UNIC Standard for Micro-Credentials

Introductory remarks

Micro-credentials are small, accredited educational offers that offer a highly flexible, bite sized and accessible way of upskilling and reskilling. Therefore, they provide additional opportunities in the UNIC portfolio to meet the demands identified in the European Skills Agenda. For UNIC, micro-credentials offer an opportunity to respond dynamically to the demand for educational offerings and to certify new subject-specific and interdisciplinary offerings, e.g. some of the Thematic Lines have already signalled interest in offering micro-credentials. They are also an opportunity to further strengthen Lifelong Learning for a broader target group and they have the potential to motivate a broader target group for academic studies.

As an alliance of 10 partners from 10 different countries, UNIC faces the challenge of harmonizing different national stages in the development and implementation of micro-credentials, different educational concepts, and higher education regulations. This is a considerable obstacle for the development and implementation of a unified framework for awarding special UNIC MicroCredentials.

Process

To ensure the participation and perspectives of all ten partners and their experts in this harmonization process, the topic of micro-credentials was discussed both in the "Structural Issues" expert group as well as in the group of WP2 coordinators to integrate both regulatory and administrative knowledge and insights of universities and consortium's overall educational development into the concept.

The foundation for the successful realisation of this joint concept for micro-credentials was the willingness of all 10 partners to identify permitted administrative compromises where existing national regulations contradicted each other. To develop this joint framework, UNIC is building on European standards for micro-credentials while applying a flexible local approach to comply with additional national regulations."

The different stages in the implementation and roll out of micro-credentials on a national level at the 10 partners added a further challenge in the development of the joint concept for micro-credentials in UNIC. This varied from a fully implemented concept in

Ireland and a broad offer of micro-credentials by UCC to an ongoing discussion about rules and guidelines on the national level in Türkiye with no offers of micro-credentials by KU.

In addition to the already implemented joint degree programmes and offers for regular students, other target groups should be addressed with the micro-credentials in the sense of lifelong learning and to make more learners profit from the ideas, concepts, trainings and the cooperation with the UNIC cities. Each partner will use its strengths and key areas to achieve this. We see the diversity that lies within the alliance in terms of scope and level of experience as a strength for the joint micro-credential approach and also the benefits arising from extending existing offers from UNIC universities. With the cities as partners in UNIC, we already have external stakeholders as partners in the development process. Nevertheless, local companies, NGOs and other partners from the labour market will be asked to take part in the design process of UNIC micro-Credentials depending on the topic. This would also be a way to strengthen the connection of UNIC with the labour market.

For the development of the joint guidelines for micro-credentials in UNIC, we use the general description from the EC:

"Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development."

[https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials]

Micro-credentials are owned by the learner, can be shared, are portable and may be combined into larger credentials or qualifications.

Based on this definition, we developed ideas for the use of micro-credentials within UNIC. We started by analysing relevant information on micro-credentials, various case studies, the necessary legal frameworks and existing solutions by the partners. The joint working group then defined the essential topics that should be addressed by the UNIC micro-credential approach.

- target groups
- ECTS assignment and the ECTS amount
- procedural steps and organisational issues in design
- decision making and implementation process about each UNIC Micro-Credential

- visibility and marketing
- mobility among UNIC members and mutual recognition
- alignment of key topics connected with the UNIC thematic framework and Thematic Lines
- offering digital UNIC Micro-Credentials
- inclusion of stakeholders in the process of design of the micro-credentials (employers, experts etc.)
- exchange of technical solutions in relation to admissions and certification
- financing of micro-credentials: fees, charging principles, e.g. discount for certain target groups (vulnerable groups, UNIC students etc.)

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1. Guidelines for UNIC Micro-Credentials

The guidelines are exclusively dedicated to special UNIC Micro-credentials and not to local concepts. This implies that each partner can also offer its own micro-credentials according to local/national rules parallel to the UNIC Micro-Credentials and can open additionally its own micro-credentials to UNIC students. Aligning and binding together existing local micro-credential offers as a portfolio of complimentary micro-credentials across two or more partners is also possible.

The design and approval will follow the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance.

1.1 Basics

- Amount in ECTS
- Individual micro-credentials usually designed as a stand-alone offer
- UNIC MCs are each offered at least by one partner university and co-created with at least one other UNIC university
- Micro-credentials are flexible, extracurricular offer; recognition of a previously earned microcredential for a degree programme depends on local rules
- Stacking of micro-credentials to degrees is currently not envisioned but can be explored in the future

- Participation of learners can be - but does not have to be - conditional on formal or contentrelated prerequisites
- Each UNIC Micro-Credential should consist of a special course offer with compulsory participation. An examination of informal learning to see whether the defined learning outcomes/competences for micro-credentials have been achieved is not sufficient to be awarded a UNIC Micro-Credential
- Micro-credentials could be offered online, hybrid, on-site or blended
- European Qualification Framework Level 6, 7 and 8
- Including the UNIC cities and the labour market as an important stakeholder in the development process of micro-credentials

1.2   Content

- content-related micro-credentials, e.g. aligned to the topics of the Thematic Lines
- no thematic limitation, if there is an interest by the UNIC academics and they are willing to develop the micro-credential
- Micro-credentials for Future Skills

1.3   Target Groups

- Persons taking micro-credentials as part of Lifelong Learning
- Registered Students of UNIC partners
- University employees where applicable

1.4   Funding/Fees

- Micro-credentials are mainly fee based. However, fees can also be replaced or supplemented by other external or internal funding
- All partners endeavour to find possibilities for reduced participation fee for UNIC students where applicable

1.5   Quality Assurance

- Predefined "module" mask for describing the learning outcomes, achieved competencies, content, mode of assessment and workload as required by the ESG, a joint authorisation procedure will be implemented for micro-credentials. This joint authorisation procedure for micro-credentials will be aligned with the overall concept for the Quality Assurance for collaborative Educational Offers in UNIC

- Micro-credentials follow the same academic standards as all UNIC and local offers of all partners
- All micro-credentials follow transparent assessment standards
- To further ensure quality standards student feedback is sought and responded to within a pre-determined cycle
- Following the results of the Microbol project that strongly advises to take the European Standards and Guidelines as a basis for the QA of Micro-credentials, UNIC Micro-Credentials are part of the internal QA processes. "learners should be involved in quality assurance processes, the Quality assurance policies and practices for micro-credentials should be transparent" [ENQA OCCASIONAL PAPER QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS: Expectations within the Context of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Dec. 2023, p. 14]
- The following items are provided for each Micro-Credential certificate: [ENQA OCCASIONAL PAPER QUALITY ASSURANCE OF MICRO-CREDENTIALS: Expectations within the Context of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Dec. 2023, p. 14, p. 18]

Mandatory Elements

- Identification of the learner (eligibility)
- Title of the micro-credential
- Country/Region of the issuer
- Awarding body
- Date of issue
- Learning outcomes
- Notional workload needed to achieve the learning outcomes (in ECTS credits, wherever possible)
- Level (and cycle, if applicable) of the learning experience leading to the microcredential (EQF, QF-EHEA), if applicable
- Type of assessment
- Form of participation in the learning activity
- Type of quality assurance used to underpin the micro-credential

Further Elements

- Prerequisites needed to enrol in the learning activity
- Supervision and identity verification during assessment (unsupervised with no identity verification, supervised with no identity verification, supervised online or onsite with identity verification)

o Grade achieved
o Integration/stackability options (standalone, independent micro-credential / integrated, stackable towards another)

1.6 Information/Publication/Marketing for UNIC Micro-Credentials

- Publication of and application for UNIC Micro-Credentials via the Virtual Campus and UNIC webpage
- Local platforms
- Cooperation with the UNIC cities and the labour market for marketing

2. Recommendations for the development and implementation of micro-credentials in UNIC

For the concrete development and implementation, we take the 10 principles proposed by the EC

[https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/micro-credentials%20brochure%20updated.pdf]as a basis.

2.1 Quality

Micro-credentials in UNIC are subject to the same internal and external quality assurance tools as are applied for joint degree programmes and for local offers by all partners. The QA tools and procedures used for joint UNIC Micro-Credentials are published and aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance. The QA will include tools to assess the learners feedback and to incorporate relevant stakeholders in the development process.

2.2 Transparency

UNIC Micro-Credentials are described in a similar way with transparent information about the learning outcomes, the content, the form of the assessment, the workload – provided in ECTS - and the level within the European Qualification framework.

2.3 Relevance

UNIC Micro-Credentials shall be aligned with the key topics of UNIC. Further topics are possible. The topics are updated regularly and are created in cooperation with relevant stakeholders including the UNIC cities.

2.4 Valid assessment

UNIC Micro-Credential learning outcomes are assessed against transparent standards.

2.5 Learning pathways

UNIC Micro-Credentials are designed to support flexible learning pathways, including the possibility to stack, validate, and recognise micro-credentials from across different systems.

2.6 Permeability/Recognition

UNIC Micro-Credentials are designed in a way that recognition is possible both in higher education institutions and on the labour market - nationally and internationally, for academic or employment purposes.

2.7 Portability

UNIC Micro-Credentials are owned by the learner. The learner is able to store and share the micro-credentials in a digital wallet. UNIC partners will provide solutions for a digital system in line with the GDPR.

2.8 Learner-centrer

UNIC Micro-Credentials are learner-centred and developed. The learners are part of UNIC's Quality Assurance for micro-credentials. This means that learners are part of the development process and provide feedback in the form of course evaluations.

2.9   Authentic

UNIC Micro-Credentials contain sufficient information to check the identity of the credentialholder (learner), the legal identity of the issuer, and the date and location of issuance of the micro-credential.

2.10   Information and guidance

UNIC provide sufficient and transparent information and advice on UNIC Micro-Credentials.

Jointly created in the UNIC Working Groups "Structural Issues" and "Work Package 2 coordination" as part of the deliverable "2.1.Designing Innovative Teaching and Mobility"

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Authors: Susanne Lippold and Jonna Tikkanen, Ruhr University Bochum, with contributions of all UNIC partners

Contact: unicteam@rub.de