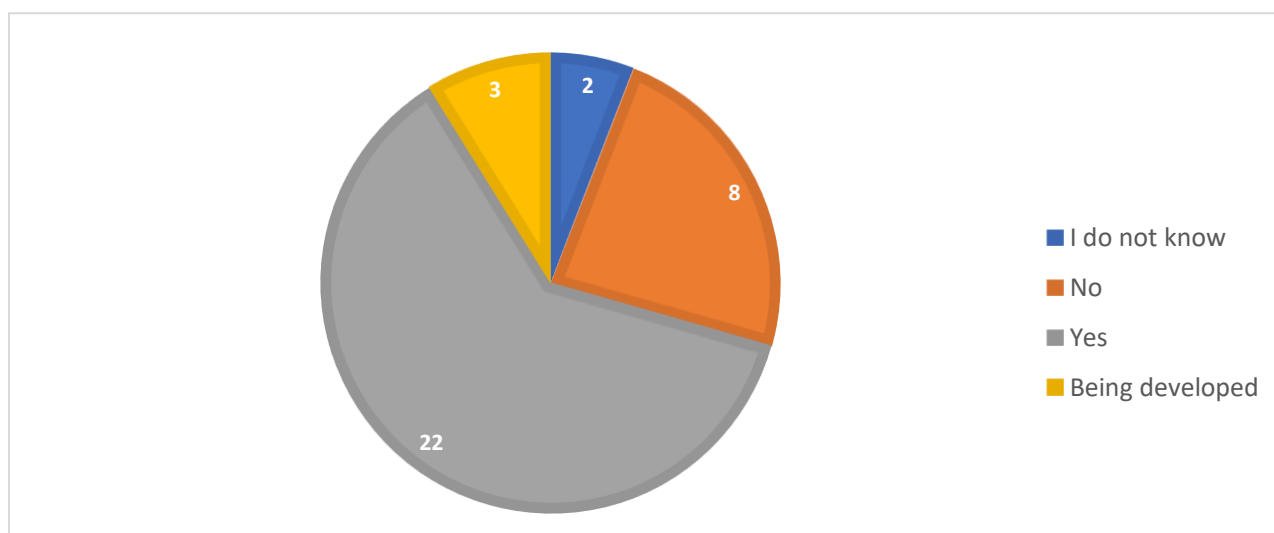
The first part of the report has the goal of providing a general overview on the state of play of micro-credentials in the EHEA countries, focusing on 3 main aspects:

- To what extent micro-credentials are already offered in the national context and what are the trends of their development;
- The role of legislation in relation to the uptake and acceptance of micro-credentials;
- The link between digitalisation and micro-credentials, and if there are policies in this field.

3.1 Overview on micro-credentials offered or being developed

Micro-credentials are offered in 22 countries and are being developed in another 3. The countries that are looking into developing micro-credentials reported that, among others, the discussion is stimulated by their participation in international initiatives.

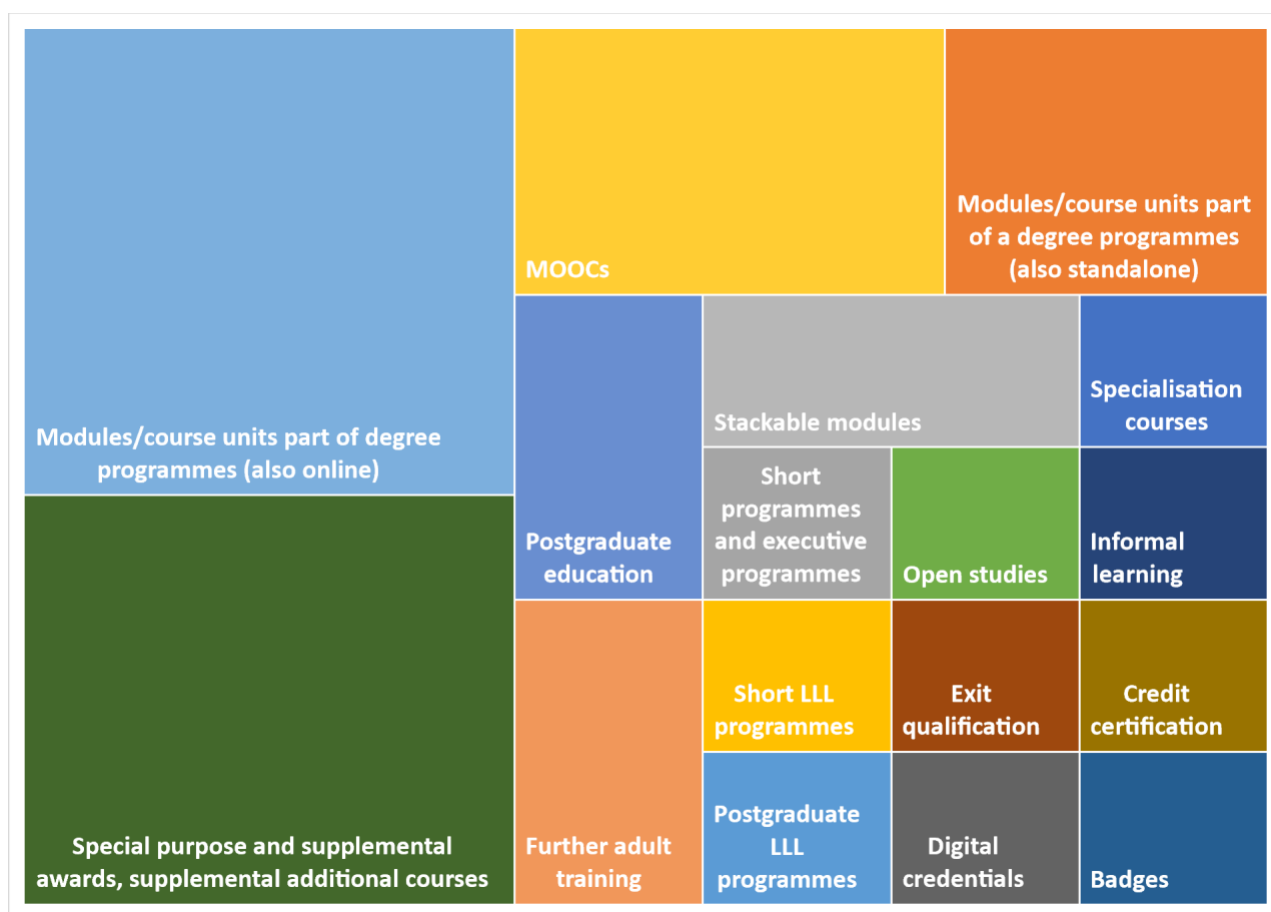
Figure 1: Countries that offer or are developing micro-credentials



3.1.1 Typology of micro-credentials offered or recognised by higher education institutions

When asked about examples of micro-credentials offered or recognised by HEIs at national level, respondents most often mentioned modules/course units taken as a part of a degree programme, that can be delivered both in presence and online, and special purpose and supplemental awards, supplemental additional courses. Micro-credentials are also described as MOOCs or modular learning units that can be called “micro-degrees”. Some countries offer courses required for practising a specific profession (e.g., certificate in nursing or courses required for practising the profession of teacher).

Figure 2: Examples of micro-credentials offered/recognised by HEIs



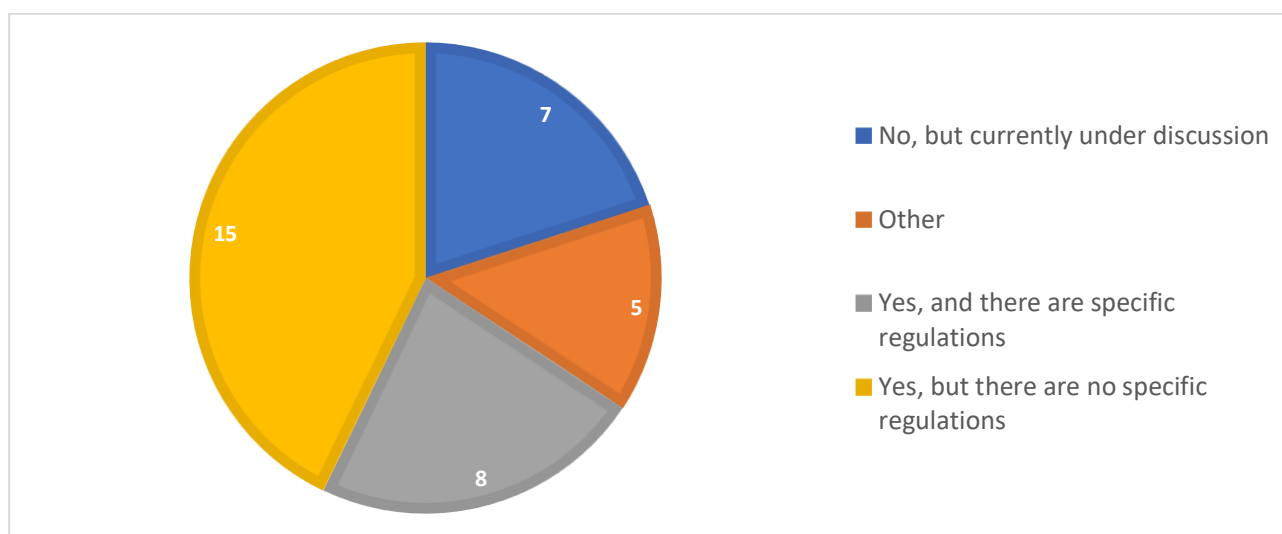
The definition of micro-credentials is a key point and data collected confirms that the meaning assigned to micro-credentials varies greatly across the surveyed countries.

It is also interesting to note that some respondents stressed the role of strategic partnerships with external stakeholders, as well as their participation in European University Alliances and European University networks as relevant elements for the development and delivery of micro-credentials.

3.2 Regulation of micro-credentials at national level

National legislation allows for the provision of micro-credentials in 23 countries. Among them, 8 reported that there are specific regulations concerning micro-credentials and 15 that there is no such national legislation.

Figure 3: Micro-credentials regulation at national level



In 7 countries the topic is gaining momentum and the relevant stakeholders are discussing how to regulate micro-credentials. Only one respondent stated that institutions should not offer such learning experiences.

Answers to this question show a great variety of approaches and the richness of national experiences in the EHEA.

In the majority of EHEA countries the national legislation allows for the provision of micro-credentials, but without a specific regulation.

3.2.1 Legislation allowing for provision of micro-credentials, but without specific regulations

15 countries out of 34 answered that legislation allows the provision of micro-credentials, but that there is no specific legislation.

In a nutshell, in these countries micro-credentials are not explicitly regulated or mentioned by this specific term in legislation. However, national legislation does not prevent HEIs from including micro-credentials in their offerings either.

According to the answers received it is possible to summarise the qualifications that fall in the MICROBOL definition of micro-credentials, in countries where they are not explicitly regulated, in 4 main typologies:

- **RPL** (of non-formal learning), for entrance into a full degree programme.
- **Recognition of credits obtained in the framework of any credentials** (including micro-credentials) awarded upon completion of any form of education provided by a recognised HEI or another authorised awarding body, or recognition of credits from other non-HE providers, as long as the recognising HEI ensures high educational quality.
- **Modular units/single courses within a study programme**, with the possibility to provide a final certificate. These modular units can be seen as short pieces of learning. Two countries

reported that the law states what is the information that should be given in the certificate (workload, assessment/evaluation of learning outcomes, etc.). Two countries reported that the higher education programmes are course-based. In one case an individual certificate after completion of each course is foreseen, while the second country reported that a course can be delivered at different levels but examined at a certain level according to level-dependent learning outcomes criteria. In both cases, such HE courses are micro-credentials according to the MICROBOL definition.

- **LLL, further and adult education, general postgraduate education, continuing education and specialisation programmes** that can be regulated or not regulated (but in any case, subject to institutional accreditation). Even in the cases where such qualifications are not regulated, there is anyway the possibility to assign them a level in the NQF, to express the workload in ECTS, to assign a grade, etc. In other cases, the provision of such certificates is strongly regulated, and information should be provided with a course syllabus, number of ECTS, entry requirements, the way the learning outcomes have been assessed, etc. Two countries mentioned in this category professional courses such as teacher training courses.

One country also reported that as autonomous institutions, national HEIs in the country do not require legislation to provide micro-credentials, but they must be subject to institutional validation and national QA procedures and general guidelines. In this country the national QA Agency is currently working on specific guidelines for micro-credentials.

3.2.2 EHEA countries with specific regulation on micro-credentials

Among countries that reported having specific regulations on micro-credentials, two highlighted the distinction between degree and award. In one case the award is the title of certification of learning achieved through courses, which do not have the required number of credits at the specific National NQF level to be considered as a full qualification.

In the other case micro-credentials (while not necessarily called as such) are already included in the NFQ in the form of non-Major award types (e.g., Supplemental, Special Purpose).

Three countries highlighted regulations respectively on adult education and LLL. In such systems there is the possibility to organise postgraduate training and continuous professional development programmes, leading to a certificate that certifies the professional competences specific to the programme. In one country the difference with other programmes is also in the profile of participants, who do not have the status of students.

Furthermore, HEIs can organise various forms of informal learning, such as courses, summer and winter universities, schools, workshops and the like. Upon completion of the appropriate form of non-formal learning, a certificate shall be issued.

One country reported that in the national system there are 3 different elements as possibly corresponding to the MICROBOL definition of micro-credentials:

1. A course unit within the framework of adult higher education, sanctioned by a certificate of successful completion, a document which, without conferring an academic degree, may award credits and attests to the attainment of the learning outcomes of the course unit.
2. A course unit followed in single modules delivered by HEIs. It cannot exceed 30 credits and is an *a priori* part of a 60-credit programme. This could be either in full-time higher education, or in course units delivered in the framework of single modules.
3. “Continuing Education” programmes, aiming to update the knowledge of graduates, to perfect and specialise their knowledge and skills (logic of reintegration or professional reorientation). Successful completion of these studies may lead to the award of titles/qualifications, certificates (from universities, university colleges or art colleges) or certificate of successful completion (from adult higher education) depending on their content and status (min. 10 credits).

Another country reported that the recognition of extra-curricular prior learning is regulated. Furthermore, there are recognised qualifications referenced to the NQF that are to be defined on the basis of competence sets specifically related to them. This is being increasingly developed and is not fully implemented for any kind of degree yet.

In two countries there is explicit reference to the use of such credentials in the context of the social development of the country and of the freedom to choose one’s professional future.

3.2.3 Countries without specific regulation, but currently under discussion

One country that gave this answer pointed out that this is currently under discussion because it is discussed at EHEA level, while in another country the concept of LLL is being developed, where it is envisaged to develop mechanisms for the recognition of learning outcomes of all types, including micro-credentials. In a third country the discussion is at the very beginning and there is the need to address a whole spectrum of questions such as recognition, QA and QF.

Common definition is one key point, also because different definitions are often used in other ways outside the EHEA. One country highlighted as crucial the role of the European University Association involving universities in the country in the national development of micro-credentials.

Another country reported that different stakeholders at national level have already been appointed to work closely on this with European peers.

3.2.4 No and countries should not provide such credentials

Only one country gave this answer, explaining that short learning courses with partial qualification are already provided by many institutions but these courses do not fit in the definition of micro-credentials, and that further changes in legislation are necessary to truly incorporate the micro-credentials in the education system in the country. According to the comment provided, micro-credentials should be incorporated into legislation on LLL, but as the QA is essential for trust and

transparency of micro-credentials, it would also be necessary to integrate such provisions into regulation on QA in higher education.

3.2.5 Other

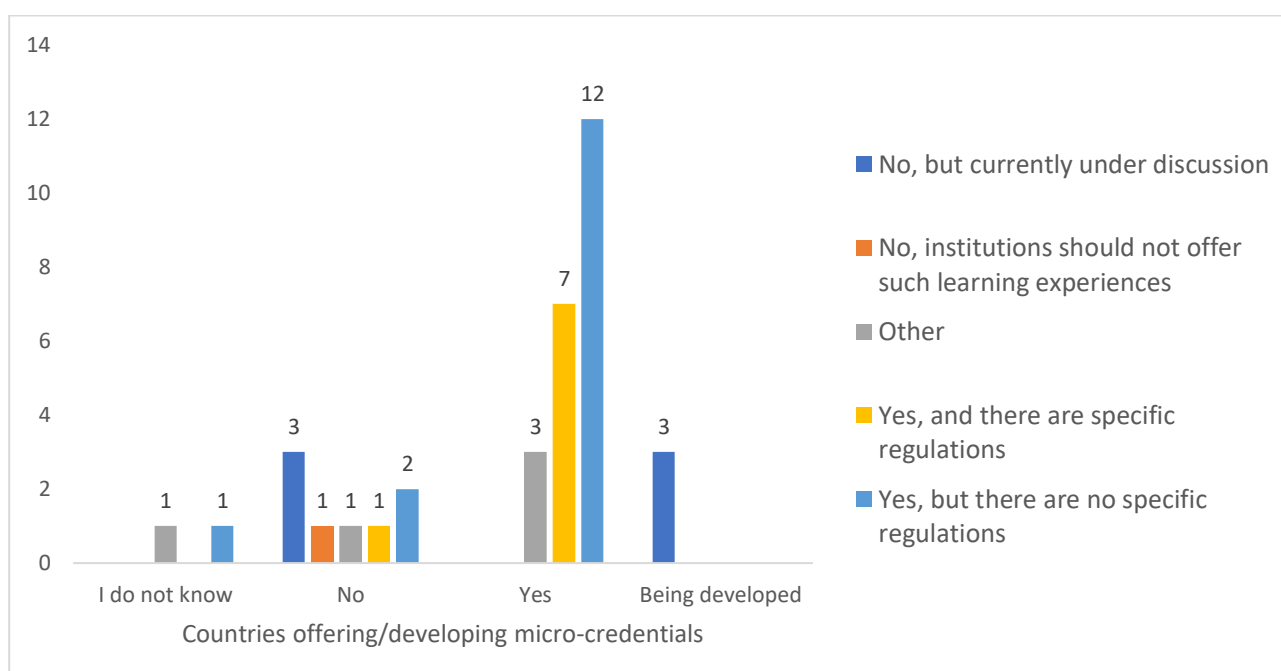
Five countries do not fall into any of the categories mentioned above. Looking at their comments, one country reported that there are no provisions in the field. Three countries reported that they have LLL provision, and that if we consider this category, similar courses have already been active for a long time, and there is a framework in place for them. In one case the legislation is thus open to micro-credentials, whereas in another case it is reported that similar credentials do not refer to NQF and to ECTS, and regarding recognition HEIs are allowed to recognise such courses according to the national legislation and international regulations

3.2.6 Relationship between national legislation and development of micro-credentials

Performing the cross-analysis of the information collected by the countries answering the survey, data shows that not all countries offering micro-credentials have national legislation addressing the issue and, vice versa, there are countries that offer such learning experiences, while the discussion is still ongoing on the legislation.

More in detail, among the countries that do not offer micro-credentials, national legislation allows HEIs to offer professional development courses leading to the certification of the acquired competences. What’s more, national legislation leaves the possibility to provide “non-regulated programmes” linked to the NQF and study modules or courses upon completion of which the institution shall issue a certificate. It is also interesting to note that in some that do not offer micro-credentials, their regulation is under discussion.

Figure 4: Micro-credentials offered/being developed and national legislation (cross analysis)

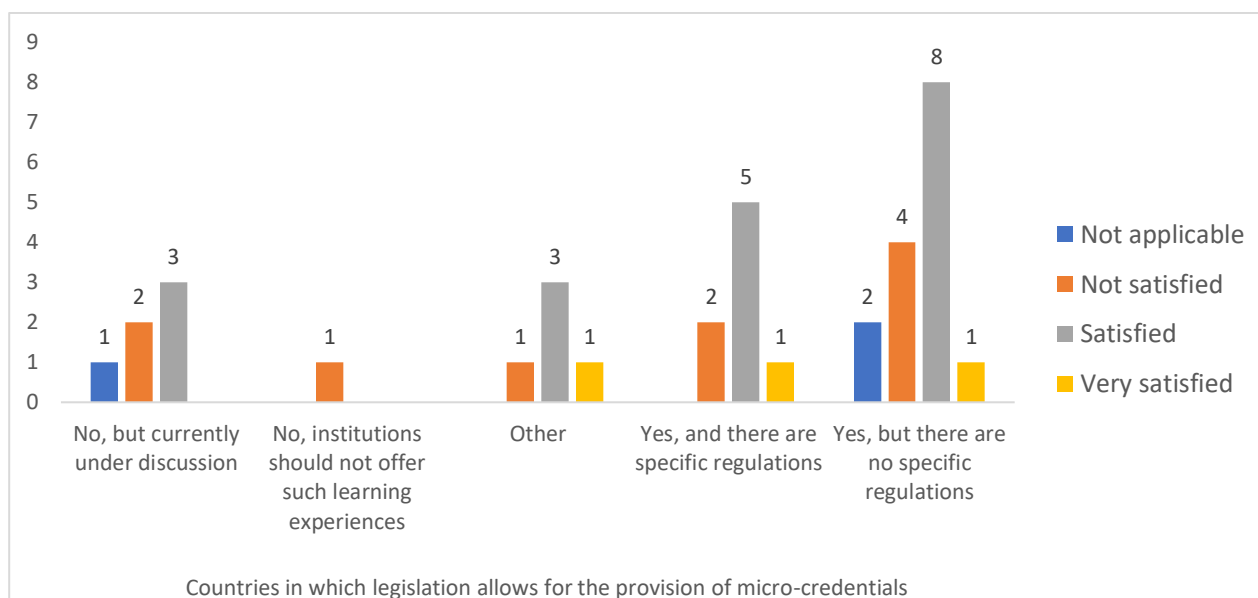


Referring to the countries that offer micro-credentials, the majority of respondents (12) reported that national legislation allows for their provision but there are no specific regulations, while in seven countries they are specifically regulated. Three countries (choosing “Other”) specified that the discussion is still ongoing on both the legislation and the application of the Bologna tools.

3.2.7 Satisfaction regarding the current uptake and acceptance of micro-credentials in national legislation

Concerning the legislation at national level, the level of satisfaction with the work done so far was also explored.

Figure 5: Regulation of micro-credentials and satisfaction with the current uptake of micro-credentials (cross analysis)



In this light, it is relevant to notice that the majority of both the countries that have and are discussing about regulations on micro-credentials reported their appreciation for the increasing national interest and action in integrating such learning experiences into national legislation and funding system and two respondents stated that are very satisfied with the work done. Among the remaining countries, four reported little interest in this matter and two that this is not a national priority at the moment. The country which said that institutions should not offer micro-credentials is not satisfied with the little interest shown in investigating this issue further.

3.2.8 Exchange of practices and need for support

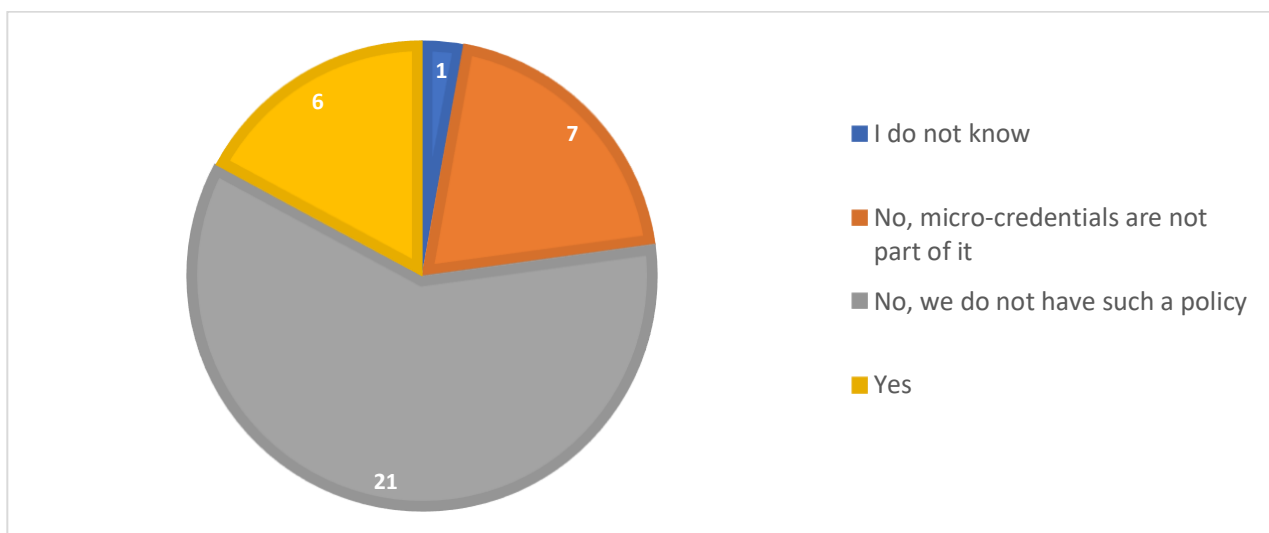
11 countries expressed interest in receiving support, regardless of the presence of legislation in the field. The request of support targets the exchange of practices, on different national experiences and on contribution from international experts in the field. One country stressed the link to the labour market and the need for cooperation on contents of micro-credentials, but also on joint tools in the field. Peer support was also mentioned, and the great importance of collecting comparative

experiences for further enhancement of micro-credentials and their implementation into the education system. One country also referred to the usefulness of having examples from the VET and sectors different from the higher education one. Webinars were also mentioned as a useful tool. One country also raised the need for public awareness about micro-credentials, as a necessary step for establishing truly trustworthy functional systems.

3.2.9 Micro-credentials and digitalisation policies

Analysing the integration of micro-credentials into national policy on digitalisation of credentials it emerged that only 6 countries gave a positive answer to this question, whereas 7 countries reported that micro-credentials are not part of digitalisation policies. It is interesting to note that data shows that 21 out of 34 countries do not have any policies on digitalisation.

Figure 6: Integration of micro-credentials into the digitalisation policies



One country reported the provision of financial support to HEIs for the development of e-portfolios with a specific platform, which allows learners to publish their micro-credential badges.

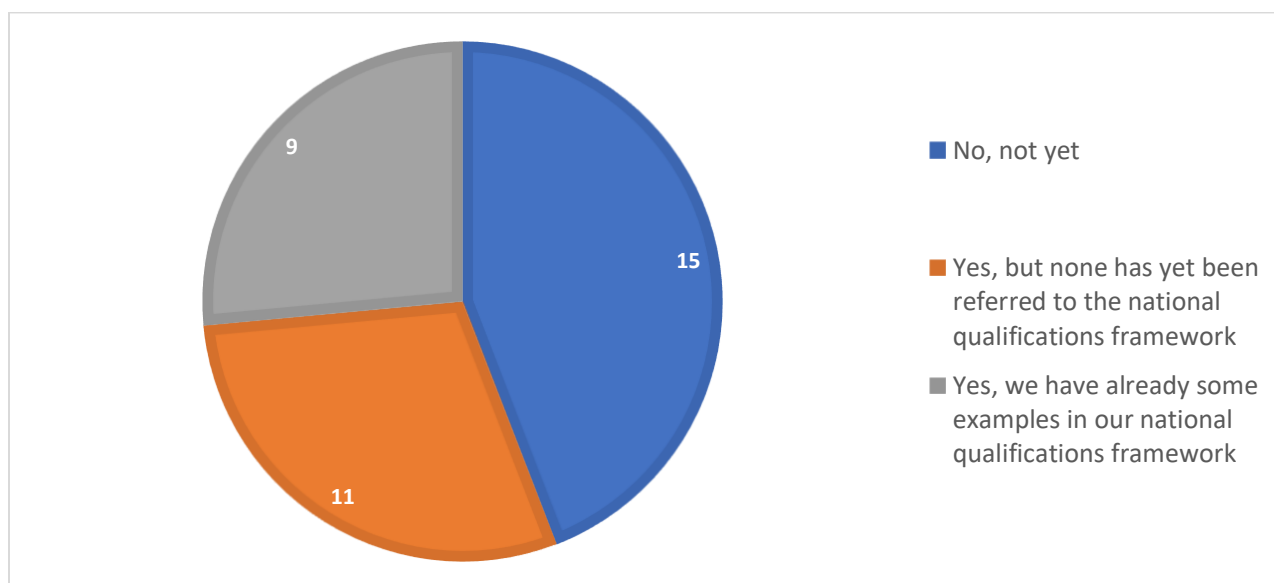
4 Section 2 – Applying Bologna tools to micro-credentials

In this section the report analyses the link between Bologna tools (QA, QF and ECTS, and recognition) and micro-credentials. More precisely, the report showcases the state of play of the use of Bologna tools in the field of micro-credentials, highlighting the areas where micro-credentials are already covered by the Bologna tools and the areas where there is room for further improvement.

4.1 National qualifications framework and ECTS

Data shows that the majority of countries **do not have micro-credentials referred to the NQF**. Among these countries, 7 reported the need for discussion on the topic at national level, discussion and debate that in some of these countries is already started or is about to start. This need for discussion in one country is due to the fact the this is a new topic, not regulated by the current legislation. Another country reported that micro-credentials are currently not part of the NQF, and there is no common understanding about them. It is under discussion if and how micro-credentials could and should be integrated. One country also raised the need for more discussion with HEIs on this topic. Two other countries reported that currently the NQF only includes full degrees, and it is not designed in order to cover other credentials. One country reported that there are some short learning courses which lead to the partial qualifications. Furthermore, two other countries reported that they are currently shaping/revising their NQF.

Figure 7: National qualifications framework open to micro-credentials



In 11 countries the **NQF is open to micro-credentials**, and according to answers micro-credentials could be referred to any level (two countries), at level 5, 6 and 7 in one country and only to level 6 in another country. One country also reported that it is planning to foster LLL and adult education and within this will facilitate micro-credentials in the near future (2021-2027 period). Three countries made reference to the higher education sector, with different nuances: in one country micro-credentials awarded by HEIs can be referred to the QF. In a second country HEIs can organise

the study process in modules in the framework of whole study programmes: in this case it is the full degree that it is referred to the QF, and the single module can indirectly take the level in the QF (level that it is not explicitly assigned to the single course). A third country explained that by law the single module/course within a full degree in higher education should be referenced to a specific QF level. So, in theory if HEIs awarded a stand-alone certificate for the single course this has a QF level, but this is not yet implemented in practice. One country reported that the full potential of QF in relation to micro-credentials has not yet been explored/used. In one case, it was highlighted that although the NQF is open to micro-credentials, none has yet been referred.

9 countries reported already having **some examples of micro-credentials referred to their QF**. Five countries provided explicit information on the levels to which micro-credentials are referred to, with quite a different landscape: two countries have micro-credentials referred from level 1 to 7 of the EQF, one other from level 2 to 8, one country from level 2 to 7, and the fourth from level 5 to 8. One additional country reported having micro-credentials awarded at the level of higher education. Furthermore, 3 countries commented on the fact that it is easier to assign a level if the micro-credential is part of a larger academic/professional qualification: in other terms it is the larger qualification that is referenced to the QF, and the micro-credential takes the level from the larger qualification of which it is part. In one country it is not possible to assign a level to micro-credentials as such, if they are not part of a larger qualification, whereas in the second country it is possible but very costly. So, in this case the QF is “indirectly” open to micro-credentials, that constitute a smaller unit of learning or “set of competences” part of a larger qualification.

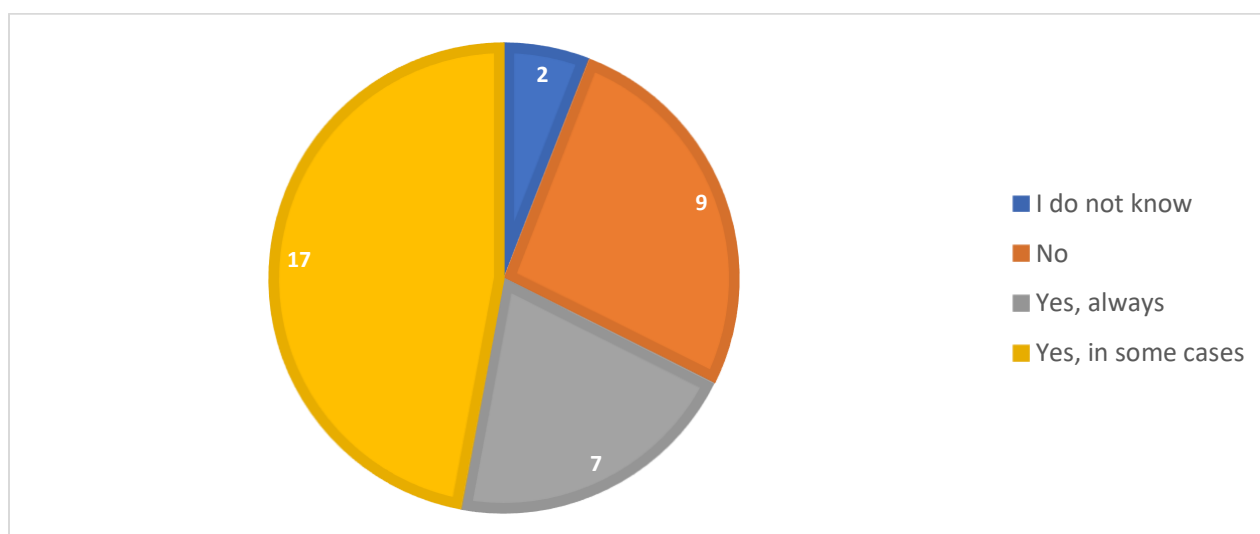
No particular distinction between professional and academic qualifications is present in this case. One country reported that it has referred some non-formal qualifications to the NQF from the VET and Adult Learning sector, in order to support the transparency of education systems both at the national and the European level.

4.1.1 Micro-credentials expressed in ECTS

The majority of countries have micro-credentials expressed in ECTS in some cases. Two reported that there is not a defined range of ECTS at national level for micro-credentials, whereas one other reported that workload can be expressed in hours (for instance 600-1400 hours), and two other countries reported a difference between the professional sector, where the workload can be expressed in hours but not in ECTS and not referred to the QF (but the ECTS can be calculated starting from the hours), whereas in the higher education sector the single unit/module of an academic degree can be expressed in ECTS.

Micro-credentials can have a number of assigned and/or estimated ECTS that varies in different countries.

Figure 8: Micro-credentials expressed in ECTS



Here are the different ranges according to answers provided:

- 2-4-6 ECTS
- 4-6 ECTS
- Usually less than 10 ECTS
- Minimum 10 ECTS
- 3-20 ECTS (module/single course within a full degree)
- 3-25 ECTS
- 5-25 ECTS (including micro-masters for which 15 or even up to 25 ECTS credits can be recognised)
- 20-50 ECTS
- 1-60 ECTS
- Maximum 30 ECTS
- Micro-credentials awarded by HEIs mainly have 13-30 ECTS, and less frequently 0-6 ECTS. Continuing education usually has 10 ECTS.

In the majority of countries there is not a defined range of ECTS for micro-credentials. One country reported that the range of hours is fixed only for certain courses, whereas others are under the autonomy of institutions. Three countries are discussing the range for ECTS of micro-credentials. One country also commented on the need for stackability of micro-credentials.

A second group composed of 9 countries reported that they **do not use ECTS for micro-credentials**. The reasons vary from the fact that there is no legal basis for this to a changing landscape where micro-credentials are under discussion but there is not yet enough ground to express them in ECTS.

One country also reported that HEIs at the end of e-learning programme award ECVET instead of ECTS.

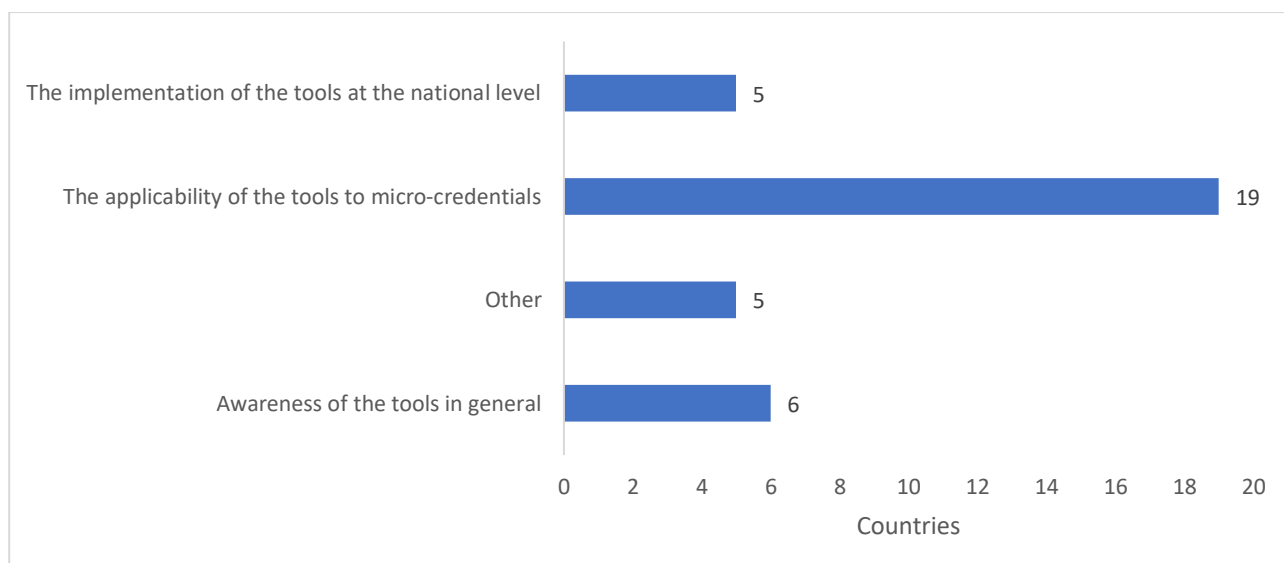
In the third group of countries **micro-credentials are always expressed in ECTS** or other credit systems (including European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training, ECVET), and the range of ECTS varies in the following ranges:

- 1 to 5 ECTS;
- 3 to 6 ECTS;
- from 3 to 36 ECTS;
- 7.5 credits, 15 and 30 credits (for single courses within a full study programme in HE);
- 20 - 30 ECTS;
- 2-70 ECTS;
- 6-119 ECTS;
- from less than 180 to less than 30 ECTS.

4.1.2 Biggest challenge in applying Bologna tools to micro-credentials

For the majority of countries, the biggest challenge is the applicability of the tools to micro-credentials, but also the implementation at national level and the awareness of the tools in general still represents a challenge, even if for a smaller group of countries. 5 countries gave the answer “Other”, focusing in their comments on the need for common understanding and terminology regarding micro-credentials (two countries). One country also highlighted the costs and administrative burden. Another remark is on the fact that such tools should apply first and foremost to the full degrees, and then may be applied to micro-credentials.

Figure 9: Biggest challenges in applying Bologna Key Commitments to micro-credentials



Another comment stresses that micro-credentials are already offered by a broad range of online, commercial etc. providers without the use of Bologna tools (ECTS, NQF, QA, etc.) and employers/individuals appear to accept these. So, there is a challenge in moving from this situation to a more “regulated” environment as exists for other types of qualifications/credentials.

Another comment highlights that the problem does not lie in the tools but rather in the cooperation to be developed in the field of micro-credentials between the different providers of education, vocational training and enterprises. Furthermore, a multi-operator system does not protect mechanisms of competition to the detriment of the beneficiaries. Another challenge is that the suggested link with NQFs, and more particularly an eventual positioning of these micro-credentials, raises questions insofar as the nature, organisation and state of development of these frameworks are subject to great disparities at European level.

4.1.3 Comments regarding the Bologna tools like ECTS and QFs in relation to micro-credentials (e.g., design, use)

Regarding the application of ECTS and QF to micro-credentials, a number of comments are shared by respondents to the survey.

The main themes are:

- A point raised is the importance of using ECTS correctly to express both the volume of work needed and the learning outcomes capturing the effort, which is needed, and the learning outcomes achieved. There is a need for further definition and examples and how this would align to NQFs;
- A point raised is the fact that the term micro-credential refers both to the learning experience and to the qualifications awarded, whereas the QF refers to qualifications. Is it absolutely necessary to link, in the definition of MCs, the learning experience and qualification, or is it possible to assess the number of ECTS systematically for each qualification? The learning experience could have a different workload but the qualification could be referred to the same level.
- There is the need to see how this link between micro-credentials both as learning experience and as a qualification, and the QF would work in practice. A micro-credential certificate or “supplement” should indicate learning outcomes, ISCED field, level, mode of delivery/participation, admission requirements, assessment method, QA, stackability in regular degree programme, supervision and identity verification during assessment, and the fact that comparability and transparency on an international level is important in this respect.
- A dedicated QF for micro-credentials would not be useful. Qualifications that are assigned to the NQF should have meaningful sizes. Micro-credentials which are too small could be very useful for personal and professional development but do not necessarily need to be

assigned to the QF. To some, the added value of assigning such small courses to the NQF is not obvious and might even confuse the beneficiaries and learners.

- Micro-credentials can by no means replace the traditional BA, MA or PhD programmes, and may be offered by HEIs in addition to these full degrees adding to the institutional profile for upskilling or further education in a very specific field of knowledge and competence.
- A challenge could exist when the two frameworks (EQF-LLL and QF-EHEA) are not integrated on a national level. In this case higher education micro-credentials will only belong to a cycle. How will the micro-credentials within this framework relate to the whole discussion of level 5 and 6 in EQF/NQFs (8 levels)? That is, to LLL-NQFs?
- A key challenge is adopting the Common Framework relating to workload and credits on one side, and on the other to leave enough flexibility in definitions (including number of ECTS for countries to decide).

Even if this question is in the section dedicated to ECTS and QFs, there are a number of comments that do not necessarily refer only to these tools, starting from the assumption that micro-credentials are by default delivered online/remotely, but that is not always necessarily the case. A couple of comments focus on the need for more cooperation between the different actors, cooperation that now is limited (silo-fashion). Tools are implemented, and the challenge is in explaining clearly to the stakeholders how they are to be used in the new context. A challenge is that Bologna tools may provide a useful framework but could also perhaps appear over-complex for the type of programmes covered by the term 'micro-credentials', and some tools are set up in a way that it can be difficult to be responsive to the timescales and needs of industries looking for micro-credentials. One country reported the use of validation and RPL by HEIs in the field of recognition of micro-credentials, and two other countries reported as a challenge the QA of micro-credentials and the application of ESG standards to higher education and non-higher education providers.

4.2 Recognition

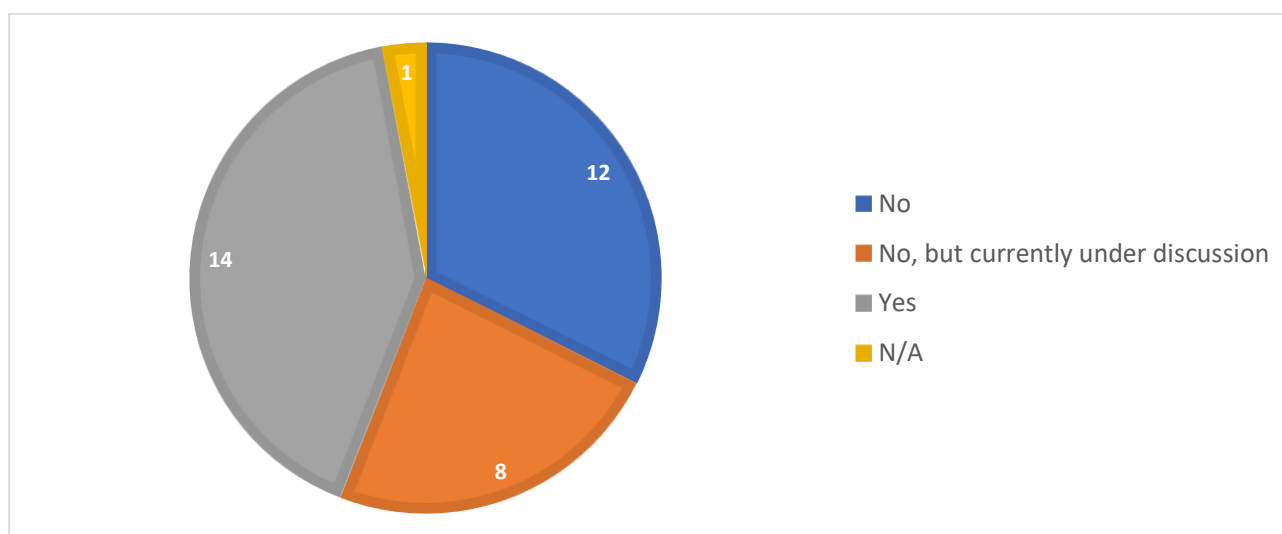
4.2.1 Implementation of policies and/or practices related to the recognition of micro-credentials

The majority of countries (14) have implemented policies related to the recognition of micro-credentials, followed by countries that do not have such policies (12), and then a group of countries (8) where these topics are currently under discussion. Countries belonging to the first two groups shared a number of comments and information that are reported below.

4.2.1.1 *Countries with policies and practices related to the recognition of micro-credentials*

Looking at the comments, some countries which provided more information, refer to the use of RPL by HEIs in order to recognise micro-credentials awarded by non-formal providers.

Figure 10: Countries implementing policies related to the recognition of micro-credentials



One country refers to Validation of Prior Learning (VPL) as a route to achieve a formal qualification or credits. In this case VPL arrangements can be offered by a public or private organisation acting as a recognised validation body under four conditions:

- the competences they assess are part of a recognised professional qualification;
- the assessment tools they use are developed in line with the standards for VPL;
- the organisations have a quality label at the organisational level;
- the validation bodies accept regular quality control.

A successful assessment of competences leads to a full professional qualification certificate

Another country underlines that RPL is always made on a case-by-case basis and cannot be generalised for non-formal micro-credentials as such.

In another country as long as single courses are delivered by HEIs as part of a full study programme, they can be recognised. In the same perspective in another country HEIs can award micro-credentials as LLL certificates in the framework of a bigger degree, but in this case they need a specific accreditation by the QA Agency, and no request has been submitted yet.

One country reported that it is planning to have policy for the recognition of micro-credentials from 2021 onwards in the strategic plan for higher education, and it is planning to adopt the European approach to micro-credentials.

One country referred to the use of the criteria contained in the “Practitioners guide for recognition-of e-learning”², outcome of the Erasmus+ e-VALUATE project, for international students, and they have not yet worked on the application of these instruments for student mobility inside the country across the educational sector.

² <https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2020-08/practitioners-guide-for-recognition-of-e-learning.pdf>

In one country the ENIC-NARIC centre issues comparability statements for qualifications corresponding to a learning programme of a minimum of 200 hours. From 200 hours, comparability statements can be issued, based on the same criteria as other degrees. The ENIC-NARIC centre takes into account the criteria indicated in the MICROBOL survey and the recognition of qualifications by the educational system of the country where they have been issued.

4.2.1.2 Countries without policies and practices related to the recognition of micro-credentials

Looking at countries that do not have specific policies for recognition of micro-credentials, one country reported that it is possible to recognise credits obtained in the framework of training leading to a micro-credential. In the framework of the current legislation, in fact, it is possible to recognise micro-credentials awarded by recognised HEIs or other authorised awarding bodies. A student has the right to have the achieved ECTS credits recognised in accordance with the regulations laid down in the internal regulation of studies, and this is a basis for recognition of credits obtained in the framework of a “traditional” study programme, credentials obtained after completion of part of the programme, short-cycle degrees and any other credentials (including micro-credentials) awarded upon completion of any form of education provided by a recognised HEI or another authorised awarding body. In the last 3 cases an applicant first has to be admitted to a higher education programme and then the earned credits can be recognised towards the study programme. Such an approach is promoted by the national ENIC-NARIC centre and such advice is also given to those who contact the ENIC-NARIC centre with questions concerning recognition of qualifications not falling under the category of traditional degrees.

4.2.2 Elements considered relevant in the recognition process

Countries were also asked to indicate whether the elements listed below are considered relevant in the recognition process:

- Quality of the study programme
- Verification of the certificate
- Level of the study programme
- Learning outcomes
- Workload
- Assessment procedures
- Identification of the participant

19 out of 34 countries stated that the proposed options are not applicable and 2 countries that they are not relevant.

As summarised in Table 1, among the 14 countries which gave positive answers, 11 take into consideration all the proposed elements, whereas 3 countries only some of them. One country also

specified that learning environment and evaluation results are taken into consideration in the recognition process.

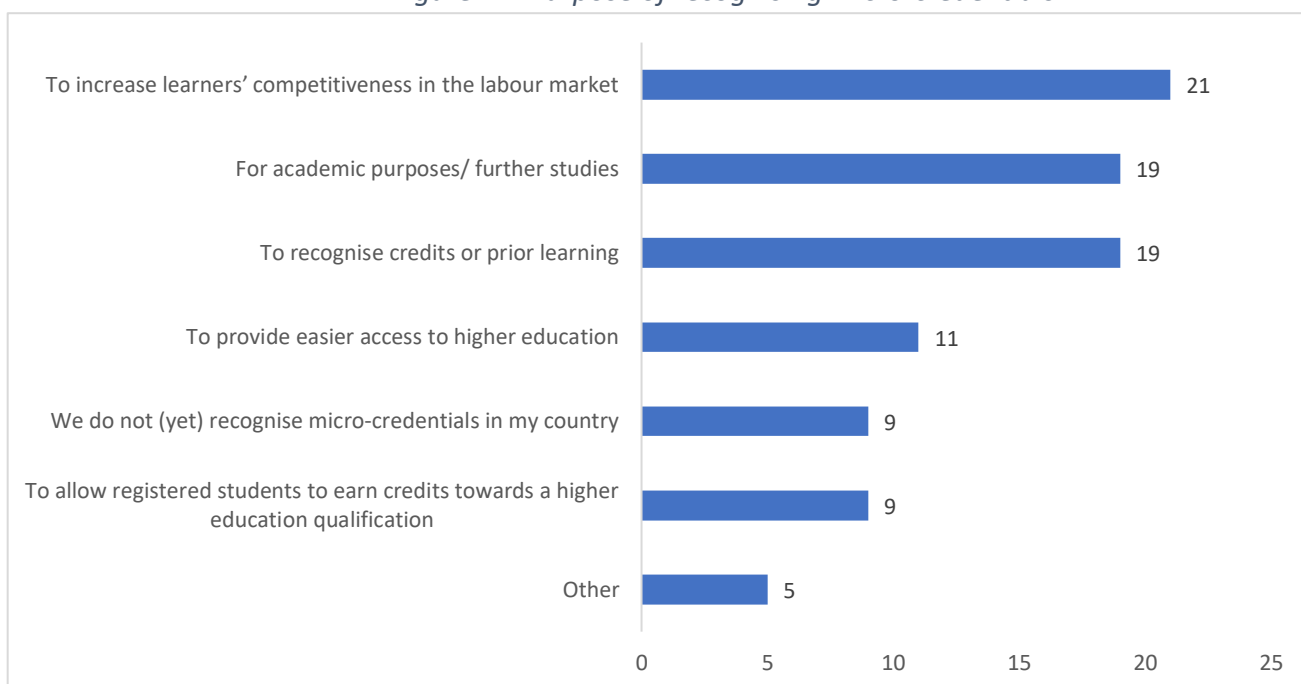
Table 1: Elements considered relevant in the recognition process

Quality of the study programme	Verification of the certificate	Level of the study programme	Learning outcomes	Workload	Assessment procedures	Identification of the participant
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
	+	+		+		
	+	+	+	+	+	
+	-	+	+		+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	+	+	+	+	+	+

4.2.3 Purpose of recognition

Respondents were also asked to describe the purpose for which they recognise micro-credentials. As shown in the bar chart, the vast majority of countries reported that micro-credentials are recognised with the aim of increasing learners’ competitiveness the labour market (21), for academic purposes/further studies (19) and recognising credits or prior learning (19).

Figure 11: Purpose of recognising micro-credentials

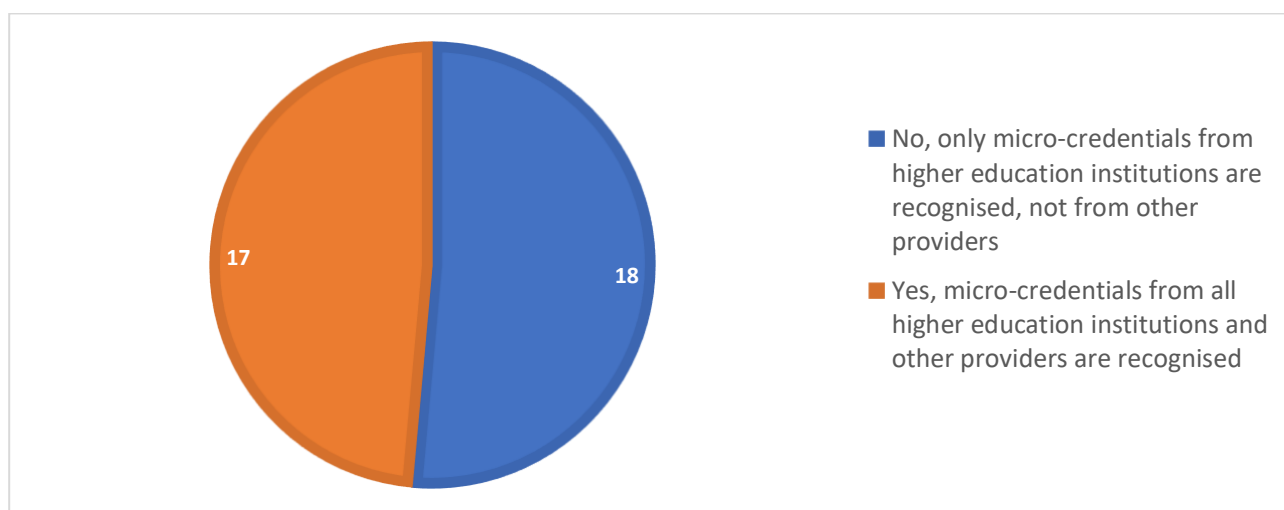


Some countries stated that micro-credentials are recognised to provide easier access to higher education (11) and to allow registered students to earn credits toward a higher education qualification (9). As for the countries whose responses did not fall under the categories mentioned above, they said that micro-credentials can allow for the RPL and that they can only be recognised as part of the limited ECTS of elective courses which students are allowed to take in accredited programmes. In some cases, it was specified that individual institutions, employers or regulatory bodies are responsible for the recognition of micro-credentials and that their policies may differ.

4.2.4 Recognition of micro-credentials offered by providers other than higher education institutions

Referring to the providers of micro-credentials, the picture given by the respondents describes that in almost half of the countries answering the survey, national legislation allows for the recognition of micro-credentials from both HEIs and other providers.

Figure 12: Recognition of micro-credentials offered by non-higher education providers



The number of countries where only micro-credentials offered by HEIs are recognised is slightly higher (18).

Two countries reported that it is possible to recognise micro-credentials from providers other than HEIs, but only up to a maximum number of credits (12 in one country and in the other one-third of the ECTS credits required to complete a degree programme must be earned at the host HEI that issues the degree). Another country reported that HEIs can formally recognise micro-credentials by non-formal providers, but this is not very common. Massive recognition of previous learning delivered by non-HEI providers might be challenged by external QA. Control mechanisms such as validation of learning outcomes via exams would be expected in such cases. One country reported that up to 60% of ECTS credits within a study programme may be replaced by RPL in certified LLL courses provided by HEIs. Another country answered that HEIs may recognise those micro-credentials not coming from the HE sector by using recognition procedures in line with the LRC or RPL, where applicable.

4.2.5 Peer support and exchange of practices

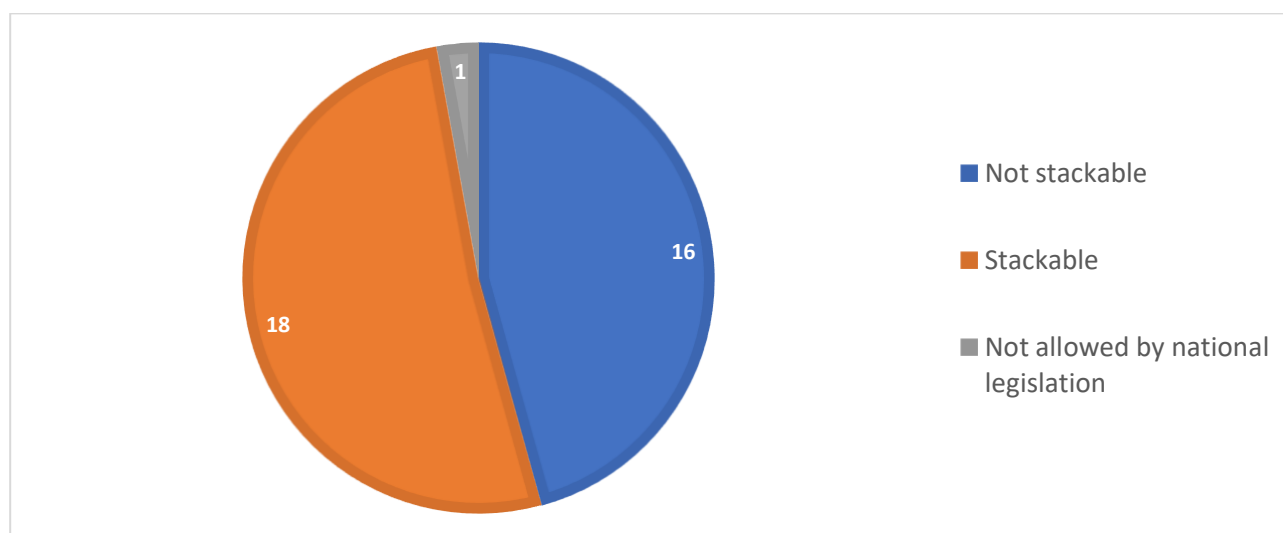
15 countries reported that they would like to have **peer support, exchange of practices and exchange with experts from other countries** in the field of recognition of micro-credentials. They would also like to deepen the discussion about common definition, approach and understanding of micro-credentials for the HE sector across the EHEA countries and get examples of how to integrate micro-credentials into HE.

4.2.6 Stackability of micro-credentials

In the context of this report, stackability means that micro-credentials can be accumulated and grouped over time, building into a larger, more recognisable credential³.

Looking at the question whether HEIs recognise micro-credentials as part of a normal degree programme, or, in other words, if learners can accumulate them to build up to a degree within higher education, the scenario is quite balanced with 18 countries giving a positive answer and 16 a negative one. One country stated that national legislation does not allow HEIs to recognise micro-credentials as part of a non-stackable degree programme. Analysing the additional comments provided by countries that gave a negative answer, in 5 cases this is due to the fact that currently it is not possible at all to recognise micro-credentials in a degree programme according to the national legislation. In one country however discussion is in progress, and in another country micro-credentials can give only professional rights and cannot be recognised for further study.

Figure 13: Legislation allowing for stackable micro-credentials



But in the majority of cases (8 countries) it is possible to recognise micro-credentials in a full degree programme, where the term “micro-credential” means a single course, professional knowledge and

³ Kazin, C. J. and Clerkin, K. M., 2018, *The potentials and limitations of micro-credentials*, Service Members opportunity Colleges, http://supportsystem.livehelpnow.net/resources/23351/Potential%20and%20Limitations%20of%20Microcredentials%20FINAL_SEPT%202018.pdf p. 7 (accessed 28/12/2020).

skills, competences gained in a non-formal context, etc. One country reported that stackability is only possible for competence sets, which are specifically related to a degree to be awarded on the basis of a coherent learning path; RPL might be another way of recognition as long as learning outcomes match with the learning outcome-based degree. In addition, it is possible when the study programme allows the integration of ECTS obtained through MOOCs.

As reported for some countries in the previous paragraph, there could be some limitations in the maximum number of credits that can be recognised. In all these cases stacking separate modules/micro-credentials is not currently a legal path towards attaining a full degree. In other term it is not possible to gain a degree by only “accumulating” micro-credentials.

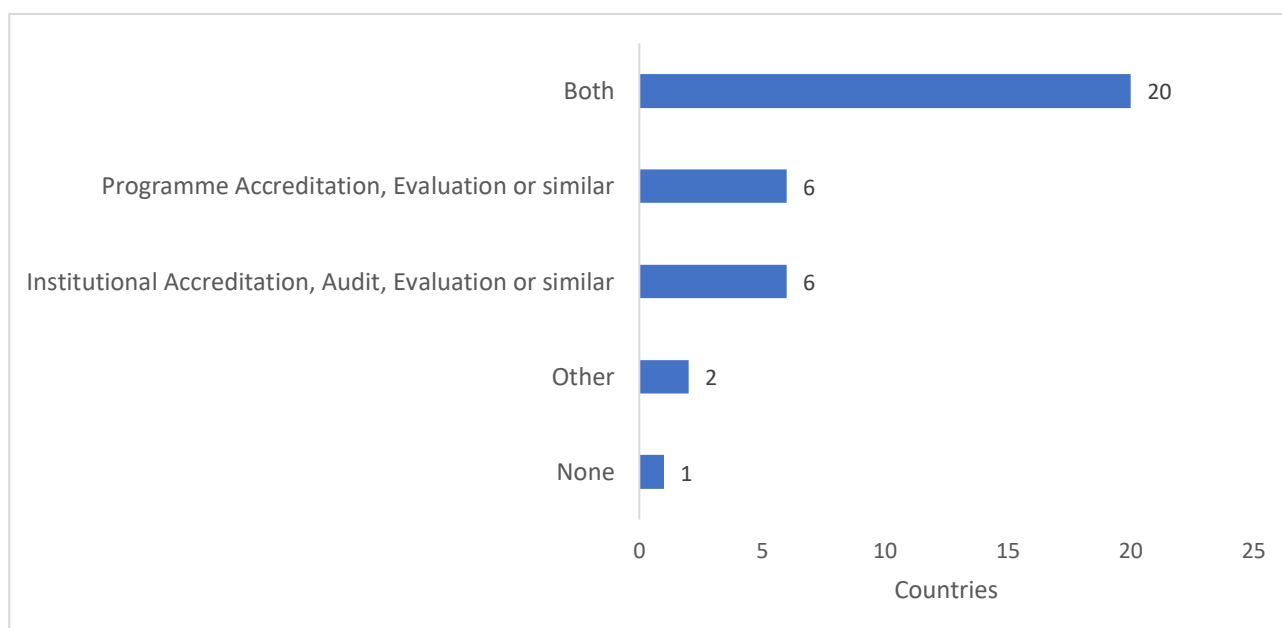
4.3 Quality assurance

When talking about the Bologna tools applied to micro-credentials, a key issue is related to QA. In this light, countries were first asked about the external QA systems they have in place to assure quality of courses offered by HEIs.

4.3.1 External QA systems in place to assure quality of the courses offered by higher education institutions

In general terms, most of the countries (20) monitor the quality of courses through both programme accreditation/evaluation and institutional accreditation or audit. Some countries further specified that the QA system may vary depending on the HEI involved and also that institutions are required to establish an internal QA and/or reporting system.

Figure 14: External quality assurance systems



In six countries QA is monitored either through programme accreditation or institutional accreditation/audit. Two countries selected the option “Other”: one country specified that external

QA is granted through the accreditation of study directions (groups of study programmes), the second country that there are also so-called alternative procedures. These procedures, which are developed independently by the HEIs and which are subject to the same quality requirements as those for programme and system accreditation, are intended to contribute to gaining insights into alternative approaches to external QA. Only one country reported that they do not have any QA systems in place.

4.3.2 National QA system explicitly including or referring to micro-credentials offered by higher education institutions

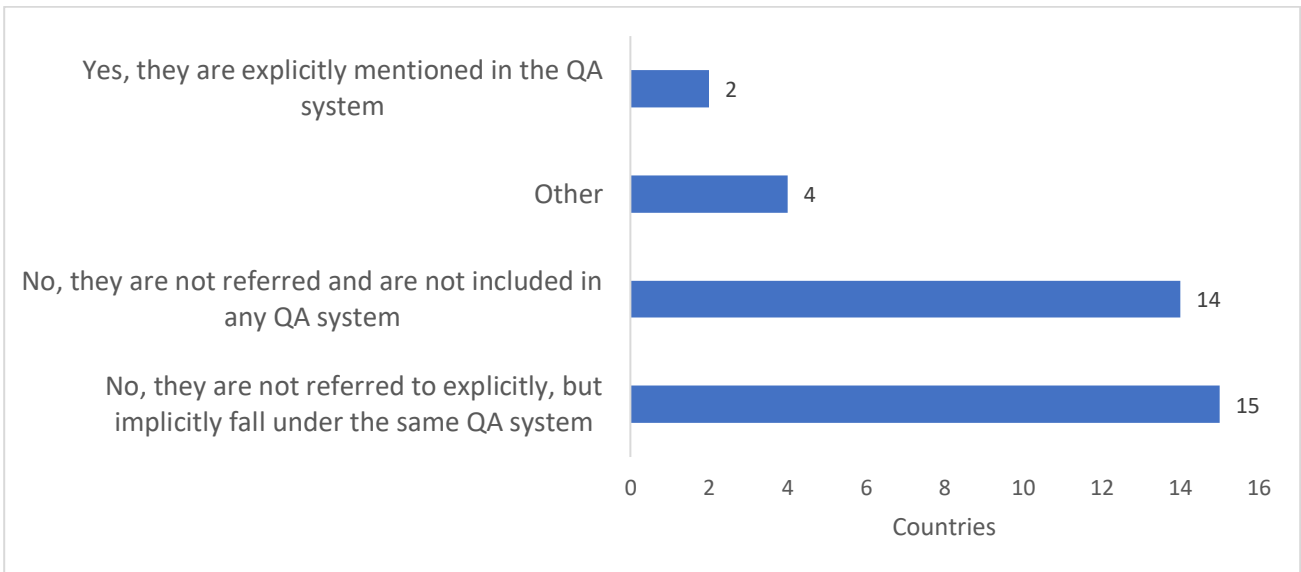
Respondents were also asked to indicate whether their national QA system explicitly includes or refers to micro-credentials offered by HEIs. The majority of countries (15) reported that even if micro-credentials are not explicitly mentioned in the QA system at national level, they implicitly fall under it.

A second group of countries reported that micro-credentials are not included in the QA system. One of these reported a future transition to an institutional evaluation that is intended to bring coherence to all existing quality approaches within institutions, but it would not be realistic to consider that a shift from programme evaluation to institutional evaluation would automatically imply that each institution will focus its attention on the evaluation of the quality of micro-credentials (which are present in variable forms in HEIs' practices).

A smaller group of two countries answered that micro-credentials are included in the current QA system. Of these two countries, one reported that the accreditation of the postgraduate programmes of LLL is performed by any institution for QA which is a member of The European QA Register for Higher Education (EQAR), and in the other country institutions may carry out special programmes of specialisation in the area of higher education for the purpose of LLL with the aim of acquiring professional qualifications or a part of a professional qualification or other qualification.

Looking into comments provided by the 4 countries that answered "Other", in one case micro-credentials are not mentioned but implicitly could fall under the QA system. This is the case also for the second country, where QA can also implicitly include micro-credentials: they are implicitly mentioned in QA standards of institutional accreditation (according to which HEIs are expected to contribute to social development of the country and facilitate LLL), and furthermore the same standards should promote the establishment of quality culture in the institution, that may involve QA of short courses, too. In the third country the "retraining" programmes for adult education are explicitly mentioned. The fourth country reported that micro-credentials are not referred to in the accreditation rules.

Figure 15: Micro-credentials included in the national quality assurance system

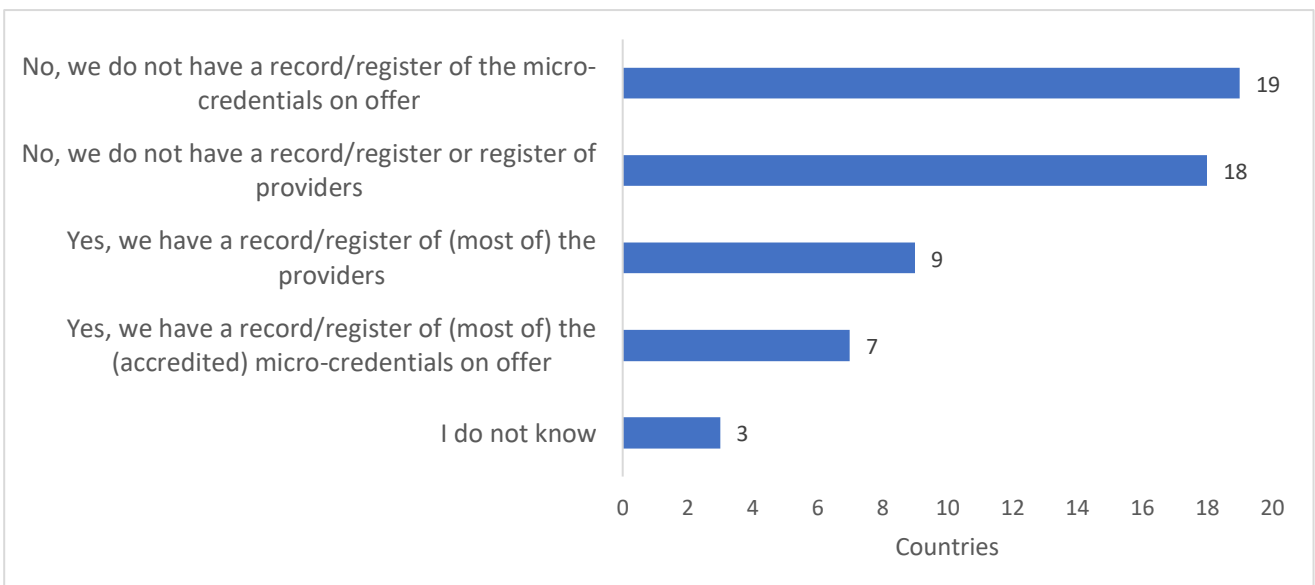


They are only quality assured via accreditation procedures as far as the recognition of micro-credentials by HEIs in the context of study programmes is concerned. Recognition procedures (recognition according to the LRC and RPL) in the context of study programmes are checked in accreditation procedures.

4.3.1 Register of micro-credentials and their providers

Another aspect that was explored by the survey is the information provided about the micro-credentials on offer and about their providers. As shown in the bar chart below, the majority of the countries do not have a record/register of the micro-credentials offered, nor of the providers. Among the 9 countries that declared they have a register of most of the providers, 7 countries also have a register of most of the accredited micro-credentials on offer.

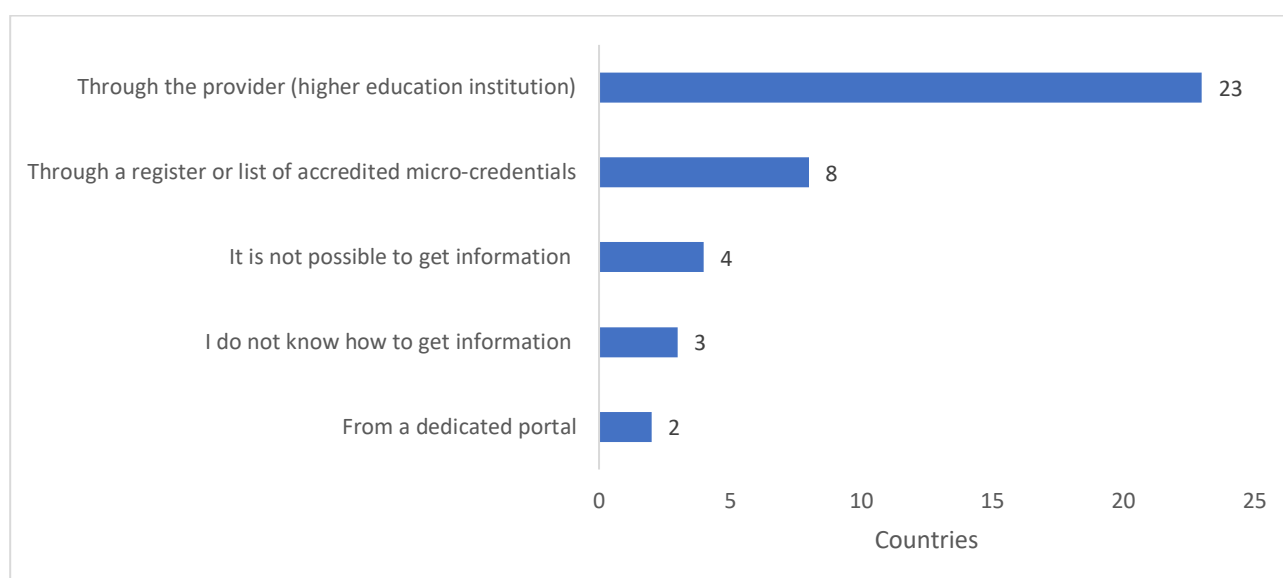
Figure 16: Official record or register of micro-credentials and providers



4.3.2 Sources of information on the QA status of the awarded credential

Analysing the sources of information on the QA status of the awarded credentials, the majority of respondents reported that information on the QA status of the awarded micro-credentials is provided by the provider itself (HEIs). In eight countries it is possible to get information through a register or list of accredited micro-credentials and in two countries from a dedicated portal. It is worth mentioning that in some countries there is more than one way to get information. For instance, the QA status of micro-credentials is described both by the provider and through a list of accredited micro-credentials. In one case, all the three sources of information mentioned in the survey provide data on micro-credentials. Referring to the four countries in which it is not possible to get this information, it is relevant to underline that in three of them micro-credentials are not offered.

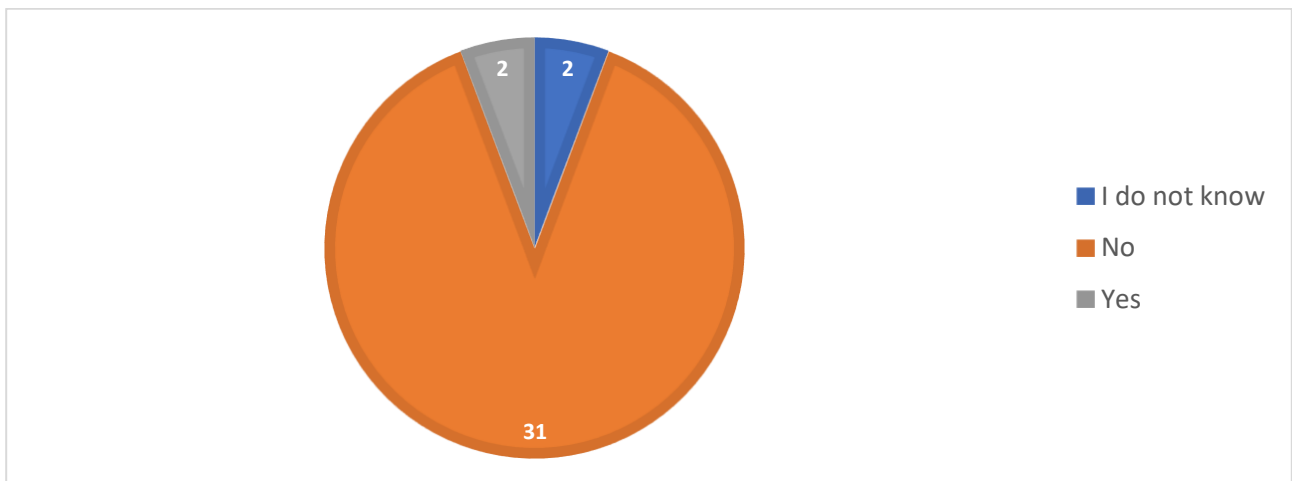
Figure 17: Sources of information on the quality assurance status of the awarded credential



4.3.3 Other policies and/or practices related to the QA of micro-credentials

The majority of countries have not implemented any other policies or practices related to the QA of micro-credentials. Looking at the comments of the two countries that do have policies in the field, one country reported that according to national legislation Vocational Education (VET) is subject to quality control by the Inspectorate of Education. The legislation prescribes the conditions for the certification of professional qualifications by regulating the quality control. The jointly-defined QA framework is aligned with the QA framework of the Inspectorate of Education. Generally, for a policy field or sector this means using the jointly-defined QA framework; creating an objective and neutral inspection service and relevant procedures and lastly organising local quality control at least once every six years. The second country has specific regulations on the accreditation of LLL programme by HEIs.

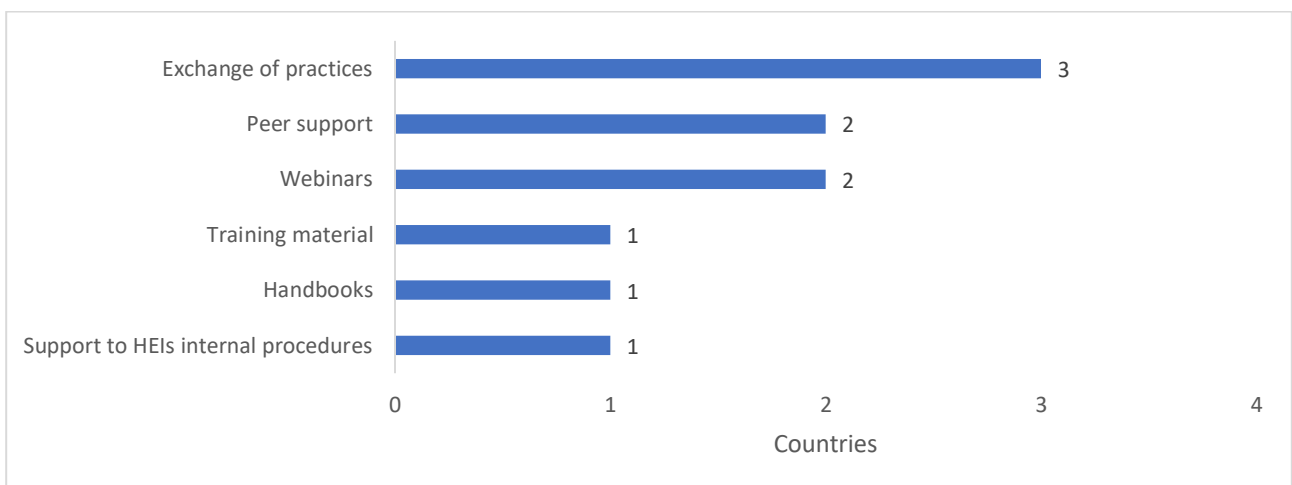
Figure 18: Other policies and/or practices related to the quality assurance of micro-credentials



4.3.4 Peer support and exchange of practices

In the field of QA, support is required from 19 countries. The main request is for exchange of practices, with experts from other countries and peer support.

Figure 19: Type of support in the field required by countries



One country also reported that targeted consultations and case studies could be useful for the ongoing discussion at national level, and in the view of a possible impact on national legislation. Another country also mentioned support to HEIs in their internal QA procedures, and support to the National QA Agency.

5 Section 3 – National experiences and comments

5.1 National experiences and practices

In this section a number of national experiences are reported, that could be useful to foster discussion at national and international level and for the exchange of practices among EHEA countries:

- The VPL made by HEIs is mentioned by 3 countries, with reference to a university example in one case⁴. In another case a guide is mentioned to recognise students' extracurricular experience and skills⁵. In the third country the new procedures for the RPL for admission, exemption and sanction in one or more course units of adult education is mentioned⁶. This regulation aims to harmonise valorisation practices within adult education institutions. It precisely defines the notions of formal, non-formal and informal learning. It also introduces the notion of a “dossier of valorisation” in order to simplify the citizen's approach to the recognition of skills acquired in and outside teaching and guarantees the possibility of issuing certificates of completion. These provisions allow more flexibility in defining personal study pathways and organising curricula within the modular system. They also facilitate student mobility by ensuring the portability of assessments through the certificate of successful completion.
- Two examples of HEIs already offering micro-credentials: in one case the institution offers a wide range of micro-credentials as a stand-alone certificate, that have EQF level and credits, and that can be recognised as credits towards a full degree in the same university⁷. In the other case the micro-credential is jointly organised by a HEI and the ENIC-NARIC centre, and it is targeted to admission officers in HEIs, to create awareness among those who will have to recognise micro-credentials (final qualification is awarded through blockchain technology)⁸.
- Development of a methodology for recognition of micro-credentials and e-learning as outcome of the Erasmus+ e-VALUATE project, contained in the “Practitioner's guide for recognition of e-learning”⁹.

⁴ <https://www.hes-so.ch/en/validation-acquis-experience-182.html>

⁵ <https://www.france-education-international.fr/en/actualites/2019/05/23/extrasup-a-methodological-kit-to-recognise-students-extracurricular-experience>

⁶ http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/44754_000.pdf

⁷ <http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/micro-credentials>

⁸ <http://www.cimea.it/en/servizi/cimea-academy/university-certificates-and-micro-credentials.aspx>.

⁹ <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/recognition-projects/e-valuate>

- The edubadges are also mentioned by one country: the edubadge infrastructure provides the HEI with the possibility to fill in a variety of metadata when issuing an edubadge. This includes metadata for ECTS and EQF¹⁰.
- One country also referred to the role of referencing the national QF to the EQF as a way to develop a relevant methodology that could lead to a common understanding and integrating the approach of learning outcomes into the vocational and academic curricula. The referencing exercise could serve as one step towards the enhancement of recognition and the QA of micro-credentials with the development of a common methodology regarding the identification, design and evaluation of learning outcomes.
- Create NQF that are comprehensive and future-proof, with the capability to be flexible, including micro-credentials.
- Funding is also mentioned: one country reported that the national government announced additional funding for higher education skills-related provision, including for “modular” student places. Over 450 modular courses of max. 30 ECTS are being provided to upskill those in employment or seeking employment by HEIs - universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and private HEIs¹¹. The government has also funded a multicampus initiative involving 7 universities in the country, a project that seeks to establish a national framework for ECTS-bearing, quality-assured micro-credentials, and facilitate the development and roll-out of a programme of flexibly-delivered and accredited micro-credentials across the 7 universities¹².
- The award of credit certificates for successfully completed learning units, and the use of credit contracts to allow for short learning programmes.
- One country reported the cooperation at national level with the creation by the Association of Higher Education Institutions and the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education of a common working group focusing on a number of issues regarding demarcations and transition possibilities between different post-secondary types of education. Based on a LLL perspective for the individual, the working group proposes measures that lead to greater clarity and improved educational opportunities. The working group also deals with the modalities of recognition and validation between the two types of education. Issues pertaining to the provision and recognition of micro-credentials may be naturally approached within this common initiative. In a joint report, the Association of HEIs and the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education have mapped opportunities and obstacles to increasing mobility between higher education and vocational higher education and

¹⁰ A tutorial explaining the edubadges metadata fields is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ResEmXCqSo&feature=youtu.be>

¹¹ <https://hea.ie/skills-engagement/july-stimulus-he-initiative-places-announced/>

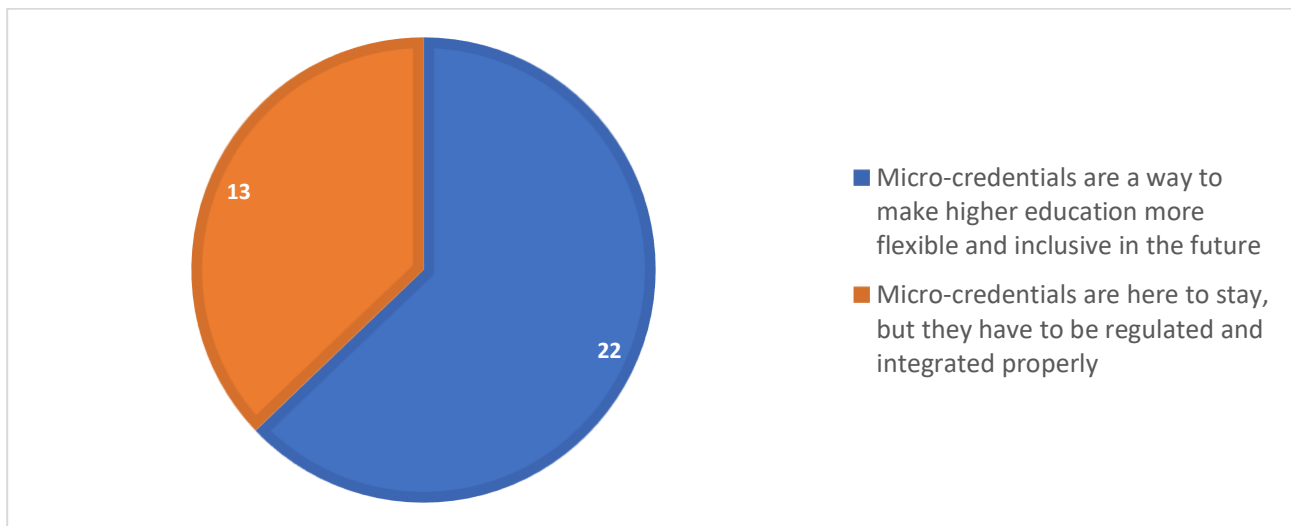
¹² <https://www.iua.ie/press-releases/iua-press-release-5th-oct-iua-breaks-new-ground-with-e12-3-million-mc2-micro-credentials-project-under-hci-pillar-3/>

provide suggestions on how dead ends in the transition between them can be opened up. Higher vocational education typically provides specific knowledge, skills or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs (cf. MICROBOL definition). If such measures should be implemented, certain micro-credentials (or equivalent certified small volumes of learning) provided by higher vocational education might also be recognised as higher education courses (possibly with stackability towards a higher education degree)¹³.

5.2 Further comments

In the last section of the survey countries were invited to share any further comments and thoughts regarding micro-credentials.

Figure 20: Overall attitude towards micro-credentials



A first overview of the general feeling towards micro-credentials highlights that most of the surveyed countries consider micro-credentials as a way to make higher education more flexible and inclusive in the future. The remaining 13 countries emphasised that it is needed to regulate and integrate micro-credentials properly.

Analysing more in detail the observations provided by the respondents, a group of comments focuses on the **relation between micro-credentials and higher education, highlighting also possible threats:**

- while the quality of the envelope is important for students' equitable access to micro-credentials, it does not seem acceptable that this should take priority over the quality of the content;

¹³ Link to the report: <https://suhf.se/app/uploads/2019/11/%C3%96kad-r%C3%B6rlighet-mellan-yrkesh%C3%B6gskoleutbildning-och-h%C3%B6gskoleutbildning-utredning-MYH-SUHF-april-2019.pdf>

- inclusion is a priority but it cannot be achieved at any price. The development of micro-credentials could generate strong competition between providers and constitutes a real risk of marketisation of education/training;
- full degrees are of importance: the core mission of public universities and other HEIs is the provision of profound higher education and thus to enable students to gain knowledge and qualifications within their studies and study-degrees. In the continuing education context, most public universities offer smaller units in postgraduate centres;
- higher education cannot remain outside the trend of micro-credentials, and it is key to provide quality landmarks for learners, companies and society at large. Flexible learning paths are meaningful for widening higher education and greater access and success, and micro-credentials can provide more opportunities for learning and teaching through innovative practices and an appropriate answer to increasingly fast-moving changes on the labour market. However, in order to provide trust to the whole ecosystem and to society at large, their stackability should be framed by coherent learning paths and in connection to a specific degree to be awarded in a specific field of competence. Furthermore, a distinction should be made between learning process and qualification award.

Another group of comments focuses on the **relation of micro-credentials with LLL**:

- micro-credentials could be offered in addition to full degrees and serve for LLL. So called “lifelong learning courses” have been an integral part of HE education for about two decades now, maybe longer. Many of these courses meet the general principles of micro-credentials (certified, recognised, ECTS awarding etc.), although they are not called so. They should be used for the purpose of improving professional skills;
- societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs should be constantly discussed also in relation to the role of HEIs, and how higher education and other kinds and levels of post-secondary education should complement each other. An example is the relationship between higher education and higher vocational education; the latter typically responding to direct short-term upskilling and reskilling needs of the labour market;
- in some countries there is a long-standing tradition of LLL, where higher education not only involves educating youth after secondary education, but also includes possibilities for continuing development for professionals throughout their working life. In some of these types of education outside HE proper, micro-credentials may be found or would at least be legally possible. One country reported some examples, such as:
 - Contract education. Micro-credentials (freestanding courses or combinations of courses into programmes) may also be part of contract education. Contract education is an educational programme or course that has been commissioned from an HEI. A public body or a private company, for instance, may commission a tailor-made course for their employees’ continual professional development. Contract education is a form of education that does not form part of normal higher education

and is subject to the regulations in a special ordinance. Neither the Higher Education Act nor the Higher Education Ordinance apply to contract education, which means that a student in a programme of this kind does not have the same rights as students in normal higher education at an HEI. However, if the same standards are applied to the contract education as to corresponding higher education courses or programmes, grades and degree or course certificates may be issued to people who participate in contract education pursuant to the regulations on first and second-cycle higher education.

- Higher vocational education: vocational post-secondary education at EQF level 5-6 - typically provides specific knowledge, skills or competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs (cf. MICROBOL definition). Providers are institutions or establishments such as universities, local authorities or private training companies. The diplomas are not automatically recognised for further studies in higher education, but courses can be recognised by an HEI after an application of VPL.
- Folk high schools. An important element of the LLL tradition in the country are the so-called folk high schools (independent adult education colleges). They mostly offer non-formal and informal learning, but they also provide 'general courses' which can give access to higher education. Thus, an adult learner who has completed the general course at upper secondary education level meets the general entry requirements for university studies¹⁴.

Another group of comments focuses on the **need for cooperation and dialogue at national level among different actors**:

- close collaboration with private and public sector employers both in the development and recognition of the qualifications is crucial. A national dialogue should be conducted also involving self-accredited institutions with the regulator;
- multi-actor approach: this is necessary, so all stakeholders (university, industry, society) must be included in the discussion on the micro-credentials.

A few comments highlighted further **challenges regarding the application of Bologna tools to micro-credentials**:

- a key challenge is the adoption of the common framework and in particular adherence to the proposed workload and number of credits.
- QA in HE is focused on the quality of courses, and it does not use the same criteria as for qualifications which are made of a set of competences and refers to the assessment of the skills. Furthermore, the country suggested that ESG should include a section on MCs.

¹⁴ <https://www.folkbildningsradet.se/om-folkbildningsradet/Oversattningar/English-translations/the-folk-high-schools/>

- the assurance and development of the quality of micro-credentials or, in general, of short formats for university (further) education is a task of the internal quality management system. External QA procedures (such as programme-related accreditations, etc.) are neither appropriate nor manageable in terms of resources with regard to short university formats.
- both formal framework requirements of micro-credentials (workload spectrum, systematics and descriptions of the types of offer and degrees, etc.) and qualitative requirements (target group relevance, professional practice orientation, level requirements, creditability, etc.) should be defined. If possible, international comparability should be ensured.
- concerning the recognition process, we have to adapt our evaluation process to flexible learning paths and particularly micro-credentials. However, they need to meet essential criteria related to QA, recognition of the credential by the national authorities, the position in the NQF and clear learning outcomes.

6 Conclusions

The MICROBOL project engages ministries and stakeholders involved in the BFUG to explore whether and how the existing EHEA tools can be used and/or adapted to be applicable to micro-credentials. In line with this objective, this analysis presents the results of the 35 survey respondents with the main aim of gaining a picture on the state of the art of micro-credentials and showcasing the decisive points entailed in the development and recognition of micro-credentials in the framework of the Bologna Key Commitments on the basis of the direct experiences of the main stakeholders involved in this process. The reflection on these issues is also enriched by the insights from the three working groups on QA, Recognition and QF and ECTS, organised in the framework of the MICROBOL project (on 12, 21 and 27 January 2021). Awareness about the starting situation is fundamental to any proposals of improvement: this document can also provide indications for the continuation of the project that foresees the drafting of a document meant to provide input for the EU Council Recommendation on micro-credentials.

6.1 Overview on micro-credentials

As a first point, it should be noted that the majority of the countries are already offering and/or developing micro-credentials¹⁵. When looking at the trends of their development, two elements confirm the great variety of approaches and articulations of micro-credentials in the EHEA. The first is that **the understanding of what constitutes a micro-credential varies greatly across the countries surveyed**. Most of the countries offer micro-credentials in the form of course units within a degree programme, MOOCs and special purpose awards. In other cases, micro-credentials are offered in the framework of postgraduate education or described as stackable/stand-alone modules, short LLL courses and adult training. The second element to emerge is that there are very **different approaches to micro-credentials on the regulatory side**. While in the majority of the countries the national regulatory framework allows for the provision of micro-credentials, only in a few cases are they explicitly regulated or mentioned in legislation and different typologies of qualifications that fall into the MICROBOL working definition can be offered and recognised. Both countries with and without regulations mentioned RPL (of non-formal learning), LLL, continuing education, specialisation programmes, as well as single courses within a study programme and recognition of credits. It is also worthwhile mentioning that the lack of a common definition, as well as the issues related to QA and QF have been highlighted as key points to be addressed.

Interesting insights emerge also from the two cross-analyses performed. The first shows that not all countries offering micro-credentials have national legislation addressing the issue and, vice versa, there are countries that offer such learning experiences, while the discussion is still ongoing on the legislation. Anyway, there is a correlation between the presence of national legislation – specific or

¹⁵ Micro-credentials that fall in the MICROBOL definition, see p. 11 of this study.

not – that allows the provision of micro-credentials and their development at national level. The second cross-analysis highlights that the majority of both the countries that have and are discussing about regulations on micro-credentials appreciate the increasing national interest and action in integrating such learning experiences into national legislation and funding system.

The analysis of data on the general overview on the use of micro-credentials enables a first reflection. The **need for a common definition of micro-credentials** is considered as a key point to foster their development and it should be as inclusive as possible. Moreover, the **regulatory framework at national level needs to be adapted**. On this subject, it is important to notice that, as shown by the cross-analysis, in some cases the lack of specific regulations in this field does not represent an obstacle to offering micro-credentials. What's more, **countries express confidence in their efforts at integrating micro-credentials in national legislation**.

One key element for the portability of micro-credentials is digitalisation. According to the results of the survey, **the vast majority of countries do not have policies on digitalisation of credentials in general**. A small group of countries have such policies, and in a few cases micro-credentials are part of them.

Looking more in depth at the data on the application of Bologna tools (QF and ECTS, recognition and QA) to micro-credentials, the analysis showcases the areas where micro-credentials are already covered by the Bologna tools with possible room for improvement where the emphasis is on higher education. The three dimensions are strictly interrelated, and mutually supporting each other, as the results of the survey shows.

6.2 National qualifications framework and ECTS

Referring to QF and ECTS, data shows that in **the majority of countries there is no reference to micro-credentials referred in the NQF**. In most cases, this is due to the fact that micro-credentials are **perceived as a new topic which must be discussed further at national level**. In a few cases, the NQF is open only to “traditional” full degree qualifications. In general, there is a call for a more in-depth reflection on this topic, reflection that has already started in some cases, whereas in others it needs to be activated.

Analysing data from the countries in which the NQF is open to micro-credentials or having examples referred to their QF, **quite a variegated landscape can be delineated**. In some cases, micro-credentials could be referred to any levels, in other cases they are referred to specific levels, i.e., from level 1 to 5, or 2 to 7, 2 to 8, 5 to 8. In other cases, the micro-credential takes the level from the larger qualification of which it is part.

Nonetheless, the **majority of countries do have micro-credentials expressed in ECTS, either in some cases or always**. In general, a micro-credential can have a **number of assigned/estimated ECTS that varies in different countries** and the range in number of ECTS credits varies from 1 to more than 100.

A lower number of countries do not use ECTS for micro-credentials. The reasons vary from the lack of a legal basis to a changing landscape in which there is not enough ground to express them in ECTS.

Even if the discussion on QF and ECTS is still ongoing, it is relevant to notice that there is **consensus on the fact that if micro-credentials are referred to the NQF this supports transparency and recognition.**

Among the issues raised by the data on QF and ECTS, there is the fact that the term micro-credentials refers both to the learning experience and to the qualification awarded. There is the need to see how this link between micro-credentials both as learning experience and as a qualification, and the QF would work in practice. A micro-credential certificate or “supplement” should include all the elements needed to better describe the micro-credential awarded.

Qualifications that are explicitly assigned to the NQF generally have substantive sizes. Micro-credentials when they are small, may not be listed in the NQF, but they would nevertheless gain in clarity and relevance for personal and professional development, if they were assigned to the QF by their respective providers. Looking at the issues regarding micro-credentials referred to the QF, it emerged that a dedicated QF would not be useful.

Referring to the very varied landscape concerning the number of ECTS assigned to micro-credentials, data shows that micro-credentials are not or not always expressed in ECTS although this is perfectly possible, as explained in the LLL section of ECTS Users’ Guide – an official EHEA document – using the same principles for credit allocation, award, accumulation as is done for component parts of programmes. Such coherent use of a key Bologna tool would greatly benefit learners, HEIs and employers alike. Obviously, ECTS for micro-credentials would have to be used correctly and express both the volume of work needed and the learning outcomes capturing the effort which is needed, and the learning outcomes achieved. A key challenge is adopting a common framework relating to workload and credits on one side and, on the other side, to leave enough flexibility in definitions.

Finally, the strict link between QA, QF and recognition was highlighted since it could be more challenging to recognise a credential that is not referenced in the QF.

6.3 Recognition

The majority of countries have implemented policies related to the recognition of micro-credentials, although many countries do not have specific policies. In general, both groups of countries that have and do not have policies in the field refer to recognition/validation of prior learning applied to micro-credentials as well as recognition of courses delivered by HEIs as part of a full study programme and micro-credentials awarded by HEIs and other authorised bodies. In addition to this, countries that have policies on micro-credentials refer to the adoption of the European approach to micro-credentials, to the use of criteria from the e-VALUATE project and to the recognition by the ENIC-NARIC centre of learning programmes of a minimum of 200 hours. Referring to the RPL, it is important to note that, 1) as the procedure is performed on a case-by-case

basis, it cannot be generalised for non-formal micro-credentials as such, 2) it implies heavy burden to be applied for small micro-credentials (e.g., 2 ECTS). In other terms, the RPL is clearly designed and effective for the purpose it has been delivered, but it is more challenging to imagine that it can be scaled up to massive use of micro-credentials.

Other important elements come out from the analysis of the purpose of recognition, the stackability and the recognition of micro-credentials awarded by providers other than HEIs. As for the **purpose of recognition** the data shows that most of the countries recognise micro-credentials with the aim of increasing learners' competitiveness in the labour market, while **a slightly lower number of respondents to the survey recognise micro-credentials for academic purposes and for furthering of study** (also in the form of recognition of credits and of prior learning). Looking at the stackability, in almost **half of the countries, learners can accumulate micro-credentials to build up to a degree programme**. It is also relevant to mention that in some cases, stackability is not possible towards a full degree, nor to access to higher education, for which a formal entry qualification is needed. From the comments provided by respondents it appears that the stackability of micro-credentials for further study **entails challenges with the national regulatory framework, the identification of coherent learning paths, matching learning outcomes and positioning at the most appropriate level** of national QFs. On the other side fewer than half of respondents said that stackability is not possible according to national legislation. The other element to mention is that, in the view of exploring the synergies that can develop between HEIs and other providers in a framework of trust and security, the data highlights that several countries, but still **not the majority of respondents, pointed out that they do not recognise micro-credentials from providers other than HEIs**. This is mainly due to the regulatory framework or to the absence of QA mechanisms. In some cases, micro-credentials awarded by external providers are recognised only through using RPL or under certain conditions (for instance only in adult education).

This data on the recognition of micro-credentials leads us to outline some considerations. The first is that, in principle, micro-credentials are recognisable and **Bologna tools have to be used and in place at national level**. In this regard, **the survey indicates that their implementation at the national level has still space for improvements**. The development of explicit policies related to the recognition of micro-credentials can be an element of further implementation. Nonetheless, one point that needs further deepening is to what extent the **LRC arrangements cover micro-credentials**, both as stand-alone qualifications and as periods of study. In the light of adapting the existing tools to the recognition of micro-credentials and building up a common framework able to address not only the development of micro-credentials at national level but also to strengthen cross-border cooperation in the field, **ENIC-NARICs, as a network, could play a key role in contributing to reviewing existing practices and to support fair recognition of micro-credentials**.

Some considerations regard recognition of micro-credentials for academic purposes. Here there are two elements for further discussion: one is the possible use of micro-credentials for **access to higher education**, i.e., as entry qualifications. The second is the distinction between "recognisable" and "recognised": one key element to go from "recognisable" to "recognised" is transparency in

information provision. Indeed, **transparent information provision is among the keys to recognition**: it should include the elements needed for recognition and it should be addressed both to HEIs and to non-formal providers at national level.

As for the stackability of micro-credentials, the **real challenge is with stand-alone micro-credentials rather than for micro-credentials** that are already part of a full-degree programme, especially for those stand-alone micro-credentials awarded by non-formal providers. The level of micro-credentials, the learning outcomes and the coherence of the study path remain the main issues to be addressed. On this subject, it is worth noticing that the **use of Bologna tools as levers of training and development of individuals** could help build up a framework in which micro-credentials could be accumulated in a coherent path. For this purpose, it would be interesting to discuss this topic with HEIs and registrars.

6.4 Quality assurance

In general terms, the majority of countries monitor the quality of courses through both programme accreditation/evaluation and institutional evaluation or audit, while in a lower number of countries it is monitored either through programme accreditation/evaluation or institutional evaluation. When talking about the inclusion of micro-credentials in the national QA systems, **the fact that they are not explicitly mentioned does not prevent most countries from considering them implicitly covered by their QA system**. In the few cases where micro-credentials are mentioned in the QA system, they fall into the accreditation of postgraduate programmes of LLL or special programmes of accreditation. In this framework, a point that seems to come to light is that **external quality procedures (such as programme accreditation) are considered too burdensome to be applied to micro-credentials**.

Analysing the sources of information on the QA status of the credentials awarded, in **most cases information is provided by the awarding institution itself**. It is also worth mentioning that in **in some countries there is more than one way to get information**. For instance, the QA status of micro-credentials is described both by the provider and through a list of accredited micro-credentials. **The majority of the countries do not have either a record of the micro-credentials offered at national level, or a register of providers**.

Another point that comes out clearly from the analysis is that **the majority of the countries have not implemented any other policies related to the QA of micro-credentials**. The only two cases in which specific policies are in place refers to vocational education and LLL programmes.

A more in-depth analysis of the issues that have emerged enable us to delineate some elements that need to be taken into consideration when thinking about the QA of micro-credentials.

The first consideration is that it is largely agreed that the **ESG are a comprehensive and flexible tool that can be adapted to the assessment of micro-credentials**. Therefore, there is no need to create new tools both in terms of standards and procedures. The second point, which is closely linked to the first one, concerns the **excessive burden that would derive from the application of external**

and internal QA procedures to micro-credentials. In this regard, it is possible to assume that if a micro-credential is offered by an institution that is subject to external and internal QA, the micro-credential itself would meet the required quality criteria. Therefore, **external QA is required to evaluate the institution and not each micro-credential.** This can also be applied to micro-credentials offered in partnership with external providers, where the QA is still a responsibility of the HEI.

A third point that it is essential to **avoid the confusion and lack of understanding of this learning experience** that could result from the absence of specific QA mechanisms and sources of information, especially in the view of a possible growth of the phenomenon. To address this issue, **transparency is a key issue.** It is, therefore, needed to clearly explain how a learning unit is useful for a student and why a student should be interested in it. Moreover, institutions should have clear policies for accreditation of programmes/courses/learning units that should be published and easily accessible.

6.5 Transversal issues

Analysing the results of the survey, there are also a number of **transversal issues** that emerge.

The first one is related to the need for further discussion at national and international level and to **reach a common understanding of micro-credentials.** In this sense a unique and comprehensive definition is crucial as a starting point for this discussion.

Together with a common definition, a clear and transparent common framework is key. There is a clear need to find a balance between “standardisation” of a transparent and understandable framework regarding micro-credentials on one side, and on the other to leave enough flexibility and to encompass diversity of experiences at national and international level.

The results show a very **dynamic picture with regard to the acceptance and uptake of micro-credentials at national level.** In many countries a national discussion is ongoing, and it would be relevant to monitor the developments in a diachronic approach, for instance repeating the survey in one year’s time and comparing the results.

Internationalisation is a key topic: together with the discussion at national level, the aspect of **co-constructing micro-credentials with a transnational approach** must be kept in view and taken into account. In this direction a common lexicon, terminology, and transparency of information are crucial.

Micro-credentials are not a goal in themselves, but are at the service of the full educational and professional development of individuals. This learner-centred approach should be at the core of the discussion, and in this sense Bologna tools are now as always **levers for the training and development of individuals.**

The adaptation of Bologna tools (QA, recognition, QF and ECTS) to micro-credentials require an effort and an administrative cost. For this reason this effort should be “proportional”. Usual QA

mechanisms, recognition procedures and assigning a level to a qualification in a QF could be too burdening to be applied as such to micro-credentials, whereas a **fit-for-purpose approach** could be most effective.

Digitalisation remains an open issue: in a context where the majority of countries do not have policies in the field, either for full degrees or for micro-credentials, there is a **huge space for development of digital instruments as a means to support portability, authenticity and transparency** of all types of qualifications, and more in general to underpin mobility.

A clear request for **support** on the topic emerges from the survey results. This support, that is mainly meant as peer support, collection of comparative experiences, exchanges of practices, also includes the need for contribution from experts in the field, the development of joint tools, and the exchange of information on legislation at national level. The need for targeted consultation, case studies, support and information to national competent authorities, webinars, handbooks, was also mentioned.

One of the main aims of the survey was to **encourage national discussion on micro-credentials and the applicability of Bologna tools in this context**. While this objective seems to have been reached according to the results, more discussion, consultation and exchange of practices at national and international level is called for in order to reach a common understanding and to place the development of micro-credentials in a common framework. In this sense the report would be a starting point and constitutes a reference for further discussions, showcasing a very dynamic landscape where more developments are to be expected in the near future.

Annexes

Annex 1: List of countries which replied to the questionnaire

Albania
Andorra
Austria
Belarus
Belgium – Flemish Community
Belgium – French Community
Bulgaria
Croatia
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Estonia
Finland
France
Georgia
Germany
Greece
Hungary
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Kazakhstan
Latvia
Liechtenstein
Lithuania
Malta
Montenegro
Netherlands
North Macedonia
Poland
Portugal
Romania
Slovak Republic
Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom

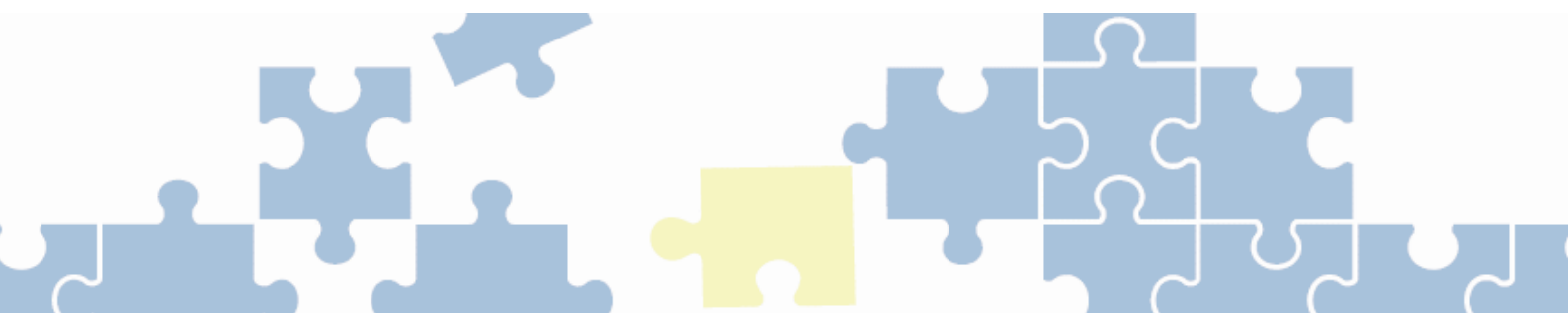
Annex 2: Questionnaire



European project MICROBOL

Survey on Micro-credentials

October 2020





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MICROBOL Project

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INTRODUCTION

This survey is created in the framework of the MICROBOL project (Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments). This 2-year project, co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy reform, and more specifically "Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms", 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.

The aim of this survey is to collect information on the **current state-of-play and development with regards to the topic of micro-credentials in different member states of the European Higher Education Area.**

The focus of this survey is on micro-credentials offered by higher education institutions or recognised by them, unless otherwise stated in the questions. When filling in the survey, please consider any short courses, programmes, or learning experiences, whether they are offered as part of the existing degree programmes or not, that exist in your system today and correspond to the below definition, even if they are not specifically called 'micro-credentials'.

Definition of a micro-credential within the MICROBOL project:

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.

The results collected from this survey will be used within the MICROBOL project to give input to the work of the three working groups within the project (on Qualifications Framework&ECTS, on Recognition and on Quality Assurance).



INSTRUCTIONS

Please complete this online survey by opening the link:

[MICROBOL Survey on micro-credentials](https://limesurvey.arteveldehs.be/index.php/986787)

Or type

<https://limesurvey.arteveldehs.be/index.php/986787>

Important:

This document is only for reference and discussion and is not a paper alternative to the survey online. Thank you for completing your survey online through the above 'Lime Survey' tool.

Please note that we accept only 1 submitted response per country.

The survey is open from 15 October 2020 until 15 November 2020.

Besides aiming to collect data on the current state-of-play of micro-credentials in your country, we hope this survey will encourage national discussions on micro-credentials and their link to the Bologna Key Commitments. Therefore, the **target group** of the survey are members of the BFUG as well as the nominated representatives in the MICROBOL working groups.

Furthermore, we kindly ask you to consult the different national stakeholders (higher education institutions, students, QA agencies, recognition centers, etc.) when completing the survey.

Message: When filling in the survey, please consider any short courses, programmes, or learning experiences, whether they are offered as part of the existing degree programmes or not, that exist in your system today and correspond to the proposed definition, even if they are not specifically called 'micro-credentials'.



SURVEY

All questions marked with an ‘*’ are mandatory.

* CONTACT INFORMATION

In this section, we aim to collect information about the contact person for this survey.

- Please indicate the name of the contact person for this survey at your Ministry/ Organisation/ Association.
- Please indicate the email address of the contact person for this survey.
- Please indicate the main function of the contact person for this survey.
- Please indicate the name of your Ministry/Organisation/Association.
- Please select the country of your Ministry/Organisation/ Association.

GENERAL

In this section, we want to collect some general information about micro-credentials in your country.

- *1. To your knowledge, are micro-credentials already offered or being developed in your country?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I do not know
- *2. Do you have examples of micro-credentials in your country offered by HEIs, or recognised by them?
 - a. Yes
Please provide further details on the micro-credentials you have in your country. Please provide links to relevant information and documentation, if available.
 - b. Being developed
Please provide further details on the micro-credentials being developed in your country. Please provide links to relevant information and documentation, if available.
 - c. No
 - d. I do not know
- *3. Does your national legislation allow for the provision of micro-credentials ?
 - a. Yes, and there are specific regulations



Could you please provide more detail and/or a copy or link to the relevant norms or legislation? (and an English translation, if possible)

In order to further develop such learning experiences or micro-credentials, would you like to receive additional support (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc)?

b. Yes, but there are no specific regulations

Could you please provide more detail and/or a copy or link to the relevant norms or legislation? (and an English translation, if possible)

In order to further develop such learning experiences or micro-credentials, would you like to have additional support (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc)?

c.. No, but currently under discussion

Why is the legislation discussed now? What key issues are being discussed?

Would you need further support to revise your legislation (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc.)?

d. No, institutions should not offer such learning experiences.

What revisions to your legislation would be necessary to make provision of micro-credentials possible?

Would you need further support to revise your legislation (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc.)?

e. Other (please specify).

***4.** How satisfied are you with the current uptake and acceptance of micro-credentials in your legislation?

a. Very satisfied, micro-credentials are well integrated into our legislation and funding system

b. Satisfied, there is increasing national interest and action in integrating micro-credentials into our legislation and funding system, but still a lot to do

c. Not satisfied, there is little national interest and action in integrating micro-credentials into our legislation and funding system and there should be more work done

d. Not applicable, in our country we do not currently have an interest in or a need to integrate micro-credentials into our legislation and funding system

***5.** If you have a national policy on the digitalisation of credentials, are micro-credentials part of it?

a. Yes

b. No, micro-credentials are not part of it

c. No, we do not have such a policy

d. I do not know

*6. Do you have an official record or register of micro-credentials and providers in your country? (multiple answers possible)

Yes, we have a record/register of (most of) the providers

Yes, we have a record/register of (most of) the (accredited) micro-credentials on offer

No, we do not have a record/register or register of providers

No, we do not have a record/register of the micro-credentials on offer

I do not know

QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK & ECTS

In this section, we want to collect information about the qualifications framework and ECTS in your country.

*7. Is your national qualifications framework open to micro-credentials?

a. Yes, we have already some examples in our national qualifications framework
At which level(s) are they referred to/or can be referred to?

b. Yes, but none has yet been referred to the national qualifications framework
At which level(s) are they referred to/or can be referred to?

c. No, not yet
Could you elaborate on the reason for this?

d. We do not see the need at the moment
Could you elaborate on the reason for this?

e. I do not know

*8. Are micro-credentials expressed in ECTS or other credit systems (with reference to learning outcomes and workload)?

a. Yes, always
What is the range or amount of ECTS/ other credit systems for micro-credentials?

b. Yes, in some cases
What is the range or amount of ECTS/ other credit systems for micro-credentials?

c. No
Why not?

- d. I do not know
- *9. What do you think is the biggest challenge in applying Bologna tools like ECTS and Qualifications Frameworks, to micro-credentials?
- a. Awareness of the tools in general
 - b. The implementation of the tools at the national level
 - c. The applicability of the tools to micro-credentials
 - d. Other possible challenges?
10. Do you have any other comments regarding these tools in relation to micro-credentials (e.g. design, use)?

RECOGNITION

In this section, we want to collect information about the recognition processes in your country.

- *11. Have you implemented policies and/or practices related to the recognition of micro-credentials?
- a. Yes
Please specify and provide a link to relevant information and documentation, if available.

Which elements are considered relevant in the recognition process? (multiple answers possible)

- quality of the study programme
- verification of the certificate
- level of the study programme
- learning outcomes
- workload
- assessment procedures
- identification of the participant
- other (please specify)

- b. No, but currently under discussion
Would you like to have additional support (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc) for the recognition of micro-credentials?
- c. No
Would you like to have additional support (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc) for the recognition of micro-credentials?
- d. I do not know

- *12. For what purpose do you recognise micro-credentials in your country? (multiple answers possible)
- To provide easier access to higher education
 - To recognise credits or prior learning
 - To increase learners' competitiveness in the labour market
 - For academic purposes/ further studies
 - To allow registered students to earn credits towards a higher education qualification
 - We do not (yet) recognise micro-credentials in my country
 - Other (please specify)
- *13. Does your legislation allow higher education institutions to recognise micro-credentials when offered by providers that are not higher education institutions (companies, NGOs, international organisations, etc.)?
- a. Yes, micro-credentials from all higher education institutions and other providers are recognised
- b. No, only micro-credentials from higher education institutions are recognised, not from other providers
- Why are micro-credentials offered by other providers not recognised?
- *14. Does your national legislation allow higher education institutions to recognize micro-credentials as part of a normal degree programme? In other words, can learners accumulate them to build up to a degree within higher education, or are they 'stackable'?
- 'Stackability: Stackability means that micro-credentials can be accumulated and grouped over time, building into a larger, more recognisable credential (Kazin and Clerkin, 2018, p. 7).'*
- a. Yes
- b. No
- Why not?

QUALITY ASSURANCE

In this section, we want to collect information on the quality assurance systems in your country.

- *15. What external quality assurance systems do you have in place to assure quality of the courses offered by higher education institutions?
- Institutional Accreditation, Audit, Evaluation or similar
 - Programme Accreditation, Evaluation or similar
 - Other (please specify)
- *16. Does your national quality assurance system explicitly include or refer to micro-credentials offered by higher education institutions?



- a. Yes, they are explicitly mentioned in the QA system
Please give a reference.
- b. No, they are not referred to explicitly, but implicitly fall under the same QA system
- c. No, they are not referred and are not included in any QA system.
How do you see it possible to integrate micro-credentials into your QA system?
- d. Other, please specify.
- *17.** Have you implemented any other policies and/or practices related to the quality assurance of micro-credentials?
- a. Yes
Can you please specify and provide a link to relevant information and documentation, if available.
- b. No
Would you like to have additional support (e.g. peer support, exchange of practices with experts from other countries, webinars, etc) related to QA of micro-credentials?
- c. I do not know
- * 18.** How can one get information on the QA status of the awarded credential (the award achieved at the end of the course)?
- Through the provider (higher education institution)
 - Through a register or list of accredited micro-credentials
 - From a dedicated portal
 - Other (please specify)
 - It is not possible
 - I do not know

GENERAL

In this section, please share your last examples and further thoughts and comments with us.

19. Do you have examples of good practice in relation to any of the areas in the questionnaire (legislation, recognition, QA, QF & ECTS, etc.) that you would like to share? If yes, can you please specify and provide a link to the relevant information and documentation if available.
- *20.** How would you characterise your overall feeling towards micro-credentials?
- a. Micro-credentials are a way to make higher education more flexible and inclusive in the future



b. Micro-credentials are here to stay, but they have to be regulated and integrated properly

c. Micro-credentials are a short term trend

d. Micro-credentials do not have a place in higher education institutions and should not be included in related legislation

e. I have no feelings towards micro-credentials

21. Please share any further comments or thoughts.

Thank you for completing the survey online!



