



Characteristics Statement

Micro-credentials

May 2022

Contents

About this Statement	1
How can I use this document?	1
Relationship to legislation	1
Micro-credentials.....	1
1 Definition	3
1.1 Background to the definition.....	3
1.2 Micro-credentials versus macro-credentials	3
1.3 Level	3
1.4 Subject.....	4
1.5 Size.....	4
1.6 International definitions	4
1.7 Professional development provision within colleges and other sectors.....	5
2 Context and purpose of micro-credentials	6
2.1 Context	6
2.2 Purpose	6
3 Characteristics of the learner	8
4 Admissions and access, including Recognition of Prior Learning	9
4.1 Information.....	9
4.2 Student support and resources	10
4.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).....	10
5 Course design, including learning and teaching, and assessment	13
5.1 Course design.....	13
5.2 Pathways and 'stackable' credits.....	14
5.3 Flexibility	14
5.4 Learning and teaching	15
5.5 Assessment	16
5.6 Reasonable adjustments and inclusivity.....	16
5.7 Employer and PSRB involvement	17
6 Certification	18
7 Quality management of micro-credentials	19
7.1 What does the term 'standard quality assurance mechanisms' mean?.....	19
7.2 Course design and development.....	20
7.3 Assessment and award.....	20
7.4 Monitoring and review.....	21
7.5 Student engagement.....	21
7.6 Partnership working	21
8 Membership of the Advisory Network	23

About this Statement

The role of a Characteristics Statement

Characteristics Statements are closely linked to *The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (the Qualifications Frameworks). They complement and contextualise the information provided within the Qualifications Frameworks, providing more detail about the distinctive features of qualifications at particular levels of the frameworks and/or of qualifications at any level, which are awarded in a particular way. Characteristics Statements for qualifications sit alongside these resources to help providers develop courses and refine curricula, but are not part of the regulated requirements for higher education providers in the UK.

This document is a Characteristics Statement about short credit-bearing courses (or micro-credentials) that would not constitute an award in their own right but which might contribute towards a recognised qualification (macro-credential). It describes the distinctive features of these types of awards.

Characteristic Statements are published in QAA's capacity as a membership organisation on behalf of the higher education sector.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Statement can be found in QAA's [Glossary](#).

How can I use this document?

Characteristics Statements are used by higher education providers in the design and development of new provision and as a reference point when reviewing or revalidating existing provision. They provide general guidance for the distinctive features and structure of types of courses and qualifications, allowing for flexibility and innovation in design within a framework agreed by the subject community. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes of micro-credentials in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as an enhancement tool for the design and approval of short courses, and for subsequent monitoring and review.

Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider who awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

Micro-credentials

Although the term 'micro-credentials' is relatively new, the concept of short courses - both credit-bearing and otherwise - is not, and there is a long and established track record for this type of provision being offered in many higher education providers. The introduction of the term 'micro-credentials', however, has brought with it a global interest in increasing the scope, potential and credibility of credit-bearing short courses, driven by changing needs of industry and society.

Micro-credentials are distinctive because they can be studied independently of a traditional qualification (or 'macro-credential') as described in the Qualifications Frameworks, having

standalone value as well as the opportunity to contribute to a larger package of learning. They also have a recognised role in upskilling and reskilling the workforce and in creating accessible pathways into higher education for non-traditional learners. They can play an important role in widening access to and participation in higher education, and can support social mobility. Much of this type of provision will be driven by industry need and, therefore, employers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) are likely to be involved in quality management processes.

Micro-credentials also test the limits of credit accumulation and transfer arrangements that are recognised in different parts of the UK. A key premise of them is that a learner can engage with different higher education providers for discrete aspects of learning and accumulate credit from a range of providers that could amount to a 'stacked' qualification.

When planning and designing micro-credentials, providers should always ensure that they check any regulatory requirements of the relevant funding and/or regulatory body/ies for their nation. Opportunities for funding may also be subject to certain conditions - for example, volume of credit and length of period for study.

Key reference points

QAA

[The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications](#) (the Qualifications Frameworks)
[Subject Benchmark Statements](#)
[Credit Framework for England](#)
[UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#)

UK regulatory and funding bodies

England:

[Office for Students](#) (OfS)
[Regulatory framework for higher education in England](#)

Northern Ireland:

Department for Economy (DfENI): [higher education division](#)

Scotland:

[Scottish Funding Council](#) (SFC)
[Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) (SCQF)
[Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) Policy](#)

Wales:

[Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) (HEFCW)
[Credit and Qualification Framework Wales](#) (CQRW)

European definitions and guidance

[Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for life-long learning and employability](#)
[Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Individual Learning Accounts](#)

International definitions and guidance

[UNESCO: Towards a common definition of micro-credentials](#) (EduBrief)

1 Definition

For the purposes of this Characteristics Statement and UK higher education, a micro-credential is:

- 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.

1.1 Background to the definition

This definition was first proposed following research into practice and intentions of the UK higher education sector with regard to micro-credentials and in the context of emerging definitions within Europe and globally. While setting down some necessary parameters, the overall aims of the definition seek to: recognise the institutional autonomy within the UK higher education sector; provide sufficient flexibility for innovation; and safeguard the reputation and authority of higher education providers and degree-awarding bodies.

1.2 Micro-credentials versus macro-credentials

Historically in the UK, higher education qualifications for the purposes of work and further study are those set out in *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies* (the Qualifications Frameworks). These are typically certificates of higher education or postgraduate certificates; diplomas of higher education or postgraduate diplomas; foundation, bachelor's and master's degrees; and doctorates. They are awarded on the basis of successful study of, and assessment in, a particular subject, with defined overarching learning outcomes in the case of taught qualifications. There will be minimum and maximum enrolment periods within which successful completion must take place, usually a minimum of one year full-time study (for example, for a certificate of higher education) through to several years (for example, for a part-time doctorate). These types of qualifications can be referred to as 'macro-credentials'.

Micro-credentials are distinct from macro-credentials in that they typically represent a shorter or narrower engagement with a subject. They enable learning, assessment and the award of credit to take place in a period that is less than a single academic cycle. They are also more commonly considered as a form of continuing professional development or an opportunity either to upskill or reskill. As such, they have an important role in lifelong learning, with learners engaging in them periodically over a lifetime.

1.3 Level

Micro-credentials can be offered at all levels of the Qualifications Frameworks, from *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding Bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) Levels 4-8 and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS) Levels 7-12. Providers in Scotland and Wales may also be able to make use of any opportunities extended by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) and the *Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales* (CQFW) respectively where the relevant regulatory and/or overseeing authorities

permit. The focus of this Characteristics Statement, however, is micro-credentials within higher education across the UK.

Micro-credentials can be additional, alternate or complementary to, or a component of, formal qualifications. Their role in upskilling and/or reskilling means many will involve work-based learning but this is not solely the case.

While some international micro-credentials frameworks restrict the levels at which micro-credentials can be offered, that is not the case within the UK, although there may be implications for access to funding for some higher levels. When considering higher levels, and particularly FHEQ Level 8 / SCQF Level 12, higher education providers should take account of how these micro-credentials meet expectations of those levels. In terms of building towards a macro-credential at FHEQ Level 8 / SCQF Level 12, useful guidance may be drawn from the Characteristics Statement for Doctoral Degrees, particularly with regard to *Category 3: Professional and practice-based (or practitioner) doctorates*.

1.4 Subject

Although there is no restriction on subject, one of the main purposes of micro-credentials relates to employability so they most commonly address a specific industry need in terms of the knowledge or skills they seek to develop in participants. This does not preclude a provider offering micro-credentials to its more traditional students, such as currently-enrolled, full-time undergraduates. There will need to be careful consideration in these circumstances, however, around how the micro-credential offering relates to the academic framework that governs the degree programmes, such as whether they are additional credits, or part of the original programme, pre and co-requisites, and how they align with programme-level outcomes.

1.5 Size

Some micro-credential frameworks place parameters around the upper and lower limit of credit for a single module. While individual higher education providers may develop their own internal frameworks, there is no UK-wide restriction on upper and lower limits on module size other than the expectation that a micro-credential would not be at a level and size that would normally constitute an award in its own right according to the Qualifications Frameworks. This means that a provider may choose to develop a course of fewer than 5 credits if that is appropriate to the content, level and assessment; equally, a micro-credential could, for example, be 100 credits at undergraduate levels or 55 credits at postgraduate taught level. In practice, the majority of provision is being developed in the range of 5-40 credits, with some smaller courses at lower levels of the FHEQ or SCQF and where the focus is on a very specific skill.

An important point to remember when considering size is that the term 'micro-credential' does not necessarily refer to a very small module. Rather, it represents something that is being studied on a 'micro' level (that is, less than a recognised qualification such as a CertHE or PgCert) and which can stand alone and still have credibility and validity even if it is a module drawn from a larger programme or pathway.

1.6 International definitions

The term 'micro-credential' is recognised internationally and UNESCO is working towards a global definition that could support international credibility and portability of

micro-credentials. UNESCO's work acknowledges the need to accommodate differing approaches to quality assurance across nations.

The European Commission also made a proposal for a [Council Recommendation in December 2021 which includes a definition of micro-credentials](#). The ambition is for all Member States to agree on a common definition, as well as standard elements for their description of micro-credentials and key principles for design.

International work has informed the definition and approach outlined for the UK within this Characteristics Statement. This is a rapidly developing area of activity and, as practice evolves, QAA will continue to work with members to review and update guidance.

1.7 Professional development provision within colleges and other sectors

Many organisations other than higher education providers also offer focused professional development opportunities, some of which may use terminology that is associated with micro-credentials offered by the higher education sector. Where there is either no authority or partnership agreement for the award of recognised higher education academic credit, they fall outside of the scope of this Characteristics Statement. However, higher education providers may still wish to consider these in relation to applications made under Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies, particularly where the continuing professional development is linked to professional bodies that often work in partnership with higher education providers and operate rigorous standards around knowledge, skills and competencies. This would also include, for example, non-credit-bearing, employability-focused short courses that are offered within colleges and further education settings.

Terminology

There are a number of terms in use in relation to short courses, both for how the learning is expressed and how it is certificated. These include:

- nano-credentials
- micro-qualifications
- MicroMasters
- nano-degrees
- short courses
- modular pathways.

Some of these are specific to particular platform providers. Terminology is further complicated by the language around the certification/recognition of learning, such as:

- digital badges
- open badges.

While the use of different terms can be helpful where a provider wishes to differentiate between micro-credentials as defined here and, for example, unassessed non-credit-bearing, short courses within their portfolio, this Characteristics Statement is concerned with provision that meets the definition set out at the start of this section, irrespective of the precise nomenclature used by the provider, either for the learning itself or its certificate of evidence.

2 Context and purpose of micro-credentials

2.1 Context

Higher education providers have a long history of running short courses to complement their portfolio of certificates, diplomas and degrees. Most commonly, these short courses have either been non-credit-bearing (for example, those aimed at 'leisure learners'); or those that have accreditation by a PSRB and are intended to provide required continuing professional development to maintain accreditation in a particular sector (for example, for medical practitioners, teaching professionals or those working in finance or law).

Interest has grown globally regarding the potential of short, focused courses to provide upskilling or reskilling of the workforce. This has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic which has seen a rapid development of technology and need for improved digital skills. This thinking has already influenced government policy across the UK and some higher education providers within the UK are already well-advanced in developing and running micro-credentials.

The European MOOC Consortium's (EMC) Common Micro-credential Framework (CMF) was launched in 2019 and provides an internationally-recognised structure that can be used. While there are undoubtedly benefits in following the CMF, in some aspects it is restrictive, requiring the size of the module to be 10 or 15 credits. By contrast, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority permits micro-credentials between 5 and 40 credits, whereas other agencies do not specify any parameters (for example, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency).

While this international context might helpfully inform the strategy of individual UK higher education providers, the national policy interest in micro-credentials rests on their potential to fulfil industry needs and increase opportunities for individuals to benefit from higher education. Thus, a range of factors will influence the design of micro-credentials, including size, and this Characteristics Statement does not seek to be prescriptive on this point other than to note that, if a micro-credential would be the equivalent in terms of credit and level of a recognised macro-credential on the Qualifications Framework, then that macro-credential should be awarded instead.

Another important consideration for micro-credentials relates to their credibility.

Macro-credentials are widely understood already but an understanding of micro-credentials is still evolving. To protect the reputation of the sector and the value of micro-credentials to the learner, higher education providers need to be as conscientious about ensuring appropriate quality assurance arrangements of micro-credentials as they are for other provision in their portfolio. This is discussed in more detail in the Quality Management section below. Higher education providers need to be transparent in their quality assurance arrangements around micro-credentials to protect the reputation of the sector.

2.2 Purpose

Employment

Owing to their short, focused nature, micro-credentials enable an agile response by higher education providers to industry needs, whether in addressing evolving technology or filling skills gaps that develop through rapid and continuous change. As a consequence, they have an important role in lifelong learning that enables the workforce to meet change by enabling upskilling, reskilling and career migration.

Flexible pathways into and through higher education

At an individual level, micro-credentials provide a flexible way for learners to engage with higher education and achieve authentic academic credit. There is a particular emphasis on learner autonomy and authority. Rather than a sequence of modules being dictated by the higher education provider, as would be the case in a traditional degree programme, learners can select specific areas in which they wish to develop knowledge and/or skills to meet their needs, and (within reason) when to engage. This flexibility benefits learners who are not in a position to commit the time and financial resource necessary to complete a degree programme at a particular higher education provider and/or within more usual, limited timeframes.

In this way, **micro-credentials have the potential to provide an alternative route to obtaining a traditional degree**, particularly if a learner seeks to accrue modules in a way that allows them to be fitted together, building or stacking credit towards a qualification and thereby creating a learner-designed qualification. It should be noted, however, that there are challenges in a learner designing and accumulating in a modular manner, particularly if the credit is achieved across a number of different providers. Under current pricing arrangements, it is likely to be more expensive. Other challenges include the risk that a learner struggles with a sense of belonging, and continually has to navigate different systems and Recognition of Prior Learning processes. The time and effort involved in familiarising themselves with a range of different approaches, resources and support services might also impact on the space available for extra-curricular skills development.

3 Characteristics of the learner

The design of micro-credentials and the support for learners engaging with them will need to take account of diverse needs and backgrounds.

This could include:

- extent of previous engagement with higher education opportunities
- support around needs associated with a disability
- the opportunities that the learners have to engage with the course around other commitments (both work and personal)
- challenges associated with geographical location in relation to the higher

The characteristics of micro-credentials should also be driven by the characteristics of learners. First, many of these learners are likely to have a number of competing priorities and are unlikely to see themselves foremost as a student, if at all. This could affect how they perceive their relationship with the higher education provider and how they engage both with the course itself and the provider more generally.

Second, the nature of micro-credentials and lifelong learning means that learners might have episodic engagement in higher education over a long period. In addition to this, many may have had no previous experience of higher education, with some very mixed experiences of earlier education too. This could present significant implications for academic skills and these considerations need to inform the design and delivery of the micro-credential as well as the broader support available. (This is discussed further under section 5 - 'Course design, including learning and teaching, and assessment'.)

Where learners have no previous experience of higher education, providers should also consider some of the reasons for this and why micro-credentials might now be particularly attractive as an option.

At the same time, there is early evidence that interest in micro-credentials is likely to come from graduates - or those who have had at least some engagement with higher education - who are seeking to extend knowledge or skills. The expectations and needs of these learners are likely to be very different to those who are new to higher education.

Particularly in the case of reskilling or where a learner does not have employer sponsorship, higher education providers also need to respond to a range of different personal circumstances, including digital poverty. Many people, particularly in rural and coastal areas, are also some distance from a higher education provider.

4 Admissions and access, including Recognition of Prior Learning

4.1 Information

At the outset, to support learners in identifying appropriate courses and planning their career development, providers should ensure there is clear information on:

- the prior knowledge and/or skills that a learner will need to have in order to succeed on the course
- what will be necessary for success on the course, both in terms of engagement and achievement
- how the micro-credential is meeting the needs of industry and what those industries typically are
- other micro-credentials that are complementary to the one under consideration, including opportunities to develop areas of expertise and potentially build towards a larger recognised qualification (a macro-credential)
- advice on credit accumulation and transfer between providers, including where micro-credentials may have been developed as part of a consortium approach.

Any terms specific to higher education should be carefully explained, and acronyms should be avoided.

Higher education providers will need to articulate clearly any **expectations of engagement** by the learner - for example, the number of hours overall that are likely to be required, the activities those hours cover (including independent study), and any patterns or milestones including the forms and timing of assessment.

An important feature is the **learner-led ethos** of a micro-credential. As such, providers may consider whether it is appropriate in all cases to timetable engagement and to set start and end dates for a micro-credential or whether individual learners can be supported in choosing when they commence the course, engage in it and submit for assessment. In this latter case, a provider will need to be clear on any absolute timeframes - for example, the point after it is assumed that the learner has withdrawn.

Any **terms and conditions** should also be made available in advance and presented in a user-friendly format and language. This should include whether there is an opportunity for a learner to suspend studies and, if so, any restrictions related to this, as well as options for returning subsequently and/or eligibility for any refund of fee.

Higher education providers should be explicit both on the **resources** and **access to services** that will be available to a learner enrolled on a particular micro-credential and on the opportunities for student engagement in quality management processes.

Providers might consider whether links to any services, resources and policies need an accessible summary paragraph to introduce them to learners unfamiliar with higher education.

4.2 Student support and resources

The short nature of micro-credentials means that learners could have very little or no physical presence on campus, and their use of learning resources, whether in-person or remotely, could be over an intensive period and outside of normal teaching hours. **Higher education providers will need to plan carefully how they will provide appropriate support for these learners and enable them to access that support.** Part of this will be consideration of what facilities and resources the learners will be able to access - whether academic, academic-related or pastoral. These considerations will need to remain cognisant of the fact that a fee is being received for each learner; equally, not all services may be relevant and the learner is likely to need guidance on what is available and how best to navigate the offer.

Complete clarity on what support and resources are - or are not - included on a particular micro-credential must be in place prior to application and enrolment. This is essential for the learner to make an informed decision on whether to make an application and also to ensure that all relevant areas of the provider can deliver what has been offered.

4.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has a particularly important role to play in micro-credentials:

- 1) in managing admissions to micro-credentials in a way that supports ethical admissions practices without becoming overly burdensome
- 2) in supporting learners to use micro-credentials for entry to degree programmes
- 3) in enabling much greater flexibility around credit transfer than is typically the case while ensuring coherence of award and addressing the risk of duplication or double-counting.

1) Access to a micro-credential

Because micro-credentials are likely to be most commonly linked to industry, and are also very focused on a key skill or knowledge, traditional entry qualifications will have less significance in decisions on applications to micro-credential courses than would be the case with applications to full degree programmes. Instead, an applicant's prior experience in the specific area of the micro-credential will be of more relevance. **Providers will need to be very clear on what knowledge and/or skills a learner would need to have at the point of entry in order to be successful on the course.**

To support learners in making appropriate decisions, while not creating a burdensome or overly-bureaucratic admissions process, providers might devise an application process that enables learners to outline briefly how their existing knowledge or skills are sufficient for entry. This should be supported by guidance from the provider on what might be typical. Based on this information, a provider could seek further clarification where the information provided in the applications has exposed serious doubts about whether a learner might struggle to achieve the micro-credential or, conversely, already have achieved the skills and/or knowledge being covered.

Providers could also explore any opportunities or resources that enable a learner to self-test their understanding in advance of an application, particularly if there is a risk that articulate personal statements and work history/experience do not always provide a reliable indication of understanding in practice - for example, in some specialist STEM-related courses.

2) Using micro-credentials for entry to degree programmes

Micro-credentials can support access to existing degree programmes through their potential to be used at entry-level as well as for advanced standing. For example, they could play an important role in bridging from a foundation degree to a bachelor's degree and this could include an option either to retain the additional credit or set it against other credit on the programme. **Providers must be clear on whether successful completion of a micro-credential in this case guarantees entry to the programme or is intended only to enable a competitive application to be made.**

3) Credit transfer and 'stackability'

One of the policy drivers behind micro-credentials is the opportunity they provide learners to take control of their engagement with education, selecting short courses as and when they want, and on focused content that quickly delivers knowledge and skills. Some learners may find that this meets their needs sufficiently. There could be others, however, who would value the opportunity to build a series of micro-credentials into a recognised qualification, particularly those who do not currently hold a higher education qualification and might find that some employment opportunities are closed to them for that reason.

To date, there has been an expectation in UK higher education that any qualification - whether an exit or an entry qualification - will have a set of clearly-articulated learning outcomes that are embedded within an approved suite of modules and that the programme of study will have been through some form of design process to ensure coherence and value. The concept of 'stackability' potentially challenges this as the simple act of credit-counting has never been an acceptable proxy for acquiring a recognised qualification.

Policies relating to RPL exist at provider-level in most, if not all, higher education providers and Scotland has a national approach to RPL. While, in theory, students can transfer between providers across the UK, gaining advance standing at one provider on the basis of relevant academic credit that they have gained at another can be more challenging in reality. This is because providers seek to develop 'unique selling points' that distinguish their approach and programmes of study, and what might seem to be the same degree programme might not map across neatly between providers in terms of specific knowledge and skills development. Further, there is no expectation that credit accumulated from other subjects and disciplines should be accepted for advance standing where this means a student would have fundamental gaps in foundations.

Ethical admissions practices require that students are only admitted to a programme of study if there is a reasonable expectation that they will be able to complete it successfully. Gaps in key knowledge or skills will compromise that. Further, mapping programme detail across providers can be complex and labour-intensive, even when full documentation has been made available.

In addition, higher education providers vary considerably in terms of the percentage of the overall award they expect to have made directly themselves, but it is typically between one-third and two-thirds of the final qualification. This approach potentially places another barrier to a learner moving between providers.

Two possible approaches that could enable micro-credentials to be built into a macro-credential are set out below in section 5 - 'Course design, including learning and teaching, and assessment'. One refers to **consortium** approaches and the other posits the **use of a capstone module**. In both these approaches, current practices around the accepted minimum proportions of RPL will need to be revised.

The other challenges to standard practices around qualifications and RPL relate to **registration periods** for completion of an award and the sense of '**shelf-life**' that academic credit normally carries. Again, policies will vary across higher education providers but, typically, the validity of academic credit is considered to be around five years, and the longest period permitted to complete even a part-time undergraduate degree is rarely more than eight years, with many programmes being substantially shorter.

It may be appropriate with micro-credentials to set aside these regulations altogether. Particularly in the case of the model that asks the learner to make the case for a coherent overall experience with a capstone module, the final reflective process will mitigate the period of time since the oldest micro-credential took place. Lifelong learning does mean, however, that a degree could be built over a period of 30 or 40 years and, if setting aside these usual regulations is acceptable in the case of micro-credentials, providers will need to be clear why those regulations are still necessary for their standard degree programmes.

An important point about credit transfer across the sector is that, while there are the frameworks in place to support this, **an awarding body has no authority over whether or not another provider will accept academic credit that they have awarded**, whether for entry to a programme or for advance standing on it. Higher education providers should be clear on this point, both in the information relating to the micro-credential before a learner's enrolment, and through advising learners on future options for how they might use their academic credit. Consortia approaches with guided pathways mitigate this uncertainty, both with regard to gaps that undermine the coherence of an award and the risks of duplication or double-counting.

Current students and micro-credentials

Currently-enrolled students of a higher education provider might also seek to take a micro-credential to complement their substantive programme of study.

Higher education providers will need to consider the relationship of the micro-credential to the student's main course of study and be clear to the student on:

- whether it can be substituted for another component of their course
- any implications of learners potentially engaging in additional credit beyond the requirements of the degree on which they are enrolled.

This may have implications for how the micro-credential is recognised on the student's transcript.

Providers should also be careful to avoid confusion with other elements of choice that might be available within their taught academic frameworks, such as optional modules or electives, particularly if there could be consequences for the student's final award.

5 Course design, including learning and teaching, and assessment

5.1 Course design

Micro-credentials are often focused to target a specific set of learning outcomes. Where the emphasis is on a particular skill, higher education providers should take care that the micro-credential does not become a simple training offering with higher education academic credit attached to it.

Ensuring academic rigour and appropriate assessment will be key. The Qualifications Frameworks and, where appropriate, Subject Benchmark Statements can be used to support good design and mitigate this risk.

As outlined above in the section on 'Characteristics of learners', learners who engage with micro-credentials are likely to come with different reasons for undertaking study. These reasons might include:

- seeking opportunities to upskill (either because they have not previously had an opportunity for higher education or because of the evolving requirements of their industry)
- looking to reskill (for example, where they are looking to move into a new industry or career)
- seeking to explore a personal interest.

Course design will need to consider the reasons for study, particularly in ensuring that learners understand, and have a reasonable opportunity to meet, academic expectations. A useful resource that may support providers in meeting the needs of a diverse range of learners are the [Universal Design for Learning Guidelines](#), which identify barriers and suggest approaches to overcome them.

There will also need to be close working with the relevant industries and/or PSRBs to ensure that their needs are being met appropriately.

Micro-credentials should support a personalised, learner-led approach as far as possible. When a micro-credential has PSRB recognition, this may place some constraints on curriculum, learning outcomes and assessment. As far as possible, however, providers should seek to design the micro-credential in a way that enables the learner to determine when and how they engage, and to take a lead in designing assessment that enables them to meet the aims and learning outcomes for the award of academic credit.

Modules that are part of validated programmes might also be appropriate as a standalone micro-credential. However, in many circumstances, it will be unlikely that the module as originally designed and approved will be suitable for the needs of a learner seeking to engage with a micro-credential owing to the way it will have been designed and the likely mode of delivery. If a higher education provider is satisfied that a particular module is appropriate for a dual purpose, there will need to be careful consideration of whether or not learners engaging in a module as a micro-credential should be enrolled with a cohort of students who are taking the module as part of a degree programme. Where there are mixed cohorts on a single module, the overall group must be managed so that the academic experience is not compromised for any individual or sub-group.

5.2 Pathways and 'stackable' credits

While micro-credentials may be developed individually, creating groups of related modules and pathways for learner development will support progression and the lifelong learning ethos to which they are, in part, responding. It also gives the learner more agency in the extent to which they wish to study a topic at any one time and which aspects they wish to prioritise. **Because of the intention that a micro-credential will meet a particular need in an agile way, a course is unlikely to be over a year in length.**

To date, there has been an expectation in UK higher education that any qualification - whether an exit or an entry qualification - will have a set of clearly-articulated learning outcomes that are embedded within an approved suite of modules and that the programme of study will have been through some form of course design and development process to ensure coherence and value. The concept of 'stackability' challenges this as the simple act of credit-counting has never been an acceptable proxy for acquiring a macro-credential.

There are two potential ways in which these challenges can be addressed.

1) Consortium approach

A consortium approach is where a group of higher education providers enter a formal agreement to recognise each other's micro-credentials and enable a learner to move freely between them. This would need to be supported by formal agreements that set out which body would ultimately be making an award, what that award would be, and the grounds on which it would be made.

This approach could include providing a single directory of the micro-credentials available for a learner to browse that run across all consortia providers. It could also support the development of pathways, whether as particular diets of micro-credentials leading to a macro-credential or simply complementary micro-credentials that would support a learner in deepening skills and knowledge in particular areas. As part of this, information could also be provided on which courses might overlap to the extent that they would either be less useful to the learner in combination or would be considered double-counting for a macro-credential.

2) Capstone course/module approach

Another approach would be for a provider to permit a programme of study that enables a learner to present their achievements and, by way of a capstone course or module, allows the learner to draw the different elements together to form an integrated whole. In some respects, this would not be dissimilar to a liberal arts degree, but would offer even more flexibility as there would be no requirement for a learner to follow a linear route in terms of progression through levels of study nor to remain at a single provider.

In this model, particular attention would need to be given to ensuring that there was no duplication or double-counting of credit.

5.3 Flexibility

Micro-credentials need to be as flexible as possible in terms of enabling a focused and rapid response to need and in accommodating learners with many and various demands on their time. There is a risk, however, that in seeking maximum flexibility a micro-credential tries to be 'all things to all people', particularly for smaller courses (<10 credits). When designing a micro-credential, higher education providers will need to consider the point at which the value of a micro-credential risks being diluted, or of it no longer meeting needs, because the flexibility of the design has become too ambitious.

Micro-credentials do, however, present opportunities for a far more flexible approach than traditional degrees, particularly in terms of design, delivery and assessment. The content and purpose of a particular micro-credential can determine size and level, rather than an academic framework that is designed for larger programmes of study. Delivery could be online, in-person, or a combination of the two. It could take place intensively on a single day or be spread over a longer period. Where there is a cohort, learner engagement could have some timetabled events or be entirely asynchronous.

There are also opportunities for higher education providers to design micro-credentials that have flexible start and end points at the level of an individual, rather than a cohort, so the learner can join at any time and submit for assessment at any point of their choosing (although providers will need to be clear if there is a maximum period for engagement or if the micro-credential is scheduled to be withdrawn).

5.4 Learning and teaching

Micro-credentials can be delivered through different modes of learning.

This includes, but is not restricted to:

- synchronous and asynchronous online delivery
- on-campus delivery
- work-based learning

or any combination of these.

The period of direct delivery to the learner might be as little as a day or it could be a significantly longer period of time with the course spanning a number of weeks or months.

Although, for the flexibility of the learner, there are benefits to micro-credentials being online and asynchronous, they can, in fact, be delivered through the full range of teaching and learning approaches, including:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- workshops
- practical sessions
- presentations
- synchronous and asynchronous technology-enhanced activities
- independent and group tasks
- use of virtual learning environments

Some of these will be more effective than others, however, and **teaching and learning activities will need to be tailored to the intended audience and nature of the learners for each micro-credential.** For example, where specialist equipment, facilities or technology is required, an intensive one-day workshop on campus may be the best way to deliver the main teaching; in other circumstances, online resources that a learner can access at their own convenience may be better. Where a higher education provider has partnered with an employer to deliver a micro-credential to a cohort of employees, the learning and teaching may be delivered, at least in part, through a model that includes in-person delivery

at the workplace. The [UK Quality Code Advice and Guidance on work-based learning](#) provides further detailed information on this area.

Higher education providers will need to develop ways of managing and supporting the dynamics of a learning community for a range of different and challenging situations.

As noted under section 3: 'Characteristics of the learner', academic support will be a critical consideration as the learners may have no prior – or at least no recent – experience of higher education. In many cases, they will not be coming onto campus, and this is a type of learner who, traditionally, tends not to access on-campus support. Another implication of learner-led provision is that this extent of self-directed learning can involve a different set of skills which may not have been developed even by those with prior experience of higher education, and this will need to be supported as well.

Where possible, **academic skills development should be an integrated part of the micro-credential** - for example, English for Academic Purposes. As described under section 4 - 'Admissions and access, including Recognition of Prior Learning', higher education providers should also be prepared to be very proactive in terms of setting out the support that is available. This should include considering how to resource support so that it meets the distinctive needs of these types of learners, who are more likely to require one-to-one engagement and support outside of normal teaching hours.

5.5 Assessment

The assessment of a micro-credential needs to have a learner-centred approach and may take any form appropriate to the learner need and course requirements. A portfolio approach, which a learner can present to an employer, might be useful for upskilling or reskilling orientated micro-credentials. The industry-focused nature of many micro-credentials means that workplace-based projects might also be particularly appropriate.

PSRB recognition or requirements may dictate the approach to assessment in some circumstances where a professional qualification is integrated into the micro-credential. Similarly, in some cases, assessment design will be prescribed by the PSRB and based on a particular technical competency.

Providers should ensure they support learners in understanding and meeting the assessment requirements. Critical to this will be ensuring learner awareness and understanding of appropriate strategies to maintain academic integrity and avoid poor academic practice. Providers might consider how academic support teams could contribute with the development of useful resources and an introduction to academic integrity and basic study skills.

Validity of any assessment method is critical; the higher education provider must be confident in the integrity of the submission made and the identity of the person making it, particularly where delivery and assessment of the micro-credential is entirely online.

5.6 Reasonable adjustments and inclusivity

Providers should remain cognisant of their legal and moral obligations to ensure learning opportunities and assessment are accessible and do not disadvantage learners with particular needs or characteristics. This will have implications for the design of learning opportunities and assessment, including the proposed medium through which activities will

take place, and there may be a need to offer alternatives that accommodate particular circumstances.

In the context of many micro-credentials being online and asynchronous, providers will also need to consider the use of adaptive technologies to support learners - for example, how best to facilitate access to and resourcing of specialist software that might support learners with hearing or visual impairments.

5.7 Employer and PSRB involvement

With their role in reskilling and upskilling, micro-credentials can play a vital role in an organisation's retention of its employees and need to be responsive to evolving requirements of industry. With a strategic approach to micro-credential portfolio development, higher education providers can benefit from working closely with employers of all sizes, from the micro-business to global-brands and across a breadth of employment areas, as well as PSRBs. Approaches will need to combine agility with robustness of business cases to ensure that micro-credentials have credibility and currency in the longer term.

Traditionally, higher education providers have sought to engage industry representatives in course design, development and review through consultation, including membership of panels with delegated responsibility for these areas. **Micro-credentials that are highly focused on upskilling and reskilling will benefit from co-creation**, where the course is jointly designed by the provider and employer(s), both acting as equal partners and contributors in the process.

Work-based experience may also play a critical role in some micro-credentials. Employers will need support and training in fulfilling their roles and responsibilities, with clear mentoring systems in place. This will need particularly careful consideration where employers are asked for reflections or feedback that may inform assessment decisions. This could include guidance for all parties on how employees might effectively navigate the micro-credentials offer for the development of their career and aspirations. **As with apprenticeships, these provider-employer relationships might need to be supported with structured partnership agreements to underpin effective working relationships.** Workplace mentoring could be particularly beneficial and higher education providers should be prepared to provide training and support for those acting as mentors in the workplace as well as for participants enrolled on micro-credentials.

There are benefits in PSRB recognition being sought for micro-credentials, or an integrated industry/professional qualification being available as part of the course. This can help employers' understanding of the value of a micro-credential and will also deliver more benefits to the learner.

6 Certification

On successful completion, the achievement of the micro-credential must be evidenced through formal certification. Typically, this would be through a transcript providing confirmation of:

- 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 and the nature of that recognition.

The information provided should support learners either in progressing their career or transferring the credit to another qualification, potentially at another higher education provider. Using a standard minimum information set will better enable this.

Higher education providers may wish to consider whether any additional information is relevant in some circumstances - for example, a delivery provider or any other partner, or reference to another credit framework such as the *Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales* (CQFW) or the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF). Providers may also consider including any additional elements that appear in the European Commission's list of mandatory elements for the description of a micro-credential which has been drawn up to support portability of micro-credentials across the European Higher Education Area.

While the information advised here is more than would normally appear at module level on a student transcript, it is important to recognise the independent nature of a micro-credential. Alternatively, providers could provide a link to where the generic elements of this information could be accessed. There will then be a need, however, to ensure that the information remains easily and publicly available over time.

7 Quality management of micro-credentials

As with all other aspects of micro-credentials, there is an expectation that a higher education provider will implement quality management policies and processes to safeguard the academic standard and quality of the award of academic credit. Approaches to the quality management of micro-credentials will need to accommodate the facts that:

- they do not follow the usual pattern of the academic year
- they have a distinctive relationship with a learner's employment profile, which has implications for RPL and 'shelf-life' of credit
- a learner's journey is unlikely to follow the traditional route through levels.

Key areas for consideration will be:

- admissions decisions, and the role of Recognition of Prior Learning
- approaches to course design and approval that are agile and not overly-burdensome while still being robust
- swift confirmation of outcome and award following completion of assessment
- effective monitoring and review
- student engagement in quality management.

7.1 What does the term 'standard quality assurance mechanisms' mean?

The definition of micro-credentials notes that they should be 'subject to standard quality assurance mechanisms'. As they carry academic credit, higher education providers should ensure that requirements of their regulatory or funding bodies are met in terms of quality management - there should be an effective quality management approach that meets the sector-agreed standards. **It is important to note, however, that the nature of micro-credentials means that a higher education provider may need to reconsider some aspects of its approach to quality management for this area of provision to ensure it is appropriate and proportionate.**

The extent to which a higher education provider may need to adapt its approach to quality management will depend in some part on the nature of its approaches to other areas of its provision. In particular, higher education providers should remember that there is considerable scope for provider autonomy in how they design and operate quality management frameworks. Further, that any external assessment will focus on outcomes and effectiveness of approach, not only the processes themselves.

In assessing where different approaches may be needed, higher education providers should draw a distinction between policy and process. For example, if the provider's policy is that 10% of formal assignments are considered by external examiners, then this would be expected to apply to micro-credentials as well, unless the policy is amended to accommodate a different practice. In short, if higher education providers operate alternative quality management processes for micro-credentials to ensure proportionality of approach, thought must be given to the implications for related policies.

There is a need for agility and swift decision-making to deliver micro-credentials well. This particularly relates to design and development, formal assessment decisions and the award of the micro-credential. Stakeholders across the full range of services within the higher education provider who are engaged in the design and delivery of provision will need to be able to contribute to the successful delivery of micro-credentials. Similarly, some systems may need to be tailored to support micro-credentials. It will be important for colleagues to understand the distinctive nature of micro-credentials so they do not inadvertently attempt to force them into inappropriate systems or processes.

7.2 Course design and development

In designing and developing micro-credentials, higher education providers are advised to **draw on the usual resources available** to them, in particular the Qualifications Frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements. Credit frameworks are also valuable in estimating the overall hours of engagement that are likely to be required for successful completion.

Drawing on the expertise of PSRBs and external professionals in content co-creation will enable good course design and stand the course in good stead for the fulfilment of knowledge and competencies for PSRB accreditation/recognition and fulfilling course outcomes. Where there is a demand for an aggregated qualification to be recognised by a PSRB, there will be additional challenges in terms of ensuring that the holistic qualification meets all PSRB requirements.

There is also an expectation of student engagement in course design processes. This may be challenging for micro-credentials owing to the characteristics of the learner. **Providers may consider opportunities to engage students with some shared characteristics** - for example, those studying for apprenticeships, or with a significant work-based element to their programmes, or who are part-time. As developments increase, recent alumni from cognate micro-credentials may also be able to contribute to course design.

In terms of internal processes, higher education providers should consider how best to achieve a proportionate approach. This will be informed by the discrete nature of micro-credentials which reduces the complexity of the course in comparison to a macro-credential comprising a number of components. Providers should also consider when the convening of a formal body is necessary in this process and any opportunities to reduce bureaucracy without compromise to robustness. This might be achieved by putting the main focus of activity on how a course is designed well rather than on the approval mechanism.

7.3 Assessment and award

It is important that higher education providers consider the implications of the flexible nature of micro-credentials for formal assessment and award.

At one level, there will need to be consideration of alternative assessment methods, which may have implications for existing assessment policies.

Further, owing to their short nature, **micro-credentials may not fit neatly into existing timeframes for assessment boards** and learners should not be expected to wait long periods for formal decisions. Also, rather than having cohorts considered by a board, some micro-credentials may support a learner-led approach to the extent that the learner takes control of when s/he submits for assessment, meaning **it may be more appropriate to track learners than cohorts**. Because of this, higher education providers may need to

reconsider the frequency, membership and operation of assessment boards for micro-credentials.

Higher education providers must take care that the naming of a micro-credential is not potentially misleading nor places it in conflict with a qualification on the Qualifications Frameworks.

Learners who complete the micro-credential successfully must be provided, in a timely fashion, with certification of their achievement that supports them in pursuing career opportunities and/or other educational opportunities.

7.4 Monitoring and review

There are many different ways in which higher education providers can and do approach monitoring and review. Micro-credentials will most probably be less than an academic year in length and, moreover, will not be governed by traditional rhythms of the academic year. They may also run with a greater or lesser frequency than traditional programmes and/or modules. Therefore, **when incorporating micro-credentials into processes of monitoring and review, there may need to be a pragmatic and flexible approach regarding what information is available at any one time.**

This is another area where care should be taken to avoid overengineering or a heavy-handed approach. There is a danger that micro-credentials could end up being formally reviewed under a number of different headings which can be burdensome and unhelpful. Agreeing a single approach and being clear on this is likely to be more productive.

7.5 Student engagement

Student engagement is a key characteristic of UK higher education but these learners are likely to identify most with their immediate course, rather than the wider subject or the provider. Further, while some learners may retain a relationship with one provider over a sustained period by following a series of micro-credentials, other learners could have a relationship with more than one provider concurrently, or sporadic engagement in various courses over a period of time, or have a unique engagement in micro-credentials.

For micro-credentials, more traditional methods of engaging students, particularly around formal representation systems, may need to be re-thought to accommodate the diversity of learners these courses are likely to encourage. One option might be for higher education providers to embed student engagement mechanisms into delivery, and any student engagement opportunities should be made clear at the outset to maximise the value of them.

In particular, providers should ensure that student engagement opportunities are sufficiently robust to inform monitoring and review in a meaningful and effective way. There may also be opportunities to use feedback to inform the design and development of further micro-credentials.

7.6 Partnership working

In addition to the discussions above around consortia developments and working with employers, partnerships may also help address the challenges faced by those with digital poverty or who are geographically distant from a higher education provider. For example, higher education providers could seek agreements with local businesses, educational establishments or community organisations for spaces that could be used by learners.

As with all partnership working, very clear and explicit partnership and/or articulation arrangements will need to be in place to safeguard the learner experience and all parties engaged in the activity and to ensure all stakeholders are clear about their roles and responsibilities in the delivery of the micro-credential.

8 Membership of the Advisory Network

We would like to thank all QAA Members who have engaged in the work supporting the development of this Characteristics Statement, and particularly the following:

Lynne Barker	King's College London
Dr Julie Blackwell-Young	Abertay University
John Bolton	Bangor University
Ruth Burchell	QAA Scotland
Anne Carpenter	QAA
Georgia Clarke	QAA
Dr Russell Crawford	Falmouth University
Dr Demelza Curnow	QAA
Dr Anne Danby	University of Derby
Lisa Harris	Open University
John Kerr	University of Glasgow
Adam Lea-Bischinger	A R Consulting
Mark McCahill	Colleges Scotland
Maureen McLaughlin	Northumbria University
Ursula McTaggart	Ulster University
Dr Joy Perkins	University of Aberdeen
Professor Sue Reece	Kingston University
Dr Laura Roberts	Swansea University
Professor Brian Smith	University of Law
Brett Suddell	Swansea University (alternate)
Dr Anne Tierney	Heriot-Watt University
Robin Westacott	Heriot-Watt University (alternate)

Published - May 2022

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2022
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786
www.qaa.ac.uk