

Micro-credentials, Maximum Impact

Opportunities and challenges for higher-education providers

Micro-credentials have the potential to address the lifelong learning needs of the Irish workforce, where over half of 25–34-year-olds already have a third-level qualification, allowing institutions to provide affordable, stackable, and focused awards to address the rapidly changing needs of technological, economic, and social transformations. This article reflects on current developments of micro-credentials across the sector and explores their potential to support the workforce of the future.

Introduction

Micro-credentials are small, stand-alone, accessible, and accredited courses designed to meet the demands of learners, employers, and support organisations. They provide an agile approach for learners to upskill and re-skill, and for providers to support that objective, and they are often designed in consultation with employers.

According to Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI, 2021b), micro-credentials 'demonstrate that a learner has mastered a certain skill-set or demonstrated a level of achievement in a particular area'. The European Commission described it as follows:

A micro-credential is a proof of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a short learning experience. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent standards. (European Commission, 2020, p.10)

For private or independent higher-education providers, including HECA members,* QQI facilitates the validation of micro-credential programmes, arising from one or more modules of both previously validated programmes



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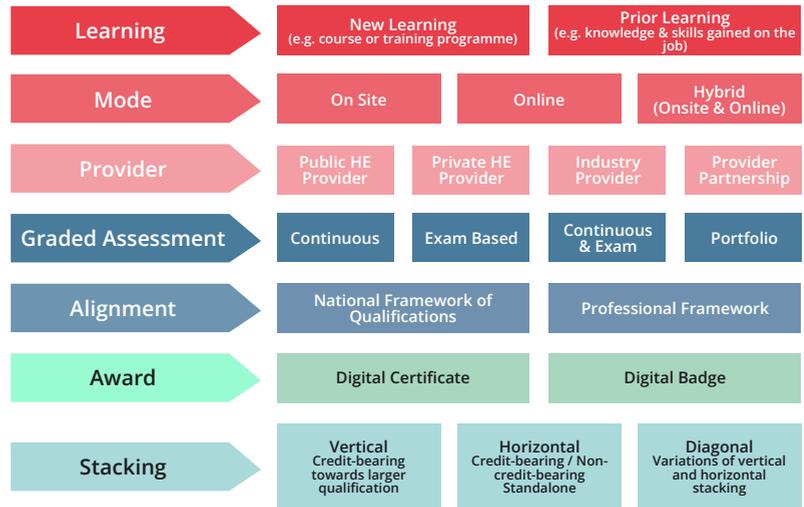


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and newly created special-purpose awards (5–30 credits in European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System, or ECTS). Validation is facilitated through a streamlined approach, for a shorter validation period (maximum three years), and attracts a smaller validation fee.

Skillnet Ireland (2021, citing Oliver, 2019), identified seven components of a micro-credential descriptor that need to be considered in its design, development, and delivery, along with current variations in each component:



Seven components of a micro-credential descriptor (Skillnet Ireland, 2021)

In seeking micro-credential validation, a provider must identify why the programme is being proposed.

This provides an effective overview of the sectoral oversight, and structural and operational considerations, to support institutions in their engagement with micro-credential design, development, and delivery.

To be or not to be a micro-credential?

In seeking micro-credential validation, a provider must identify why the programme is being proposed as such. The rationale normally centres on responding to stakeholder need and the efficiency of validation, reflecting the assertion that ‘labour market relevance is a key driver for microcredentials’ (Walsh, 2022).

The 25–34-year-old age group has the highest level of third-level attainment, at 63%, followed by 35–44-year-olds, at 58%, with women across all age groups (25–64 years) having higher levels than men (CSO, 2022). This supports the need to provide flexible, affordable, stackable, and focused supplementary awards to address rapidly changing needs through upskilling and re-skilling.

Micro-credentials in practice

Micro-credentials provide opportunities for learners (both employed and those seeking employment) to access government-funded education and training through programmes such as SpringBoard, Skillnet Ireland, and Skills to Advance, enhancing the skills and knowledge of the future workforce.

QQI had been approving further education and training micro-credential programmes as minor and special-purpose awards for several years. There are currently 2,217 programmes listed in the Irish Register of Qualifications (IRQ) (<https://irq.ie/>) in the classifications minor, special-purpose, or supplemental awards, bearing 30 ECTS or less, across all Irish providers; 167 of those are QQI awards, up from 108 in 2020.

Opportunities

In 2020, QQI introduced a process (initially on a pilot basis) to enable validation in the higher-education and training sector. In December 2020, QQI's Programmes and Awards Executive Committee approved six micro-credential programme validations, five of which were proposed by HECA colleges. HECA members have embraced the opportunity to develop micro-credentials: 116 HECA-member-based minor, special-purpose, or supplemental awards, bearing 30 ECTS or less, are now listed in the IRQ.

The transformative impact is evident in the following quotes:

The industry project forced me to review current practices in my own organisation and consider how the adoption of MMC [Modern Methods of Construction] could improve performance and efficiency and reduce time and waste. I might not have undertaken this review without the project and the guidance and learning from the programme. It is a real tangible benefit for me and my organisation. (Graduate of the Certificate in Strategic Co-ordination and Collaboration for MMC at Griffith College, developed in collaboration with Construction Professional Skillnet)

I think there need to be more professional development opportunities, whether it's micro-credentials or short courses or upskilling, in a peer-support manner. (HECA educator, quoted in HECA, 2021)

The flexible and responsive nature of micro-credentials enables learners to efficiently upskill and gives colleges the opportunity to customise programmes to meet emerging challenges, such as generative artificial intelligence. Micro-credentials are attractive to learners as an alternative or supplement to more traditional pathways, and they have the potential to expand traditional

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offerings, thus supporting the creation of a diversified student population (McGreal & Olcott, 2022).

A recent report (Skillnet Ireland, 2021) examined how micro-credentials can contribute to upskilling and re-skilling demands from both industry and employees. It offers recommendations including improving stakeholder understanding of micro-credentials and fostering cross-sector collaboration. It proposes mapping existing continuing professional development (CPD) programmes in Skillnet organisations to identify opportunities for micro-credentials. It also recommends that national funding should support research and validation of work-based learning, and that pilot co-design and co-delivery models be created with educational providers and Skillnet Networks.

Building on these recommendations, HECA providers have an opportunity to collaborate with industry stakeholders to ensure their micro-credentials align with and support current job-market needs. By forging strong partnerships with stakeholders, institutions can enhance the perceived value of their micro-credential course offerings and continue to gain industry recognition for these portfolios.

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Challenges

The proportional cost of validating micro-credentials remains prohibitive for smaller providers. Validating a single-module micro-credential (5 ECTS) for a maximum validation period of three years costs €200 per credit per year of validation, versus a cost per credit of €16.66 for a 60-ECTS minor, special-purpose, or supplemental award (over 5 years).

The lack of consensus on what does or does not constitute a micro-credential is an additional challenge. It creates complexities in assessment and comparison of values for learners and industry (Varadarajan et al., 2023).

Clarity is required on how platforms for collaborative promotion of micro-credentials are best utilised, to enhance the credibility and recognition of micro-credentials offered by all institutions. Effective promotional and communication strategies about the quality and relevance of micro-credentials, across the HET landscape, are crucial to ensure that employers and learners understand and recognise new and diverse education pathways and credentials.

There are many non-accredited programmes offered by colleges across the country that are promoted as micro-credentials. Where the programme is not placed on the National Framework of Qualifications, the ability to stack these micro-credentials towards a larger, more valuable qualification will need to be defined for learners and employers:

The value that micro-credentials, and indeed other qualifications, have for stakeholders is linked to the trust given to the credential and to the provider who offers it. It is also linked to the 'recognition' mechanisms between the education and training system and the labour market. (Walsh, 2022)

Conclusion

Public awareness and marketing of micro-credentials present a challenge for providers, as highlighted throughout the institutional submissions to the government's public consultation (DFHERIS, 2022). But there is a great opportunity for institutions to provide learners with the knowledge, skills, and competences they need for their personal and professional development, by completing stand-alone, compact, accessible, flexible, targeted, and responsive accredited programmes. Micro-credentials hold the potential to support the re-skilling and upskilling of the workforce of today and into the future.

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FOOTNOTES

* The Higher Education Colleges Association (www.heca.ie) is the representative body of Ireland's independent higher-education sector. HECA serves as a representative voice for 12 established and state-accredited privately funded providers of higher education, advocating on behalf of and supporting its members in achieving their strategic goals. In 2019, HECA members hosted over 27,000 students from 172 countries studying for a higher-education qualification in Ireland.



First cohort of Student Nurses from Hibernia College are welcomed by Drogheda and Cavan/Monaghan Hospitals.