



Modular learning by design and not default

Guide to Micro-Credential Design

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Introduction:

This guide is intended for staff in the higher education sector who wish to design and deliver micro-credentials in the context of Government policies regarding lifelong learning (the Lifelong Loan Entitlement or LLE). Micro-credentials provide flexible opportunities for learners to address skills gaps in the short term (for example, by up-skilling or re-skilling), particularly in areas of national skills need. Micro-credentials provide opportunities for collaboration between HEIs and the public and private sectors. However, to meet the ambitions of the LLE and of learners, we also need to support learners who might wish to build these micro-credentials into larger qualifications or macro-credentials, so that their experience is meaningful and valuable to their own career development and to employers alike.

We publish the guide in the context of rapidly changing policy. We intend that the guide should provide a better understanding of the needs of learners and employers and how best to meet those needs to create more flexible – yet still coherent – learner-led opportunities.

We base this work on the definition within the QAA Micro-Credentials Characteristics Statement, published in May 2022. (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/the-quality-code/characteristics-statements/micro-credentials>). The QAA define a micro-credential as:

- credit-bearing against a recognised level of the Qualifications Frameworks;
- subject to standard quality assurance mechanisms;
- not normally an award in its own right on the Qualifications Frameworks, although there are no upper or lower limits on the amount of credit that a micro-credential carries.

The QAA Statement sets out that micro-credentials should be ‘distinct from macro-credentials in that they typically represent a shorter or narrower engagement with a subject’ and that they ‘enable learning, assessment and the award of credit to take place in a period that is less than a single academic cycle’. We therefore identify micro-credentials as providing agility both for learner engagement and for meeting the skills needs of industry and the wider economy in the context of the LLE.

The Government released its response to the LLE consultation in March 2023. (There is a full [consultation response](#), an [impact assessment](#), an [equalities analysis](#), and a [written ministerial statement](#)). The Government intends the LLE to ‘empower more people to study in a way that works for them, opening up opportunities for those that might have never considered higher education’. This documentation includes the following guidance regarding course structure:

1. Each course must carry a minimum of 30 credits for funding purposes (which can also be achieved bundling smaller modules together).
2. All fundable courses will need to be part of a ‘parent course’ so that modules can be stacked towards full qualifications.
3. All must have a single qualification level and credit value, which is the same as when the module appears in the parent course.
4. Each course must be assessed.

We are mindful of feedback from learners that 30 credits represents a significant investment in time and funding for any learner and that this may deter some learners from taking up this opportunity. Indeed, Staffordshire University has recommended that Government should ensure that micro-credentials with a value of less than 30 credits should qualify for funding via the LLE. We assume that there will be a need for micro-credentials that are more easily accessible to a learner, perhaps in the region of 5 to 10 credits in size, which could potentially be bundled in larger credit sizes. For the purposes of the current guide, we therefore assume that a number of HEIs may wish to design micro-credentials that range in size from 5 through to 40 credits.

Although micro-credentials may be offered at all levels of the Qualifications Frameworks, we have based this guide on Levels 4 to 6 of The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ) as we believe this is the area in which the majority of demand is likely to exist.

Although current Government guidance suggests that fundable modules should be part of a parent course, we note that micro-credentials will require significant adaptation for the purposes of learners and employers.

Principles:

We have set out the following principles that may inform the design and development of micro-credentials in the current landscape:

General:

- Micro-credentials should be centred around the needs of learners.
- Micro-credentials should enable agility and flexibility for learners.
- Micro-credentials should enable educational gain for learners.
- The success of micro-credentials and credit accumulation systems will lie in a learner-led approach, but some LLE learners may be new to self-directed learning and will require scaffolding to make this happen.

Access to micro-credentials:

- Micro-credentials should provide access routes into HE for a wide range of learners, including harder-to-reach learners (e.g. in low IMD quintiles and Participation of Local Areas [POLAR] classifications).
- Where possible, micro-credentials should include alternative modes of delivery to meet the varying needs of learners.
- Micro-credentials require ethical admissions policies and processes.
- Curriculum and learning resources should be diverse and inclusive.

Support for micro-credential learners:

- Micro-credential learners require effective career education, information, advice and guidance both prior to enrolment and during their studies.
- Micro-credential learners require pastoral scaffolding and wrap-around.
- Learners require appropriate support in learning and access to appropriate learning resources (including relevant library services).

Micro-credential design:

- Micro-credentials should feature a flexible and learner-centred approach.
- Micro-credential learners should have access to bite-sized micro-credential provision.
- Micro-credentials may be required to relate to parent provision for LLE purposes but any existing modules require significant adaptation in order to function effectively outside of a macro-credential structure.
- Intended learning outcomes should be proportionate to credit size – we propose a maximum of two intended learning outcomes per five credits.
- Summative assessment should be proportionate to credit size – we suggest one summative assessment per five credits.
- Constructive alignment should exist between learning outcomes and assessment.
- Where a suite of micro-credentials is created, its units should be coherent.
- Where possible, micro-credentials should be designed with stackability in mind: skills and competencies may enable stacking into macro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials should enable community of learning – where possible there should be opportunities for peer learning.
- Learners may wish to choose whether or not they take micro-credentials for credit.
- Micro-credentials should be designed to develop specific knowledge and skills.
- Micro-credentials should feature authentic experience-based activities and assessments.
- Where possible, opportunities should exist for negotiated summative assessment.
- Micro-credentials should use relevant and appropriate technologies and learners should have opportunities to evaluate, enhance and develop their digital capabilities.

Employability:

- HEIs should embrace employer focus and co-creation in designing micro-credentials.
- Micro-credentials should be targeted to specific industry needs (which may include transferable skills).
- Micro-credentials should be developed according to a competency-based approach.
- Micro-credentials should ensure professional application.
- Micro-credentials may include industry/PSRB recognition, digital badging or accreditation – in some cases HEIs may stipulate that the onus will be on the learner to claim CPD activity towards any accreditation provided by professional bodies.
- A skills profiling approach may be used to provide learners with an indication of their skills coverage, using simply defined terms within learning outcomes.

Collaboration and stackability:

- HEIs may need to form consortia to facilitate the transferability of micro-credentials
- HEIs should create an educational ecosystem for the micro-credential through design and provision of a digital learning environment.
- In the absence of a parent programme, the institution should develop a range of generic learning outcomes against which micro-credentials may be mapped.

Steps for micro-credential design:

We propose a number of steps for the design of micro-credentials. Many of these are similar to processes used in designing macro-credentials.

Step 1:

- Identify vision and values for the micro-credential.
- Decide rationale for the micro-credential (with industry co-curation).
- Identify target learner demographics (with industry co-curation).
- Identify potential compatible industry or PSRB approval or accreditation (with industry co-curation).

Step 2:

- Decide on level.
- Decide on credit size (likely to be between 5 and 40 credits).
- Decide on mode of delivery.

Step 3:

- Devise learning outcomes (with industry co-curation, aiming for a proportionate approach).
- Ensure that learning outcomes define skills clearly.

Step 4:

- Devise learning and teaching strategy (with industry co-curation, aiming for an experiential approach where possible).
- Devise assessment and feedback strategy (with industry co-curation, aiming for work-based assessment where possible).

Step 5:

- Devise learning and teaching content and activities (with industry co-curation).
- Build opportunities for reflection and feedback.

Step 6:

- Devise formative and summative assessment activities (with industry co-curation).

Step 7:

- Finalise outline syllabus.

Step 8:

- Identify learning resources (ensuring that these are available to micro-credential learners).

Step 9:

- Finalise any PSRB recognition or approval.