QAA MEMBERSHIP

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Quality Compass

Which Way for Micro-Credentials?

Welcome to the second edition of Quality Compass – QAA's publication that aims to look more closely at emerging issues and help you navigate and respond to future challenges and potential opportunities.

This issue focuses on micro-credentials which form part of the discussions around modular qualifications and lifelong learning. As the Westminster Government announces more detail around its proposals for lifelong learning, and the Scottish Funding Council releases an additional £1.5m upskilling funding for micro-credentials, we consider what this might mean for the sector and how we propose to push the agenda forward.

We offer Quality Compass as a conversation-starter, linked to our wider membership offer. We are keen to engage with you and provide the opportunity to share your thoughts and practices.

If you would like to contribute to future editions or respond to anything we have covered in this issue, please contact us at membership@qaa.ac.uk

Modular qualifications – what the policy papers say

As we noted in our Members' Project Update on Micro-Credentials in December 2020, much has been made in recent months about the need for lifelong learning and the importance of technical education and skills development. Since then, the Westminster Government has published an interim response to the Augar Report and a further education white paper – Skills for Jobs – both of which have implications for the development of more flexible approaches to learning; and the Scottish Funding Council has announced additional university upskilling funding for micro-credentials in the 2020-21 academic year through the National Transition Training fund.

Going beyond the UK, international thinking on micro-credentials has continued to progress, most notably in Europe and Australia with significant recent publications. First, in December 2020, the European Commission published its *Final Report: A European Approach to Micro-Credentials*. More recently, An integrative literature review of the implementation of micro-credentials in higher education: Implications for practice in Australasia has been published in the *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*. Both of these address a range of issues relating to micro-credentials, including possible definition, relationships with established frameworks, role in employability and upskilling, quality assurance, and the subject of 'stackability' and transferability between providers.
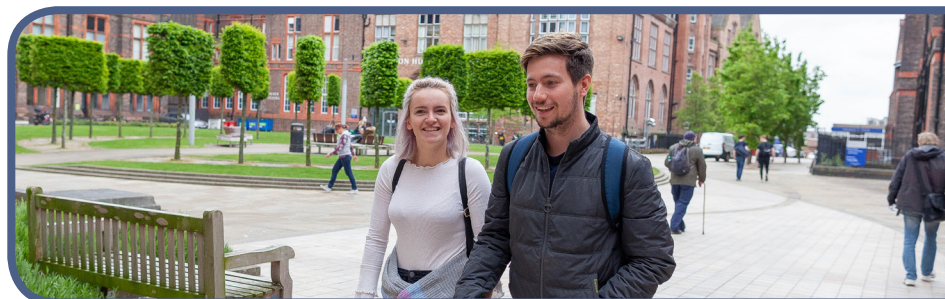
The opportunities presented by small modular packages of learning have also featured in other events and articles in the UK higher education sector recently. These include our own Quality Insights conference on 23-24 February 2021 for which we had a strand specifically on 'Connected Curriculum' and at which the speakers included Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver and Professor Sue Reece, two prominent international experts in this field.[1]

There is a sense of momentum gathering around the concept of short, industry-focused learning that enables upskilling – whether this is a form of continuing professional development within a career to support someone in reorientating their career; or to enable someone who does not yet have a higher education qualification to begin achieving credit at that level.

Definitions and parameters – what's in a name?

In various guises, micro-credentials can be said to have been around for a while, although that particular name is new. Higher education providers have a long history of running short courses, with or without credit, and aimed at various audiences from the non-expert (for example, summer schools, often offered in the creative arts) to the highly-specialist professional (for example, specialist skills development for teachers, medical practitioners or those working in digital media).

More recently, a range of other related terms has entered usage. In setting out its scope, An integrative literature review of the implementation of micro-credentials in higher education: Implications for practice in Australasia notes:

> *'There is a spread of work on micro-credentials, digital badges, open badges and some mention of alternative credentials such as nano-credentials.'*

There is a risk that the proliferating terms create an unhelpful distraction or, worse, become impediments to practice. In the work that we have carried out to date exploring the micro-credential, we have indicated the following characteristics:

1   it is credit-bearing against a recognised level of the FHEQ or FQHEIS

2   it is subject to standard quality assurance mechanisms

3   while there are no upper or lower limits on the amount of credit that a micro-credential carries, it should not normally constitute an award in its own right on the qualifications frameworks.[2]

This last point relates to an idea that a micro-credential does not necessarily mean a very small credit-load but, rather, that it is something being studied on a 'micro' level. This means micro-credentials are not studied as part of a larger whole (or degree) even if they are, for example, a module which might sit within an approved degree programme.

Sub-dividing the definition of micro-credential further, with additional technical terms for the sub-categories, introduces unnecessary complexity. It can imply a need for different approaches and management that need not – and should not – be there. We want to avoid a perceived need for additional rules and regulations.

Those short courses that fit this definition of micro-credentials have been in operation for a long time. What we need to do is enable these further, not introduce constraints.

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1   Other examples are the blog posts on the QAA site by Professor Sue Rigby, Chair of the review panel of the Credit Framework for England, first in June 2020 and then a follow-up in September 2020; a piece for the Higher Education Policy Institute by Professor Mary Bishop in February 2021; and the event run by Wonkhe on 9 February 2021 entitled Credit worthy? Making sense of the government's new proposals for post-18 education

2   These ideas were explored and outlined in our preliminary findings Project Update to QAA Members in December 2020.

Micro-credentials or modular qualifications?

Another term that is being used for this type of credit-bearing, standalone learning is 'modular qualification'. In some respects, modular qualification is a helpful alternative term, particularly around perceptions, because it can indicate that the short course is, in its own right, a qualification and does not need to be part of a larger whole to have credibility. There is a risk of confusion, however, as many higher education providers would describe their academic frameworks as 'modular'. For now, therefore, we are continuing with the term 'micro-credentials' but our use of this includes developments and debate around 'modular qualifications'.

Challenges – what's stopping the rise of micro-credentials?

In many respects, there is nothing impeding the development of micro-credentials as they are defined here, other than barriers associated with access to student funding and current approaches to reporting on progression and retention (picked up in the sections on policy and questions for providers). There are frameworks in place that support the development of units or modules of credit-bearing learning and there is an agreed Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS). This latter also articulates with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS through an agreed equivalence of learning hours (2 CATS = 1 ECTS) and understanding of level equivalence across qualification frameworks. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in admissions processes allows for a student to be given advance standing on a programme for previously achieved credit or in recognition of experiential learning. While there is not a requirement to construct a degree programme around credit, other than in Scotland, most UK higher education providers still choose to do so.

The tensions, however, emerge in other ways. First, higher education providers tend to think in terms of whole programmes. There has always been an emphasis on the coherence of award – a taught degree would be expected to have clear aims and intended learning outcomes and these could be tracked through all levels of the programme with students following a linear route. Transfers do happen, particularly if a student's personal circumstances affect where or how s/he is studying, but there is no national curriculum in higher education. As a consequence, a student transferring into a programme at another provider may have particular knowledge or skills gaps that risk disadvantaging him or her, and there may not be the means (or the will) in the receiving provider to address this while still supporting advanced standing.

Linked to this is a sense of 'shelf-life' of academic credit. Typically, academic credit is recognised for about five years in terms of its currency for returning to study. There can be good reason for this. Some fields evolve very quickly, particularly those linked to technology. If a student has had too long a gap between periods of engagement in higher education, s/he may have critical knowledge or skills gaps, which will impact on his/her ability to succeed.

However, 'shelf-life' might need to be rethought for industry-focused micro-credentials. In the case of upskilling or continuing professional development, any gap in academic engagement is likely to be mitigated by an individual's ongoing engagement with that discipline through his/her employment. Where currency of relevant knowledge and skills is supported by industry, there is no disadvantage associated with shelf-life. There might need to be an element of 'buyer-beware' for somebody stepping in and out of engagement with higher education but, in many respects, that is no different to anybody entering a programme of study or electing to take a particular module once enrolled with a provider.

For instances where an individual is looking to reskill to enable a career, as opposed to upskill within a field, clearly-articulated expectations of prerequisite knowledge and skills will be important, as will information on the content, aims, learning outcomes and assessment for the module. But doesn't this sound familiar? These are reasonable expectations for any offering and no different to any other provision – they are not additional.

Credit frameworks

All three credit frameworks in the UK are able to support micro-credentials and the recognition of prior learning.

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (2015) has the support of lifelong learning as one of its explicit aims. One of its principles (principle 20) states that it should 'facilitate and promote credit recognition for prior informal and non-formal learning and credit transfer'. The Scottish sector also has a formal, national Recognition of Prior Learning Framework.

The Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (2019) includes sections on the recognition of prior learning and also addresses unitised accredited learning and vendor/industry/professional learning as part of its Lifelong Learning Pillar.

The Higher Education Credit Framework for England (2nd edition – draft as at December 2020) is in the process of being revised at the time of writing. A draft was shared with the sector for consultation in December 2020 and a final version, revised in light of responses to that consultation, will be published in May 2021. This new edition includes a section on micro-credentials, as well as consideration of short courses and executive education.

Credible credentials

Credibility is another challenge that arises from these short modules, even if they bear credit awarded by a university. They are a different experience for the learner. There has been a lot of media coverage this last academic year around the impact of COVID-19 on the student experience. Some of the conclusions have been that the pivot to blended (and mostly online) learning has been an enormous challenge and change for staff but has been less of an issue for students. Instead, what has affected students the most is the loss of access to facilities and that wider 'traditional' student experience.

This varies with the type of provider (for example, campus-based or integrated within a town or city); student characteristics (for example, undergraduate/postgraduate, resident/commuting, full-time/part-time) and academic discipline (for example, humanities, creative arts, lab-based science, subjects allied to medicine, education). There is also a widely-held view that there is added value from having a relatively uninterrupted, linear and immersive experience of higher education, aside from the degree itself. A higher education experience comprising small units of learning, gained over an elongated period perhaps from more than one provider and punctuated by time spent outside study, is very different from the traditional 'residential' experience. To have credibility among students and employers, it will require different communication, engagement and support.

The only way is up, or 'stackability'

A successful higher education experience traditionally leads to a degree. Many employment opportunities will stipulate applicants should hold a degree or have achieved a particular level of qualification. Evidencing that achievement remains difficult for someone who may amass a collection of micro-credentials which are not formally recognised as a qualification or 'group award'. Micro-credentials also have a role in lifelong learning and some might argue that an end qualification could interrupt that role. On those grounds, there is value in allowing an individual to amass micro-credentials throughout a career and record them just as s/he would employment history.

If we want micro-credentials to be as enabling as possible, the issue of 'stackability' comes into play where we should consider how an end-qualification might be achieved by the accumulation of multiple micro-credentials over time.

Whether a learner wishes only to study for one or two micro-credentials, amass a collection of them, or build them into a more substantive single entity or group award, the achievement of each one needs formal confirmation through appropriate accreditation documentation. This is not bureaucratic in the derogatory sense of the word – it is simply what a learner might reasonably expect in order to produce evidence of successful completion. The European Commission project has developed a 'Proposed EU Standard of constitutive elements of micro-credentials'.[3] While providers in the UK might not wish to follow this model precisely, there is key information which could be provided and might, for example, include:

- learner name/identification
- title of the micro-credential
- awarding body
- date of issue
- workload in CATS/ECTS
- level of study

- mode of learning
- aims and learning outcomes
- mark/grade achieved
- Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) and Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) code
- any PSRB recognition

This is information regarding an approved credit-bearing programme of study that a provider might reasonably be expected to hold in its management information system. Providing a learner with these details and confirmation of their success on a micro-credential does not seem unduly onerous, particularly as any student should be provided with a transcript of their period of study with a provider, irrespective of when they end their enrolment.

New Zealand manages this through the requirement for all micro-credentials to be recorded with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Providers are strongly encouraged to forward the names of all successful candidates of micro-credentials to the NZQA so that the achievement is recorded on the learner's New Zealand Record of Achievement (NZRoA). The system of micro-credentials is more tightly regulated in New Zealand than the UK. It is not necessary to introduce such a system in order to enable stackability of micro-credentials, although visibility and credibility may be helped through some form of 'digital passport', as Sue Reece has suggested.[4]

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3   See A European approach to micro-credentials (europa.eu), Box 5, p13

4   Not in the public domain at present

The greatest impediment to stackability, even with a reasonable level of information evidencing the achievement of a micro-credential, is the sense of coherence of award. Higher education providers can already recognise micro-credentials that have been awarded by other providers through recognition of prior learning but, in making an award of an end qualification, they do need to have confidence in the overall coherence of that award.

One way round this might be for providers to partner into consortia and explicitly recognise the micro-credentials of each other. In some respects, this is what underpins progression and articulation agreements that frequently exist between providers, and other models of such consortia have existed previously.

Another option might be the opportunity to learn from practice in research degrees and take a more learner-led approach. 'PhD by Publication' is now widely-accepted as a valid route towards attaining a doctoral qualification. There is no time limit or shelf-life imposed on those publications because the point is rather how the candidate presents them and draws out a narrative. While there might be a need for some providers to review their RPL policies to enable something similar at the level of taught degrees, the possibility that a provider could develop a single capstone module - arguably at each level - that would enable a learner to make the case for the coherence of what they have achieved through micro-credentials, thereby enabling a group award, is at least conceivable. This would be supported if, as suggested in the EU approach, a broad discipline indicator such as a CAH or, arguably, even a HECoS code were included on the confirmation of successful completion of a micro-credential. A distinct advantage is that this does not require the creation of new frameworks or types of qualification.

It is possible that a new qualification could be introduced which would specifically recognise the accumulation of micro-credentials. The potential benefits are that it could be less daunting to attain, with a lower credit requirement and fewer - or no - stipulations around minimum or maximum credit achieved at particular levels within higher education, and it need not require coherence around subject focus. Any developments in this direction would need to ensure that there was no compromise to the common understanding of academic standards and that the new qualification was clearly distinct from the qualifications that already exist, including those that are more commonly exit qualifications such as a Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education. At the same time, the relationship with current frameworks would need to be determined so that the ethos of lifelong learning was still enabled and a learner could continue on their journey, building on their existing achievements without disadvantage.

In a report commissioned by QAA, Professor Sue Reece outlines five potential models for UK-based micro-credentials:

UK-based micro-credentials models
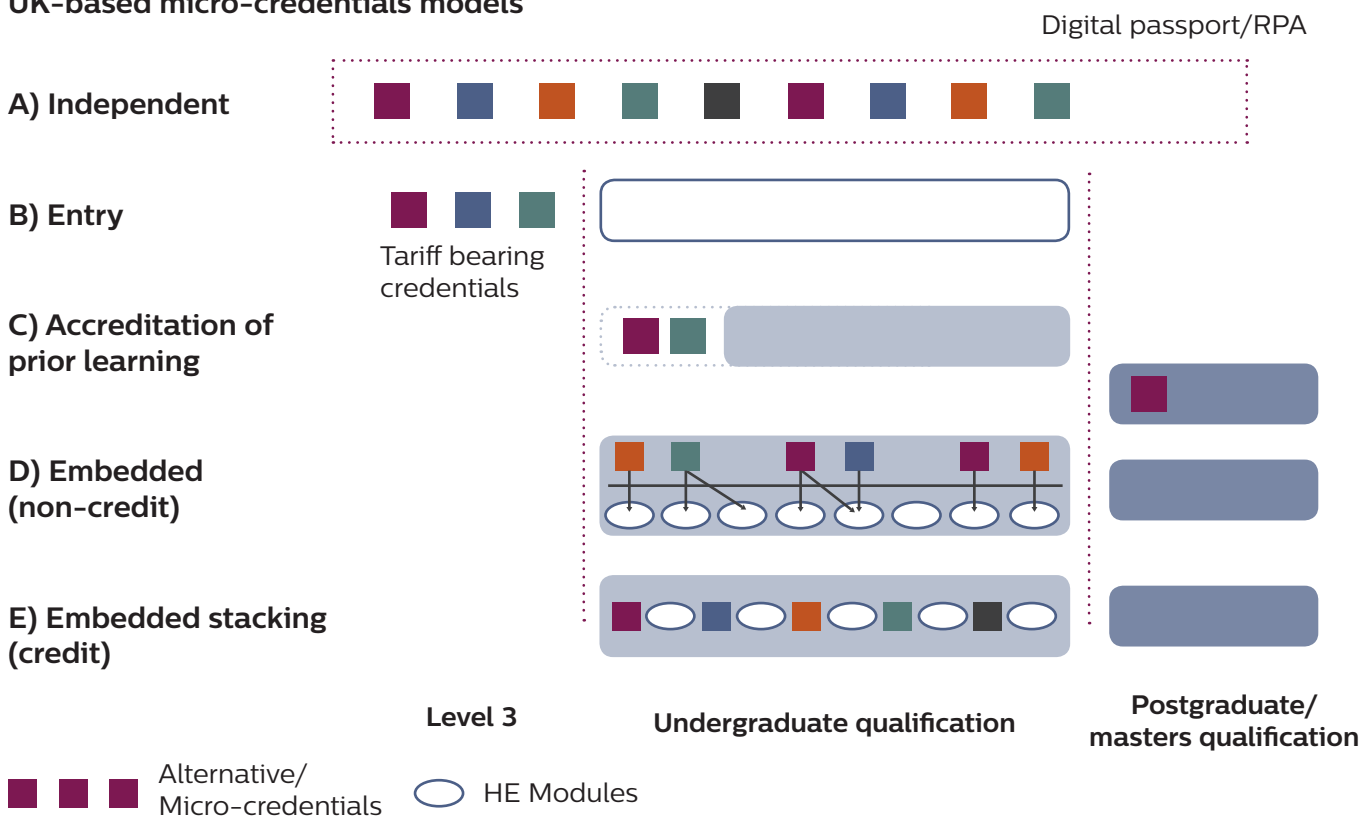
These are summarised as follows:

Model A) Independent: The learner builds skills and knowledge relevant to their individual or employer needs through a series of micro-credentials; successful completion and/or assessment outcomes are categorised and recorded in a digital passport.

Models B) and C): Micro-credentials are used as entry to standard degree or postgraduate qualifications either through the admissions process, whereby they are allocated tariff points, or credit exemption through a record of prior learning or accreditation. This system is already in use with the higher education sector but can be an onerous and overly bureaucratic process for both the learner and the institution with many stating it is easier to retake the credit within the degree programme.

Model D) Embedded (non-credit): Micro-credentials including digital badges are used to allow learners to acquire skills and competencies, from a variety of global providers, that scaffold a core of reflective, applied practice-based, capstone project or real-world learning leading to a recognised university degree/postgraduate qualification.

Model E) Embedded stacking

Professor Reece explores all of these models further, including the benefits and challenges of each for learners, providers and employers. The report can be accessed on the QAA Membership Resources site.

Policy landscape

In December 2020, the Westminster Government announced more details around the Lifetime Skills Guarantee with a list of courses which, from April 2021, will be free to adults of any age without a full qualification at Level 3 (or equivalent). The White Paper – Skills for Jobs – spoke further about the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, noting that this was a key recommendation from the Augar Report and would 'provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years' worth of post-18 education to use over their lifetime' (paragraph 77). The White Paper outlines this proposal as follows:

> *'The loan entitlement will be useable for modules at higher technical and degree levels (levels 4 to 6) regardless of whether they are provided in colleges or universities, as well as for full years of study.' (paragraph 78)*

However, as the White Paper also cautions, this will be a very significant change to the student finance system – and it has not yet been approved by the Treasury. Without this funding, there are some doubts about whether learners who have not yet had an opportunity to engage successfully in higher education, and/or are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, will take up micro-credentials.

Questions for providers

Irrespective of the size of a micro-credential, all learners have expectations about access to learning resources and support. There are questions providers will need to consider in relation to the full entitlement of students on micro-credentials. Are there sufficient library and learning resources to meet the needs of all students, particularly if there are large fluctuations in the number of learners? If these are learners who have been away from higher education for some time, they are likely to need additional support in academic skills and potentially specialist careers advice. There are also the pastoral support considerations, such as access to a counselling service. Furthermore, there are questions around engagement with the student representation system including the students' union or equivalent. These are all critical factors for institutional planning.

Another key concern for higher education providers will be the implications for student outcomes, particularly those around retention and employability, not least because student outcomes are currently taken as a proxy for quality and value.

To take retention first, there are many reasons why learners may not complete a short, credit-bearing course. As with any course, there is an onus on the provider to design a course and provide complementary support which, together, give students the best opportunity to succeed and achieve their potential. However, with a smaller investment of time and money, a learner may deliberately choose not to submit for assessment if s/he decides s/he does not want or need the confirmation of academic credit or is satisfied simply to have had the learning experience on the course. Under current forms of reporting, this could have a significant detrimental impact on the provider's retention data.

With respect to employability, if micro-credentials are intended to facilitate lifelong learning, how and when would we measure the impact on employability? Providers might want some reassurance in this area before they invest in an expansion of micro-credentials.

Which way now?

The interest in micro-credentials as a developing and, potentially, significantly expanding area of practice raises the question of what could and – more pertinently – should be done to support and enable developments. As Emeritus Professor Beverley Oliver concluded in her keynote address at the Quality Insights conference on 23 February 2021:

> *'By 2025, depending on how we proceed, micro-credentials will be seen as a fad that disappointed us, or a key step towards reimagining lifelong learning for thriving and surviving'.*

For micro-credentials to be a sustainable development and deliver lifelong learning as hoped, there will need to be a significant rethink of the experience of higher education and the value of a learner-directed, employability-focused approach. What are the implications for the learner of a sporadic engagement in higher education, studying for relatively small credit-loads? Such learners may have an interest in higher education but might primarily regard themselves as, for example an employee. This has implications for higher education providers and other sector agencies, such as the National Union of Students.

We will keep a watching brief on international developments. While we will not necessarily be driven by what is happening elsewhere, there is value in maintaining a global perspective, not least to avoid unnecessary barriers to mobility being introduced.

More immediately, we do not see a need for a new framework aimed specifically at micro-credentials. We do see opportunities in exploring the possibilities of what can be achieved with the existing credit frameworks. Our forward plan of work includes offering advice, most likely in the form of a characteristics statement which we will develop in consultation with our members, alongside a series of opportunities to share and shape practice.

We have a number of projects underway which will inform our thinking, including:

1   'Exploring the potential of micro-credentials and digital badging' – a Collaborative Cluster project which is part of the current QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme 'Resilient Learning Communities' (see case study below)

2   'Modular learning by design not default' – a Collaborative Enhancement Partnership (CEP) project, led by Bath College and involving partners including Bath Spa University, Middlesex University, Staffordshire University and Coventry University. CEP projects are part of the QAA Membership offer in England aimed at supporting innovative practice.

Through this range of work, we will begin addressing key considerations around the challenges and the opportunities of micro-credentials.

Exploring micro-credentials and digital badges

This project is a collaboration between Scottish universities, as part of the QAA Scotland Enhancement Theme. We are exploring the landscape of micro-credentials and digital badges, acknowledging the complexity and variety between and within different organisations. We are seeking the views of a range of stakeholders as a foundation to the project. We have identified four stakeholder groups:

University staff
Micro-credentials are important to universities for a range of reasons. Micro-credentials may be used as the basis of a degree, or as an access point to further study. University staff may be responsible for student admissions or for delivering the material that composes micro-credentials. As providers, university senior management also has responsibility for what might be the strategic direction of an institutional micro-credential offering.

Current students
Current students on degree programmes may wish to complement their studies with micro-credentials which capture 'soft' skills, or which are outside the scope of their degree. They may also wish for recognition of extra-curricular activities which would stand them in good stead in their future careers.

Alumni, apprentices and graduate apprentices
This group represents the widest range of backgrounds. Alumni may wish to take advantage of micro-credentials post-graduation, which help them in their career, or support them to change career. Apprentices may not have considered university study or continuing professional development but may be interested in short courses with a particular focus. Graduate apprentices may be looking for skills-based units of learning to supplement their development or their studies.

Employers
Employers may need to be reassured about the importance or the robustness of a micro-credential, compared to a degree programme. Their views about hiring based on micro-credentials and what they would look for is important, as is the possibility of using them for continuing professional development.

We are in the early stages of the process, but what is becoming clear is the range of experience across the sector. We have some institutions that have developed an institutional approach to micro-credentials, while others are just beginning to explore them. There are many drivers behind the current interest in micro-credentials, external and internal, and we seek to explore what the future holds. You can read more about the project on the Enhancement Themes website.

Assistant Professor Anne Tierney, Heriot-Watt University

Useful resources and further reading

https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/jtlge/article/view/942

https://dteach.deakin.edu.au/2019/08/02/microcredentials

https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/a-european-approach-to-micro-credentials_en

https://enqa.eu/index.php/events/enqa-webinar-micro-credentials-and-the-role-of-external-quality-assurance/

https://microcredentials.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/02/Microbol_State-of-play-of-MCs-in-the-EHEA.pdf

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/resilient-learning-communities/collaborative-clusters/exploring-the-potential-of-micro-credentials-and-digital-badging

www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/student-transitions/open-badges-in-the-scottish-he-sector09b49abe03dc611ba4caff000043ed24.pdf

https://membershipresources.qaa.ac.uk/s/article/Members-Project-Update-Micro-credentials